

# **2013 NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS**



## **FEATURE CLIPS**

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## **Chairman and CEO Robert Kraft**



### **Kraftwork**

**Three bold decisions by Robert Kraft transformed the Patriots from league laughingstock into the NFL's model franchise**

By Peter King

February 1, 2012

On the last day of the 1993 NFL regular season, Patriots players and die-hard fans seemed resigned to losing their team. Absentee owner James Orthwein, a Missouri native who had bought the club two years earlier, intended to move it to St. Louis, which had lost the Cardinals in '88. "We were as good as gone," said Patriots linebacker Andre Tippett. But the fans wouldn't go down without a fight. Though they had the league's worst team (13--50 over four seasons heading into that game, against playoff-contending Miami) and worst venue (dumpy, no-frills Foxboro Stadium), damn it, this was still their bad team and their crappy stadium. Before the game they burned empty cases of Budweiser in the windswept parking lots. (Orthwein was a great-grandson of brewing mogul Adolphus Busch and sat on the board of the St. Louis--based brewing company.) And once the game ended, victoriously, on a Drew Bledsoe overtime touchdown pass to Michael Timpson, the fans wouldn't leave. "Don't take our team!" they chanted. "Don't take our team!"

Robert Kraft, the owner of Foxboro Stadium, was getting in an elevator when he heard the crowd. It had been a frenzied time for Kraft and his family, as they watched Orthwein shop the Patriots to prospective owners who would take the team to St. Louis. Kraft was a potential buyer, but he felt the deck was stacked against him because he would keep the Patriots in New England. As the elevator door closed, he turned to his son Jonathan and said, "There's no way we're not winning this."

There are decisions people make—often emotional, often against the wishes of those they trust most—that radically shape their future. Robert Kraft has made three of them involving the Patriots. And if any of those had gone the other way, chances are very good that the Patriots would not be the winningest team in the NFL since 1994, and would not be playing in their fifth Super Bowl in the last 11 seasons on Sunday in Indianapolis.

The Patriots morphed from laughingstock to the best franchise in football because at three critical junctures Kraft didn't do the logical thing. He did what something inside him said to do. "I've been around Mr. Kraft a lot when he's got all these spreadsheets and data in front of him," says quarterback Tom Brady. "But it's his instincts that he really trusts. He goes with his gut. And look at his track record—he's always right."

### **DECISION 1: Overspending for a bad team**

A native of the tony Boston suburb of Brookline, Kraft took his four sons to countless Patriots games over the years. He had built a fortune in the paper and packaging business, and with that money came the ability to indulge a dream: He wanted to own his hometown football team. Kraft first tried to buy the Patriots in 1986, but the cash-strapped Sullivan family eventually sold to Victor Kiam. In 1989, however, Kraft bought the lease to Foxboro Stadium out of bankruptcy.

As it became more clear that Orthwein, who had little interest in owning and running a football team, would steer the club to St. Louis, Kraft broke the news to his wife, Myra, in the summer of 1993 on a walk on the beach in Cape Cod. "I told her, 'I'm going to put a bid in for the team,'" Kraft recalled in a three-hour interview with SI at his Brookline home in January. "She didn't think it was a very good business idea. To put it mildly."

But Kraft plowed forward with a seven-man team led by Jonathan, a Harvard Business School grad, that would determine how much they'd bid. The committee came to the conclusion that the Patriots—not including the stadium or lease—were worth about \$115 million. "But," Kraft said, "I figured I'd go to 120 or 125 million if I had to." Summoned to St. Louis to make a final offer with other suitors three weeks after the 1993 season finale, Kraft bid \$125 million. When Orthwein and his advisers declared that none of the bids were sufficient, Kraft said, in essence, tell us what you want for the team. Orthwein's advisers came back with a number: \$172 million.

"Was I scared?" Kraft said. "Yes, I was scared. But this was my shot. How many times in life do you get your shot to do something you desperately want to do? Logic said no. Instinct said yes. Also, things kept flashing through my

mind. The Boston Braves had left, and no team ever replaced them. My sons were getting to an age where smart sons move to take good business opportunities [elsewhere], and I wanted my family to stay intact here. I figured this could be a good family business."

After gulping hard at the figure he was quoted, Kraft said yes. For the highest price in the history of American sports, he now owned a bad football team that played in an el cheapo stadium. The tough part—telling Myra—was still to come.

Over the past six months Kraft's anguish over the death in July of his wife of 48 years has been continually evident. In his interview with SI he had to stop to compose himself four times when Myra's name came up—including in the discussion about his decision to buy the team.

"When I told her, she thought I was crazy," Kraft recalled, sitting at his kitchen table. "Angry? Yeah. She couldn't believe I'd done that. It was a ridiculous number. It's the only time she questioned my business judgment in all the years we were married. Every marriage has some hard times, and I can tell you that was a tough night."

Pause. Fifteen seconds.

"That night, to tell you the kind of person my sweetheart was, she said to me ..."

Pause. Five seconds.

"... 'You have to promise me our charitable donations will not be reduced.' I promised her that, and we moved on. Now, today, it's so tough, still. This thing with Myra—everything else is paper clips. Her perspective on what was important in life was such an inspiration."

There were fits and starts to be sure: In 1999 Kraft, seeking a new stadium, announced he would move the team to Hartford, then reversed course. And in the downturn after 9/11, funding for a privately constructed new stadium in Foxborough nearly collapsed. But Kraft weathered the storms and saw the project to completion. Gillette Stadium opened for football in the fall of 2002, when the Patriots were—thanks largely to another gutsy call Kraft had made nearly three years earlier—the reigning Super Bowl champs.

## **DECISION 2: Hiring Belichick**

It's no secret that Kraft and Bill Parcells, the coach he inherited when he bought the team, had their moments of hostility. Parcells wanted authority to draft players, while Kraft preferred a team approach, with the personnel department having final say. That eventually led to an ugly breakup after the 1996 season. But something else good came out of that season, beyond the team's first Super Bowl appearance: Kraft got to know Belichick.

"Bill Parcells came to me and said there was someone he wanted to add to the staff, Bill Belichick, and he wanted me to meet him," said Kraft. "We were already over our coaching budget, but I met him and liked him right away. I drilled him with questions, and I liked what I heard."

Things turned bitter when Kraft learned that Parcells wanted to leave after the season to coach the Jets. After the Super Bowl loss to the Packers, when the Patriots' staff was dissolving, Kraft had a choice: keep Belichick, perhaps even as head coach, or hire new blood. "I wrestled with it," Kraft said. "But I had lost the trust with Parcells, and he and Bill were tied at the hip. They were together for so long. Could I trust [Belichick]? I decided I couldn't, at the time. Everything in life is timing. Myra and I went out to lunch with him and Debby [Belichick's then wife], and I explained it. When I left there, I thought maybe there'd be a time we might work together in the future."

Belichick followed Parcells to the Meadowlands, and the Jets signed him to a contract with an "heir clause" that would give him the head coaching job whenever Parcells stepped down. As an additional reward—and, some within the Jets' organization thought, a ploy to ensure Belichick stayed on—owner Leon Hess gave Belichick a \$1 million bonus, unprompted, in January '99. But Hess died in May of that year, and the ownership situation with the Jets became muddled. When Parcells announced on Jan. 3, 2000, that he was resigning, Belichick took over—for one day. On Jan. 4 he sent his infamous letter to club management: "I resign as HC of the NYJ."

In New England, Kraft had fired coach Pete Carroll on Jan. 3, but before the Parcells announcement. "I made sure we faxed in a request for permission that day to interview Belichick—when Parcells was still the coach," says Jonathan Kraft. When the Patriots' interest in Belichick surfaced, friends around the league called Robert Kraft unprompted to ask him what in the world he was thinking in pursuing the diffident Belichick, who'd made more than his share of

enemies in a five-year 37--45 run with the Browns a decade earlier. One associate sent Kraft a tape of memorable and/or monosyllabic moments from Belichick's press conferences in Cleveland.

Kraft was undeterred. Though he felt the Patriots had the right to freely hire Belichick because they'd requested permission before it was announced that Parcels was quitting, commissioner Paul Tagliabue ruled that the Patriots would have to pay the Jets compensation. Irony of ironies: Parcels, who stayed on to run the Jets' front office, and Kraft were the ones who had to hammer out the deal. "When [Parcels] called to discuss it," Kraft said, "my secretary walked into my office and said, 'Darth Vader's on the phone.' I knew exactly who she meant." Finally they agreed. Belichick cost New England its first-round draft choice in 2000.

That wasn't the only first-round pick Belichick cost New England. Commissioner Roger Goodell docked the Pats a 2008 first-rounder as partial sanction for the Spygate scandal. But those two first-rounders were small price to pay for a coach who has averaged 12.9 wins a year, including playoffs, and led the Patriots to five Super Bowls in his 12 seasons. Belichick, a latter-day Monty Hall when it comes to dealing current draft picks for better ones down the road, has ensured that the flow of quality talent won't be stemmed anytime soon. And friends say he has no plans to quit coaching. (Belichick declined to be interviewed for this story.)

"The key to life," said Kraft, "is you try to see things other people can't see. This league is set up for everyone to go 8--8. How do you differentiate? You have to be bold in any business and do things you take a lot of criticism for but you believe are right."

Which brings us to Tom Brady.

### **DECISION 3: Jettisoning the highest-paid player in football, in his prime**

This call is less tough—though it isn't exactly an easy move to trade a prolific quarterback within the division in favor of a sixth-rounder who still had question marks. But a year after Belichick took Brady with the 199th pick in 2000, Kraft could tell that the coach was smitten with Brady and not thrilled with Bledsoe, who improvised too much for the liking of Belichick and offensive coordinator Charlie Weis during a 5--11 season in 2000. Meanwhile, Belichick found Brady to be a sponge, and it was becoming apparent that his arm was stronger than scouts had seen during the predraft process. Brady lived for the game, twice winning a parking space awarded to the player with the best off-season workout effort. And the kid was confident. He was walking out of the old stadium to his car one day shortly after the draft, pizza box (that evening's dinner) under one arm, when he encountered the owner for the first time.

"He looked me right in the eye," Robert Kraft recalled, "and said to me, 'Mr. Kraft, hi, I'm Tom Brady. I just wanted to tell you I'm the best decision your franchise has ever made.'"

In 2001 Brady replaced the injured Bledsoe with the Patriots 0--2 and quarterbacked an underdog team to a stunning Super Bowl victory over St. Louis. The next spring Belichick wanted Brady to play over Bledsoe. "You'd better be right," Kraft told him in a staff meeting. When the Bills offered a first-round pick for Bledsoe, Kraft had to okay it—and he did. "I love the guy," Kraft said of Bledsoe. "That was a tough one. But you've got to back your key managers when they make a decision."

Bledsoe lasted three unspectacular seasons in Buffalo, winning 23 games, none in the playoffs, with a plus-12 touchdown-to-interception differential. Brady in those three years: 43 wins, two Super Bowl victories and 47 more touchdown passes than interceptions.

This past year Kraft was one of 10 owners who helped negotiate the decade-long labor agreement that was hammered out in July. As chair of the league's broadcast committee he took the lead in extending the NFL's network deals through 2022. Those jobs helped him fill his time as he coped with Myra's death. "The way he does business," said Patriots union rep Matt Light, "is it's never a pissing contest. In the labor deal he said the commonsense thing: 'Let's get the lawyers out of the room.' And they did, and it got done."

While difficult, those CBA and TV deals were, in many ways, logical business developments emanating from the sport that laps all others in popularity today. Buying the Patriots? Hiring Belichick? Those were tougher calls, the kind it's become Kraft's business to make. "In this game," he said on Sunday night, after the Patriots had arrived in Indianapolis for their sixth Super Bowl under Kraft, "you better take some risks—or you'll have a nice team, and once every 10 or 20 years you'll be good. That's not what I want to be about."

## Head Coach Bill Belichick

### The Boston Globe

#### **We don't really know him at all**

**We think we know the man inside the hoodie, the maestro of the monosyllable, the scowl on the sideline, the cold-blooded, humorless molder of champions.**

By Bob Hohler

February 5, 2012

INDIANAPOLIS — A boy needed a mentor.

A cancer patient needed a hand.

A baseball manager needed direction, and a football great needed an angel.

They all needed a friend, and Bill Belichick was there.

Not the Belichick of Patriots lore, the glowering titan of NFL coaches.

The private Belichick. The guy who loves the Grateful Dead, reads Harry Potter, and happily reminisces with his pals about some of the best days of his life: growing up at the US Naval Academy, presiding over his college's Animal House fraternity, belting out the 1960s pop hit "Love Potion No. 9" for family and friends on a sunny afternoon on his beloved Nantucket.

Perhaps more than any other great coach in NFL history, Belichick is a man of two lives. An estimated 1 billion television viewers tonight will see the Belichick most New Englanders know: a gridiron mastermind, largely devoid of public charm and charisma, pursuing the fourth Super Bowl title of his 12-year Patriots reign. They will see a tight-faced tactician chasing football history, and maybe, if the Patriots prevail, flashing a cathartic smile.

They will never see the other Belichick, who fights as fiercely to shield himself from the flimsiness of celebrity — "the scentless sunflower," as Oliver Wendell Holmes described it — as he does to sustain an array of friendships that will last a lifetime.

Belichick spoke to many of his friends in recent days as he prepared to embrace one of his greatest challenges since he began analyzing football film at age 9.

"Bill is the essence of a friend," said Tony La Russa, who credited a three-hour, late-night conversation with Belichick last year with helping him guide the St. Louis Cardinals to a World Series title. "There have been times when he has been so ridiculously generous with his time and insights that I have gotten embarrassed by his kindness."

NFL Hall of Famer Jim Brown has dedicated most of his life to helping the dispossessed, including inmates, gang members, and needy children. He said two men have distinguished themselves with their shared commitment to humanitarianism: Belichick and Boston Celtics great Bill Russell.

Belichick has visited prisons and gangs with Brown and has financially backed his Amer-I-Can program. In 2006, Belichick surprised Brown at his 70th birthday party in Los Angeles. And when Brown least expected it, he received a gift from Belichick last Christmas.

"I respect Bill, I trust him, and I love him," Brown said. "There are very few people I can say those things about."

More than 15 of Belichick's friends said in interviews that the public Belichick — typically gruff with the media, tough on his players — is a stranger to them. Their Belichick leaves no friend behind.

Not Tucker Ingraham, the 16-year-old son of Rob Ingraham, who attended Wesleyan College with Belichick. Since Tucker first met him as an 8-year-old, Belichick has treated him like a son, communicating with him weekly, inviting him to Patriots practices, games, and Super Bowls, inspiring him. "

"That's as generous as it gets," said Rob Ingraham, a sports marketing executive on Long Island. "Thumbs up to Bill and those like him who recognize what those kinds of experiences mean to the confidence of a young person as he grows up."

Belichick once had one of those relationships. As a child in Annapolis, Md., he often shadowed his father, Steve, an assistant football coach at Navy who gained acclaim as the nation's preeminent college scout (he authored the 1963 primer "Football Scouting Methods").

Navy's star at the time was Joe Bellino, a Heisman Trophy winner who later played for the Patriots. Bellino befriended the young Belichick and made sure at his graduation in 1960 that his midshipman's cap landed in the 8-year-old's hands.

Belichick, who turns 60 in April, has held tight to the friendship. After Belichick's father died in 2005, he reciprocated Bellino's long-ago act of kindness by returning the cap.

"He said, 'Maybe your grandkids would like it,' " Bellino recalled.

To Bellino, Belichick's gesture epitomized his respect for history. Belichick has often asked Bellino to address Patriots rookies about football tradition.

"He thinks it's his responsibility to pass along as much as he can to the next generation," Bellino said.

Asked last week about the power of his friendships, Belichick said, "I've been very fortunate in all the things that have happened to me through the course of my life and football career. I know I can't give back as much as I've been given, but I try to reciprocate."

His personal relationships?

"Those people have been with me all the way through, so they're important," he said. "Sometimes it's inconvenient, but if the friendships are important, you find ways to make them work."

### **Time for a former rival**

Nearly 40 years have passed since Bob Heller beat out Belichick for the starting center's job on Wesleyan's football team. But when Belichick learned several years ago that Heller had been diagnosed with cancer, he quietly spearheaded a campaign to ensure that Heller was inducted into the school's athletic hall of fame.

Belichick last week contacted Heller, a Seattle lawyer whose medical condition prevented him from traveling with his Wesleyan teammates to the Super Bowl. Belichick assured Heller his teammates would remember him when they gather on the field for a pregame picture.

"Everybody sees Bill on the tube giving his abrupt non-answer answers and thinks that's who he is," Heller said. "But if you're a friend of his, you're a friend of his. He always finds time for you."

Belichick sets high expectations for his friends. Little angers him more than disloyalty, as his former protege and assistant Eric Mangini learned in 2006 after he defected to the despised New York Jets and supported allegations that Belichick cheated in the infamous Spygate scandal.

Belichick's subsequent iciness toward Mangini was captured in headlines and photographs, a friendship irreparably fractured. Gone was the warmth of their Wesleyan connection (Belichick was class of '75, Mangini '94).

Belichick's college years were formative, a time when he felt free to show a wilder, gregarious side he now zealously keeps out of view. As president of Chi Psi fraternity, he led a house bursting with hard-partying renegades, whose alleged misdeeds included urinating on a rival frat and breaking several windows. Another night Belichick was jolted awake by a frat brother firing a shotgun at a soda machine that ate his quarter.

"We were Animal House before the movie," said Mike Celeste, a Florida lawyer who played football and lacrosse with Belichick. "It seemed like we were on double-secret probation the whole time."

Belichick himself was no angel. On a Friday trip to a hockey game at Phillips Andover, which he briefly attended as a postgraduate student, Belichick and his college roommate Bill Deveraux bumped into a couple of friends from Harvard. Their brief visit to Andover turned into a sudsy bacchanal in Cambridge.

"We ended up at Harvard, drinking beer and raising hell for two more days," recalled Deveraux, a Rhode Island lawyer.

There was a memorable outing to Winter Carnival in Quebec City and annual road trips to Mardi Gras in New Orleans. On the Mardi Gras journeys, Belichick stopped along the way at Birmingham- Southern College in Alabama to see his future wife, Debby, his friend from Annapolis High School. One year Debby joined the caravan to Mardi Gras.

"That was sort of the blossoming of the romance," she told the Cleveland Plain Dealer in 1995. During the Plain Dealer interview, Debby asked Bill, "Were you really in love with me all those years when we were just friends?"

Belichick glanced at the reporter's tape recorder and said with a mischievous smile, "You know I don't discuss my personal life."

On another trip to New Orleans, Belichick's posse ran out of money, prompting him to call his father for help. Belichick's father contacted Jim Royer, an assistant coach for the Saints, who took in the Wesleyan crew. While Belichick's buddies partied on, he stayed behind to talk football with Royer.

"No surprise there," Celeste said. He recalled Belichick regularly angering his football teammates by quizzing the coach about whether he had developed contingencies for virtually every unusual play an opponent might attempt. Belichick's questions invariably prolonged practices.

Belichick distinguished himself at Wesleyan not only with his football acumen but his leadership. Friends said Belichick alone had the ability to prevent administrators from closing Chi Psi for the frat's numerous infractions.

"Bill was the responsible conscience of the place," Deveraux said.

Jim Farrell, who played Wesleyan football with Belichick, put it another way. "It wasn't that Bill didn't like to have fun and party," Farrell said. "He just wasn't going to be the stupid one."

Farrell, who owns Farrell Volvo in Southborough, met his future wife, Nina, at Wesleyan, after Belichick forged a friendship with her (Bill and Nina took 7 a.m. ice skating lessons together as freshmen). Nina baked Belichick 101 brickle cookies after he won his 100th game with the Patriots, and Jim delivered a big tin of the cookies to the coach after the Patriots defeated the Broncos last month in their divisional playoff.

Belichick has shown loyalty to the Farrells in part by shunning offers of free cars from other dealers seeking endorsements and buying all his family vehicles from Farrell Volvo. He was driving a Volvo wagon in the recent NFL Network documentary, "Bill Belichick: A Football Life," when he blithely belied his public image as a genius by confessing his inability to set the dashboard clock.

### **Private about his privacy**

Not all of Belichick's friends were willing to be interviewed and some spoke only on the condition they not be identified. They are keenly aware of Belichick's hunger for privacy, which his assistant, Berj Najarian, helps enforce. One of Belichick's Wesleyan friends said Najarian warned him to "behave" with the media.

The secrecy, however, has been difficult for some of Belichick's friends to stomach.

"I respect his privacy 100 percent, but it's frustrating over the years to see people characterize him as wooden and Dr. Doom and all of that," Ingraham said. "That's not the Bill I know."

Belichick was reluctant last week to discuss his desire for privacy. Public attention "comes with the territory but it's nice to have some private time," he said. "Sometimes it comes in small doses." Belichick's most painful brush with celebrity came soon after he and Debby divorced in 2006. He became tabloid fodder when the husband of a former New York Giants receptionist alleged in a divorce case that his wife had been involved for several years with Belichick and had received hundreds of thousands of dollars of support from him. Belichick never publicly addressed the matter, which was resolved without him appearing in court.

In 2006, he also formed a Massachusetts corporation, Bill Belichick Inc., whose stated purpose was "conducting a general business of consulting, entertaining, and endorsing, consisting of public appearances, public speaking, television appearances, etc. . . ." He dissolved the business 16 months later.



a friend involved in the matter who asked not to be identified said Belichick formed the company because he no longer would participate in the Bill and Debby Belichick Charity Foundation after his divorce. The friend said Belichick dissolved the business because he concluded he had little interest in pursuing endorsement opportunities. His paid appearances are mostly limited to radio and television interviews during the season. The Patriots pay him about \$7.5 million a year.

Asked to expound on the not-always-pleasant side-effects of celebrity, Belichick reverted to his stock refrain: "It is what it is."

### **More jovial this time**

Many people noticed that Belichick was more at ease, more jovial than usual this Super Bowl week. The trademark scowl was shelved, and some wondered why.

"He's got a lady in his life," Patriots receiver Wes Welker said, referring to Linda Holliday. "I attribute it to Linda."

The couple began dating five years ago, and while Holliday has gained an extra measure of celebrity by co-hosting the "styleboston" magazine show on Channel 5. Belichick has maintained a relatively low profile beyond his professional duties.

Other than his long friendship with rock singer Jon Bon Jovi, Belichick has shown no interest in collecting famous acquaintances. He loathes bling and, though he is driven to cement his place among the NFL's all-time coaching elite, he generally shuns self-promotion. One of his few visible concessions to pride was naming his Nantucket boat "V Rings," which he hopes to make VI — IV with the Patriots and II as a Giants assistant.

Other than boating and fishing, one of Belichick's leisure passions is lacrosse — his best sport in college — which he taught his children. Amanda, 27, and Stephen, 24, played lacrosse at UMass and Rutgers respectively, and his youngest son, Brian, 20, is expected to play this year at Trinity College in Hartford.

Dave Pietramala, the lacrosse coach at Johns Hopkins University, said it's a shame the public knows so little about the everyday Belichick. In the hours before the Patriots defeated the Ravens two weeks ago at Gillette Stadium for the conference championship, Pietramala, at Belichick's invitation, sat in the coach's office with him as he prepared for the game.

Belichick turned to Pietramala for advice in 2007 after Patriots defensive end Marquise Hill died in a jet ski accident. Two years earlier, one of Pietramala's players, Matt Stoffel, had died in a car crash.

"How did you handle it?" Pietramala recalled Belichick inquiring. (Pietramala helped establish a scholarship fund in Stoffel's honor; Belichick endorsed a memorial tribute to Hill in the Patriots locker room, where it remains.)

At other times, Belichick has stunned lacrosse friends with his compassion. When Navy lacrosse coach Richie Meade last year was relieved of his job, he was surprised to hear from Belichick. Meade had been a friend of Belichick's father.

"Out of the blue, Bill calls me and says, 'Hey Richie, the Rutgers job is open. If you're interested, don't hesitate to use me,'" Meade recalled.

Springing welcome surprises is routine with Belichick, as Farrell was reminded when the coach appeared recently at his father's funeral. Their Wesleyan pal Vinnie Colelli was unaware Belichick had donated to his family's church in Milford last year in his late father's honor until the Globe informed him. And when Casey Coleman, the Cleveland Browns radio broadcaster, died on Thanksgiving weekend in 2006, Belichick broke away from the Patriots to attend the wake in Cleveland.

Belichick, who coached the Browns from 1991-95, was so reviled in Cleveland after he cut quarterback Bernie Kosar that he received death threats. So did Coleman, one of Belichick's lone defenders. Both families received FBI protection.

"I'm sure it was hard for Bill to come back to a town like this under those circumstances," said Coleman's widow, Mary. "You won't get a lot of people in Cleveland to say this, but Bill Belichick is a great guy with a very big heart."

The folks at the Lazarus House emergency shelter in Lawrence agreed. After informing shelter managers he wanted no publicity, Belichick occasionally brought his children there when they were younger to help cook meals and serve clients in crisis.

Belichick's benevolence also extends to the Massachusettsbased AccesSportAmerica. Thanks to Belichick earmarking his royalties from David Halberstam's book, "The Education of a Coach," to the nonprofit, more than \$100,000 has gone to helping children and adults with disabilities participate in recreational activities, according to the founder, the Rev. Ross Lilley.

Still, despite all that, Belichick strikes some folks outside his circle of friends as aloof and imposing. Charlie Moore, television's Mad Fisherman, said he fears few men but has flinched every time he has tried to ask Belichick to go fishing with him.

"I get near him and I feel like I'm asking my father for 100 bucks," Moore said. "I freeze and then keep on walking. He's intimidating."

Moore said he would like "to bring out the little kid in Bill." Belichick's friends know that kid as well as they know the man. And, win or lose tonight, they know their brotherhood will endure.

"There's no guessing about that," Brown said. "He will always be a champion to us."

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## LS Danny Aiken

# The Boston Globe

### **Excelling at skill position**

#### **Long snapper Aiken has really delivered**

By Michael Whitmer

January 28, 2012

FOXBOROUGH - Perhaps the most anonymous Patriot is the one who's come the closest to having a perfect season.

Meet Danny Aiken.

A rookie who was claimed by the Patriots Sept. 4 after being waived by the Bills, Aiken handles long-snapping duties for every punt, field goal, and extra point. Not once has an Aiken snap sailed over punter Zoltan Mesko's head, or bounced back toward him on a field goal or extra point.

All 61 times that Mesko has punted this season (playoffs included), Aiken has delivered a crisp, clean snap. And for all 104 of Stephen Gostkowski's kicks - 67 extra points, 37 field goal attempts - the ball has been delivered to the holder, Mesko, flawlessly.

Aiken might not be in the same company yet as Lonie Paxton, who spent nine seasons with the Patriots and was the long snapper for all three of the team's Super Bowl victories. But as Super Bowl XLVI approaches, Aiken should have Patriots fans confident that he's a capable replacement, mainly because he's stayed out of the news.

"It's not a glorified position," Aiken said. "And it doesn't need to be."

Said Gostkowski: "Snapping, kicking, and punting, you'd rather be seen and not heard. Danny's been great. He comes in here and does his job every day, he's been very consistent. He's got a good attitude, which is tough to have sometimes as a rookie because you don't know any better. He's fit in very well, and has snapped very well all year."

Aiken is the Patriots' fourth long snapper since Paxton left for the Broncos as a free agent after the 2008 season. Jake Ingram was here for the 2009 season and part of 2010, Matt Katula lasted less than season, and James Dearth was with the team for just one game - the preseason finale - before Aiken became available.

He's held the job all season, and now finds himself going to the Super Bowl.

"You never know anything," said Aiken, when asked about his unexpected introductory season in the NFL. "All you know is that with hard work and dedication, you can get to the places you want to be."

It got Aiken out of Roanoke, Va., where he did everything for Cave Spring High School, playing quarterback and on the defensive line. On a whim, he tried long snapping.

He quickly displayed a flair for it, which eventually attracted college recruiters. Aiken chose Virginia, where he was a four-year letterman. He signed with Buffalo after going undrafted, but the Bills waived him. So he came here, armed with a special skill and hoping to turn it into long-term employment. So far, so good.

A football team's specialists can be an insular bunch, but Aiken didn't take long to make an impression on the people he'd be working with most closely.

"You don't have to spend much time with him to realize that he comes from a good family, good background," Mesko said. "I can't say enough about him, coming in here as a rookie, straight out of training camp, with limited snaps, numbers, game experience."

Mesko is lefthanded and leftfooted, so he wants the ball in a certain spot from Aiken when he punts: left hip ideally, but anything close will do. That's where Aiken, time after time after time, has put it.

"He does a good job of getting it in my strike zone, from the knees up to the chest, and that's all we're asking him to do," Mesko said. "He's very accurate."

There are subtle differences between snapping on punts and snapping back to a holder for kicks. A punt snap is roughly twice as long; a kick snap, while shorter, also needs to be much more accurate, and shouldn't come in quite as hard, since Mesko's got to field it and get it to the ground in time for Gostkowski's kick.

Another difference? On punts, Aiken's job doesn't end with the snap; as soon as Mesko boots it, Aiken runs downfield as part of the coverage team, and has made six special teams tackles this season. On kicks, Aiken snaps the ball, then braces for impact.

"He's done a good job of hanging in there, because he's always got the 350-pound guy crashing down on him," Mesko said. "The snapper's always the guy getting picked up off the ground by the other guys."

After thousands upon thousands of practice snaps, Aiken said he's at the point where he could probably tell where the ball is going if his eyes were closed.

"There's enough muscle memory, you can tell when something's a little off," Aiken said.

That hasn't been the case this season, at least noticeably to most fans. Any successful punt or kick means a good snap.

As for the perfect season? The Patriots tried that once, winning their first 18 games four seasons ago. Aiken's 18-game career has brought success, but he's not calling it perfect. Far from it.

"Never satisfied," Aiken said. "I won't say that it's been a bad season, but I'll say I can do better."

If Aiken is never mentioned during the Super Bowl broadcast, it's likely a good thing. It means he's done his job.

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## P Ryan Allen

# The Boston Globe

## A foot in the door for Ryan Allen

Allen earned Patriots' punting job

By Michael Whitmer, Globe Staff

September 7, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — Of the 13 rookies the Patriots are expected to have on their active roster for Sunday's season opener against the Bills, the biggest surprise might be the punter.

Not entirely because of who Ryan Allen is, but because of the player he replaced. Zoltan Mesko, though far from being the face of the Patriots franchise, had carved out a considerable niche in his three seasons: dependable punter, locker room jokester, charitable titan. Rarely, if ever, did Mesko miss an opportunity to lend his support to a civic cause.

But competition is part of everyday life in the NFL, and when the Patriots brought Allen to training camp, few fans initially noticed. When he kept hanging around, more fans noticed. Now that he has made the team, bumping Mesko, everyone will notice when Allen takes the field in Buffalo.

"I always knew I had the ability. It's just a matter of opportunity, and when you get an opportunity, you have to compete and make the best of it," said Allen, a left-footed kicker, like Mesko.

"The biggest thing for me is to not compare yourself to another person, because everybody is different, everyone is going to bring something different to the table. I don't want to be a rookie. I want to be someone who can come in and impact the game in a positive way."

It's been one week since Bill Belichick and the rest of the Patriots coaching staff made final roster cuts out of training camp, getting to the league-mandated 53 players last Saturday. Tim Tebow was the roster decision everyone was discussing, but he would have been a third-string quarterback, rarely used. The decision to keep Allen over Mesko will have a direct impact, because not only will Allen handle punting duties, he'll also be the holder on extra points and field goal attempts. That's a role he's never filled in a game before.

"We thought that was the best thing for our football team," Belichick said Friday, before the team's final practice leading into Sunday's game. "Zoltan did a good job for us, but this year's competition is this year's competition, and based on all the things that we took into consideration, we felt like Ryan deserved the job."

"But it was very competitive, and Zoltan showed that he can kick in the league, and he still is kicking in the league, so we were fortunate to have that kind of competition at that position."

Mesko was scooped up by the Steelers Monday, two days after being released.

The Allen-Mesko battle didn't bring nearly the same scrutiny as some of the other positions — running back comes to mind — but that was probably because most assumed Mesko would win the job.

It's safe to say that money was most certainly part of the decision. Mesko stood to make \$1.323 million this season, which would have been his fourth with the team and the last before he became a free agent. Allen will make \$405,000, the rookie minimum, and signed the standard three-year contract that's given to undrafted rookies.

Was the difference in salary a larger factor than on-field performance? Perhaps, because Mesko had better statistics in the four preseason games, outkicking Allen in each of the final three. Mesko punted 15 times in the preseason, nearly twice as many as Allen, who had eight kicks. Mesko's average was slightly better (45.2 to 45.0), his net average was better (38.1 to 32.5), and his long (57) was a yard longer than Allen's best.

So how did Allen win the job?

"I couldn't tell you that," said Allen. "I didn't make that decision, that's on the coaching staff. All I know is I'm just focused on working on my craft, getting it as smooth and as consistent as possible, and helping this team do well this season."

That's not to say Allen arrived at camp unheralded. Despite not being drafted, he was a two-time winner of the Ray Guy Award as the nation's best collegiate punter — the first player to win it in back-to-back seasons — and was a unanimous first-team All-American in 2012, when he averaged 48.0 yards per kick for Louisiana Tech. He never had a punt blocked in college.

Will that translate to the professional game? We're about to find out. Just as interesting will be how well Allen handles holding duty whenever Stephen Gostkowski lines up to kick. Neither Allen nor Gostkowski sound worried.

"I know the technique, I know the form," said Allen. "It's just a matter of getting in synch with the kicker and the snapper, and we've been working all through OTAs and fall camp, so it's all about making everything smooth between the three of us.

"[Long snapper] Danny [Aiken] and Steve were using Zoltan for the past three years, so it's a matter of getting comfortable with someone new. They've been very supportive, they're helpful."

Gostkowski, who had Mesko in the locker next to him for three years, a spot now held by Allen, said, "It's a situation I've been in before. My rookie year I had three different holders, had Matt Cassel hold and he'd never held in a game and we did well, so you just lean on past experiences.

"[Allen's] worked hard, and that's all you can ask. He's a professional athlete and he's obviously very talented and it's something he's going to figure out."

Allen has praised Mesko for the help the veteran gave a determined rookie trying to take his job. Now that he has, the focus changes. During training camp, Allen was the unknown underdog. Suddenly, he's the Patriots punter.

"This is a performance business and there are expectations," said Allen. "You've got to perform well if you want to stay here, that's what's most important to me. I knew everything was going to happen for a reason, everything was going to fall in place eventually. You know what? It all worked out."

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## WR Danny Amendola



### **Football journey: Danny Amendola**

By Mike Reiss

November 23, 2013

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- When the question is asked to Patriots receiver Danny Amendola about the high and low points of his football career, from age 10 to the present day, he is temporarily stumped.

"I'll be guessing on both of these," he starts, "but [lowest] is not getting drafted and the highest point is probably yet to come. I'm looking forward to it."

It's an optimistic viewpoint, shaped in part by the underdog route he's taken to arrive at this point. The 28-year-old Amendola entered the NFL as an undrafted free agent in 2008, spending time with the Cowboys and Eagles before finally breaking through with the Rams.

After signing a five-year, \$31 million contract with the Patriots this year, it's hard to consider Amendola an underdog any more, even if that's the mentality with which he plays.

He shares his "football journey":

**When he first started playing football:** "In organized leagues, tackle, when I was 10."

**What got him started:** "My dad is a high school football coach in Texas. I was always a ballboy growing up and wanted to go play early."

**First positions:** "Quarterback."

**Favorite players growing up:** "Wayne Chrebet. He was a smaller, scrappy guy, kind of like myself. I just related to that."

**Favorite teams growing up:** "The Oilers. Warren Moon. Ernest Givins ..."

**Role models in his football life:** "Guys I still talk to today, high school coaches. Texas high school football is really kind of a big deal. They pride themselves on doing a good job and taking care and minding their work. I respected that, obviously, and really looked up to them growing up. I still talk to all my high school coaches today."

**Role models in his non-football life:** "My immediate family. My mom and my dad, everything they've taught me."

**Favorite memories of high school football at The Woodlands:** "Playing against my dad. We won two out of three. Of course, he knew all the plays. He was the defensive coordinator and I remember one specific time it was third-and-10 and he was physically out on the field, on the numbers, screaming out the play. I remember looking back, saying, 'Get back!' He's a smart guy, so he knew what was up."

**Why Texas Tech was the right college choice for him:** "Just watching their offense go, and watching them throw the ball on every play, pretty much. I committed there when I was a junior in high school so I knew I was going there. I wanted to be in that offense."

**Best memories at Texas Tech:** "Just being in the locker room with the guys. College football is really unique because you're with the guys all the time. You live with them, you go to school with them, you work out with them, you play football with them, you party with them. It's really a family atmosphere."

**If he thought he'd be drafted:** "I didn't really know. I knew I had a shot to get a chance in a camp and that's honestly the only thing I wanted and just to try to run with that."

**Signing with the Cowboys as a rookie free agent and spending the year on their practice squad:** "I knew I was going to have an opportunity. I didn't know when it was, but I knew if I got that opportunity I would have to make the

most of it. I learned a lot. It was a whirlwind for me coming from the stuff we did at Texas Tech and relating that to the NFL, it was totally different. It took me a couple months to catch on and get a good idea of how it was going to be."

**Spending time on the Eagles practice squad in 2009:** "That was my second offense, so I could kind of relate the first offense I learned in Dallas to the offense I was learning in Philly, and I could try to match them together and get the gist of the NFL and how it worked. I feel like I really grew up as a second-year guy."

**Being signed off the Eagles practice squad to the Rams' roster in 2009:** "That was my first real shot. I tried to take that in stride the best I could. The biggest thing I learned in St. Louis, early, was that it's hard to win in the NFL and every time you do be excited about it. And you need to learn something from winning and losing. There is always something to take away from each."

**The challenge of his early-career movement from team to team:** "It was challenging -- three teams in pretty much a year. I was just searching for my opportunity and trying to run with it."

**Signing with the Patriots as a free agent in 2013:** "I was really excited. I feel like I'm ready and been around the game, and the NFL game, long enough to know what to expect when I got here. It's been a learning process. I'm obviously really excited to be here."

**Life as a Patriot:** "It's good. We don't spend too much time smelling the roses or anything like that. It's all work and that's what I really appreciate about it."

**What he loves about football:** "The competitiveness. Being out there on Sunday, being in front of a lot of people, and having fun with my teammates."

**How the game has taught him about himself:** "It teaches a lot of things. One specific thing is how you deal with adversity. Everything in the game doesn't go your way. It's not necessarily how things are going when it's good, but how you respond to things when they go bad. It's like that in life too. ... You play a lot of football and meet a lot of people and you take away what you will. You try to consume the things that you can learn from and get better as a person and football player."

**Summing up his football journey:** "It's been a lot of fun. The most important thing I've taken away from it is meeting a lot of my best friends. You learn a lot about people when you play the game with them. I'm excited to further extend my career to see where it goes."

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## CB Kyle Arrington



### **A cornerback comes of age**

#### **Kyle Arrington's rise from practice player to Pats starter to stat leader impressive**

By Anna Katherine Clemmons

January 11, 2012

His high school teammates called him Deion, as in Deion Sanders, because of his explosive ability to pick off his opponents' passes. His coaches called him Leon, a moniker referring to a commercial that featured a football player who was "too cool" to follow coaches' instructions. When it came to football, Patriots defensive back Kyle Arrington had the skills of Deion but the attitude of Leon. He didn't like to tackle.

So much has changed since then.

Arrington finished the regular season tied for the NFL lead with seven interceptions. He also finished second on the Patriots in tackles, totaling 88 (66 solo, 22 assisted), behind linebacker Jerod Mayo's 95 (58/37). In addition to leading the team in interceptions, he was tops in passes defended (13), ahead of Devin McCourty (12).

"I've seen that guy go from a practice squad guy to a nickel back guy to a starting corner and now he leads the league in interceptions," Patriots defensive tackle Vince Wilfork told CSNNE in late November. "I'm not surprised. I'm pretty sure he's not surprised, because I'm not surprised, and my teammates aren't surprised, because we put so much into this game."

Maybe he's not surprised, but the road to becoming one of New England's defensive leaders wasn't always smooth for the 25-year-old Maryland native.

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Kyle Arrington started playing football almost by default. At 12 years old, he was a lanky, athletic basketball talent with aspirations of becoming an NBA player. He walked into the gym one night for a pickup game but couldn't find anyone. When he called a few friends to ask where they were, they told him they'd signed up for football. So Arrington asked his mother to enroll him as well. He was the youngest of four athletic children -- two boys, two girls -- and his older brother, also a gifted basketball player, hadn't tried football.

Arrington played on the JV football team for Gwynn Park High School in Brandywine, Md., for two years. During his junior year of high school, he dislocated his shoulder twice. Healthy for his senior year, he played well despite what Gwynn Park head coach Danny Hayes called an unorthodox style.

"[Kyle] just didn't have a good backpedaling stance and he always had his arms up front, like a froggish type of look," Hayes says. "That drove me nuts. But once he got three interceptions, I let him stand how he wanted to stand."

Hofstra University was the only Division I school to offer the 5-foot-10 cornerback a football scholarship.

Arrington admits that even after accepting the scholarship, he thought about pursuing basketball. "I didn't want to ruin my jump shot [with football]," he says, laughing. He considered playing for Hofstra's basketball team but chose to focus on football. He also ran track to work on his speed and agility.

The weight room is where he spent the majority of his time. Redskins DB Stephen Bowen played with Arrington at Hofstra for two years. "He was a freakish athlete -- I think he benched 225 pounds, like 15, 16 times as a freshman," Bowen says. "He was always in the weight room."

Arrington gained 15 pounds of muscle while at Hofstra. His teammates nicknamed him Herc because of his Hercules-esque physique. He was one of the quieter players, working hard but saying little. Saints wide receiver Marques Colston, also a Hofstra alum, often matched up against Arrington in practice.

"He's a guy that has all the measurables: He's fast, really strong, smart and he's got pretty good ball skills, as you've seen this year," Colston says.

As a sophomore, Arrington started seven of 10 games, totaling 21 tackles but no interceptions. His junior year, he played in 11 games, recording 48 tackles and grabbing his first collegiate interception. Prior to his senior year, Arrington's coaches told him that several scouts had asked about him.

"That's when I realized, 'Hey, I have a chance,' " Arrington says of the NFL. "So I put everything into it my last year." He played in all 11 games, finishing with 53 tackles and another interception.

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After talking with several coaches and scouts, Arrington thought he'd be drafted somewhere between the fourth and seventh rounds of the 2008 draft. But on draft day, his name wasn't called. He signed with the Eagles as an undrafted free agent, joining their practice squad. Philadelphia cut him eight days later. Arrington then signed with Tampa Bay on Sept. 17, 2008, joining the team's practice squad for the remainder of the season.

Arrington wasn't angry about not being drafted and immediately focused on becoming stronger as well as finding ways to showcase his athleticism on the practice field.

While he puts a lot of pressure on himself, Arrington says he's not much of a planner. If football didn't work out, he didn't have a Plan B.

"I always cross bridges when I get there -- football was in the forefront of my mind and what I wanted to do, so I put everything into it," Arrington says.

Entering his second year in Tampa, Arrington was cut by the Bucs on Sept. 5, but was re-signed the next day. Four days later, he made their 53-man roster and played the team's opening game, only to be waived again the next day.

Still, Arrington refused to give up football, signing with the Patriots practice squad on Sept. 21, 2009. He grew up a Redskins fan but had always admired Bill Belichick-coached teams. He jumped at the chance to learn from fellow corner Leigh Bodden and says he watched the play of former Patriot Asante Samuel as well as NFL players like Champ Bailey and Lito Sheppard.

In early November 2009, Cleveland tried to sign Arrington to its 53-man roster. Arrington's agent pointed out that while he realized how much his client liked playing for New England, a roster spot versus a practice squad was a no-brainer.

"I was a little distraught about leaving New England because I'd wanted to be a Patriot and a part of this team so badly," Arrington says. "So even though I had a better opportunity elsewhere, I kind of didn't want to leave."

Still, he agreed with his agent's logic. That night, Patriots director of player personnel Nick Caserio called Arrington. Caserio asked the cornerback if he'd signed anything yet. Arrington said no. Caserio said the Patriots wanted to keep him -- and sign him to their 53-man roster.

"Besides first entering the league in Philly as an undrafted free agent, that was probably the happiest day of my life," Arrington says. He stayed in New England, playing in eight games that season and totaling 18 tackles.

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After taking over for starting corner Darius Butler, Arrington had a breakout season in 2010. He started 14 games and his tackle total skyrocketed to 77. On Dec. 19, 2010, against Green Bay, Arrington grabbed his most famous interception to date, one that has recorded over 10,000 views on YouTube.

With the Packers leading 17-14 on third-and-3 early in the third quarter, Green Bay backup QB Matt Flynn called the play. Arrington, lined up against Packers WR James Jones, described what happened next.

"We were in a Cover 1, man-to-man. I had gotten beaten previously by [Greg] Jennings on an inside route in the first half, so I'm like, the next inside route they run, I'm going to jump it. Patrick [Chung] did a great job because he had his man running in the flats and he came down and ran between James [Jones] and I to make James hesitate just a second. So I'm thinking inside, jump it. Once Flynn threw it, it felt like slow motion. I'm thinking, 'Do not drop the ball,' I'm on national TV. Once I caught it, all I thought about was to keep my legs moving and go from there. Fortunately I was able to get into the end zone. That was definitely a good feeling."

As he ran 37 yards toward the end zone, Arrington broke through four tacklers. The interception gave New England a 21-17 lead; the Patriots would go on win the game, 31-27.

After the Patriots' 2010 playoff loss ended their season, Arrington sat down with Belichick. While the cornerback says he can't reveal too many specifics of the conversation, he came away realizing he needed to work on specific drills to focus on his own hands, watching the receivers' hands and finishing each play.

He returned to Maryland for the summer and worked out with trainer Michael Brooks. Brooks, who runs the Waldorf Fitness Center in Waldorf, Md., and played defensive back in college, began working with Arrington a few years ago.

"A lot of our strength and conditioning training is geared toward making his nervous system respond to being off-balance," Brooks says.

He worked out Arrington for several hours each day, standing on balance balls or utilizing the TRX equipment to generate off-balance power. He designed drills to improve hand-eye coordination with reaction balls as well as tennis balls. In the latter drill, Brooks threw the ball against the wall and Arrington had to catch it with both hands, reacting immediately. Brooks told Arrington to learn to juggle and enrolled Arrington in yoga classes to increase his flexibility.

Prior to the 2011 season, Arrington wasn't a starter. But after rookie Ras-I Dowling was placed on injured reserve and Bodden was cut, Arrington seized the opportunity. He grabbed his first interception in the team's opener against Miami and snagged two more two weeks later during New England's three-point loss to Buffalo. His seven interceptions lead the league (tied with Eric Weddle and Charles Woodson), and he had been the solo leader in the stat category for much of this season. He keeps most of his interception balls, often giving them to his mother. His parents have attended almost every home game this season and his mother is an avid sports fan.

"He's more confident now," Brooks says of Arrington. "You can see it when he lines up -- he's sure of what he's doing, he's breaking on the ball better. His reaction is better; a lot quicker."

Still, Arrington admits he needs to improve. The Patriots defense, which has been plagued by injuries, ended up ranking 31st in the league in both passing and total yardage -- with 6,175 yards allowed through Week 16. (Green Bay finished last with 6,585 yards allowed.) While Arrington snagged two interceptions against the Chiefs on Nov. 21, Dwayne Bowe often beat him in man-to-man coverage, catching three of six passes for 51 yards against Arrington (Bowe finished the game with seven receptions on nine targets for 81 yards).

Though only 25, Arrington is considered a veteran in a young backfield that's been hampered by injuries. He's still a fairly quiet player: "I'm not the most vocal guy on the field. I just try to lead with my play and be an example, the best I can be," Arrington says.

"He's definitely a hard-working guy who competes every day in practice and doesn't ever take a play off," Patriots safety James Ihedigbo says. "He studies his opponent so well and studies receivers so well, so you're happy for him when he goes out there and makes a play in the game."

When not focusing on football, he's either spending time with his fiancée, playing video games or going to the gym to shoot hoops. "I still fancy myself a basketball player," Arrington says, laughing.

And he's left his Leon days behind. "Honestly, I prefer tackling now -- I'd rather have a big hit than an interception," Arrington says. "It's been a transformation."

Some might say the same of Arrington's path, from undrafted practice squad player to a stat-leading Patriots starter.

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## RB LeGarrette Blount



### **Football journey: LeGarrette Blount**

By Mike Reiss  
September 7, 2013

(Every Saturday, as has been the case over the last few years, the “football journey” of one Patriots player will be highlighted as part of a regular feature.)

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- When 26-year-old running back LeGarrette Blount looks back on almost 20 years of playing football, he sums things up this way: “It’s been a long, fun, hard, complicated road. For a while it was a smooth road. Then it got a little bumpy. Then it smoothed out a little bit more for me.”

Things are currently in the “smooth” category for Blount, who has carved out a spot on the New England Patriots’ 53-man roster after being acquired from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in a draft-day trade. He projects as a top backup to Stevan Ridley, and could also be used as a kickoff returner, which is unusual for a player who weighs 250 pounds.

Some of the bumpy parts of Blount’s career are well documented, while he was playing at the University of Oregon and also in the NFL (with Tennessee and with Tampa Bay).

“You’re going to have to overcome obstacles in any career, when you’re thinking about starting at the age of 7 until now,” he said. “I’ve overcome a lot of those obstacles. Hopefully I continue to do so.”

It’s been “so far, so good” for Blount in New England.

**When he first started playing football:** “When I about 7 or 8, in Pop Warner, but it’s called recreational football in Florida. The team was called Bennett’s Glass. It was flag football. I had been used to playing tackle football with my friends, so my first play I got the ball and was trying to run everyone over. They were just moving out of the way. I was like ‘this is easy.’ Then I got back to the sideline and my coach was like ‘You’re not supposed to be running people over. This is flag football.’ After that, I learned the ins and outs of it. It got really fun.”

**What led him to start playing football:** “In my hometown [Perry, Florida], my dad [Gary Blount] was a pretty big deal. His class went to the state championship a couple of times in a row. He was a middle linebacker and fullback, and everybody said to me, ‘Are you going to be a football player like your dad?’ I always watched football with him, and it just evolved from there.”

**If he was always a running back:** “I played quarterback throughout flag football. I played a little bit of quarterback in rec football and a tackle league. But from then on, I played running back, linebacker and safety.”

**Favorite players growing up:** “I didn’t get to watch the Walter Paytons and the Gale Sayers and guys like that. When I was growing up, it was Barry Sanders, Garrison Hearst, Terrell Davis and Jamal Anderson and those guys. I really liked watching Jamal Anderson. Also Jamal Lewis. Just to see the things they can do, that was exciting to me.”

**Favorite teams growing up:** “It was always the Miami Dolphins.”

**Top memories at Taylor County High School in Perry, Fla.:** “There were a lot. One game, the possibility was there to gain 500 yards, but there were 200-something yards called back. I ended the game with 300-something yards rushing and six touchdowns. I think I did it two games in a row. So that was probably one of the best memories I had, those two games.”

**Attending East Mississippi Community College and playing 17 games while rushing for 2,292 yards and 18 touchdowns:** “I went there because I wasn’t eligible to go to a Division I [school]. I came out and my first year, I led the national junior college rankings in rushing and yards per game. That had me rated No. 1 going into my second season. I did it again my second season, and that’s what ultimately got me to Oregon.”

**Enrolling at Oregon, where he played two seasons and rushed for 1,066 yards and scored 19 touchdowns in 16 games:** “They had this really good stable of backs. [Jonathan] Stewart had just left, but they still had Andre

Crenshaw and Remene Alston and Jeremiah Johnson. I had just come in, and I think LaMichael [James] came in that year also, and Kenjon Barner. We did pretty well. Oregon was an amazing place. I love it there, and try to go back as much as possible. The facilities and the coaches, the players and the support you have from the fans and alumni ... they never forget about you."

**Entering the NFL as an undrafted free agent with the Tennessee Titans in 2010:** "It was hard trying to make a team. I made the official 53-man [roster], then I got released. I learned that you can't take things in this business personally. It's a business. You're going to develop friendships and relationships with people, but ultimately it's a business and everyone is out to keep their job. People have families, and you just have to understand that."

**Summing up his three seasons (2010-2012) with the Buccaneers:** "The best year I had there had to be my first, rushing for [1,007 yards] as an undrafted free-agent rookie. It was a big deal for me in general, because I didn't know how many people had done it. Come to find out there was only one other guy who had done it, and I think it was Dominic Rhodes from the Colts. We went 10-6, so it was a successful season. That was my favorite part."

**Being traded by the Buccaneers to the Patriots on May 10, 2013:** "My time in Tampa was done. It had got to the point where I wasn't playing that much in my last year there. It was kind of like 'What should we do here?' I signed with them and got traded to the Patriots, and I'm happy that Bill [Belichick] and Mr. Kraft liked me enough to gamble with that trade. It's been amazing since I've been here. I've loved every minute of it."

Summing up his experience with the Patriots: "It's fun. You're going to work hard, you're going to get a lot done. It's really productive. I love it here."

**Role models in his life:** "My role model growing up was my dad. From the first practice I had in football until I got to Oregon, he never missed one game. From 7 to however old I was when I got to Oregon, him and my mom [Barbara Bonner] didn't miss one game. They would drive back and forth from Perry [Florida] to Scooba, Mississippi every weekend to watch me play home and away games [with East Mississippi Community College]. That was a huge support system for me -- my mom, my dad and my sister [Tareaka Blount]."

**What he loves about playing football:** "I'm a competitor. I love to compete. I hate to lose. I'm a big guy, and I love being physical. I love to take on the challenge of someone trying to tackle me when I'm doing everything I can to get away from them. You can't beat it."

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## **RB Brandon Bolden**



### **A model program for Brandon Bolden**

By Dan Duggan  
October 7, 2012

As Brandon Bolden turned the corner on the left side of the Patriots [team stats] offensive line, Bills cornerback Stephon Gilmore was waiting at the 4-yard line.

Bolden had two options: run around Gilmore or run through him. The Patriots running back chose Door No. 2, lowering his shoulder and driving Gilmore across the goal line for a touchdown in the Patriots' 52-28 win.

It was the signature play of last Sunday's 16-carry, 137-yard breakout game for Bolden, an undrafted rookie from the University of Mississippi. The thunderous touchdown run fired up his Patriots teammates and elicited groans from the 70,000 Bills supporters inside Ralph Wilson Stadium.

But 1,300 miles away, the play caused a different reaction for Marva Bolden. Surrounded by family members and friends at a Baton Rouge, La., sports bar, Marva naturally was excited to watch her son's second NFL touchdown. But there also is a fear whenever Brandon is involved in a big collision.

"I can't say there's a thought. When I see it, I just say, 'Get up, Brandon. Get up,'" Marva Bolden said. "All I need to do is see him pop up. I know that football is very physical and can be very dangerous."

Marva knows the dangers better than most. As the daughter of Frank Pitts, a retired NFL receiver who has Alzheimer's disease, she is acutely aware of the adverse effect football can have on players' health.

Between her father, husband and three sons, the high school geometry teacher estimated that football occupies 90 percent of her time — "Basically, my life is practice, homework, cooking and working," Marva said. Faced with that reality, she's come to an uneasy peace with the game.

"Football, to me, is a very, very physical game. I always have concerns. I hold my breath when I see him go out on the field all the time," Marva Bolden said. "I have seen players get hurt. My husband says sometimes my knees get a little weak. I just stay prayerful that he stays healthy."

#### **It's all in the family**

Frank Pitts played 10 seasons in the AFL/NFL from 1965-1974. A 6-foot-3 wide receiver, he totaled 2,897 yards receiving, 257 yards rushing and 28 touchdowns for the Chiefs, Browns and Raiders.

Pitts made his mark during six seasons with the Chiefs, playing for legendary coach Hank Stram, participating in Super Bowls I and IV. Pitts caught three passes for 33 yards and rushed for 37 yards in Kansas City's 23-7 win over the Vikings in Super Bowl IV.

During a phone interview with the Herald last week, the 68-year-old Pitts said with a laugh that he considered himself to be a pretty good player. According to those close to him, Pitts wasn't always so modest about his accomplishments.

"I remember being 6 years old and him popping in a highlight film of Super Bowls I and IV," Brandon Bolden said last week. "I'm 22 now — I've seen that tape at least 500 times."

Brandon Bolden grew up near his grandparents in Baton Rouge and football always was at the center of his regular weekend visits.

"He always stayed around me," Pitts said. "He always came to his grandmother's house for the cooking and then I've got some highlight films from Kansas City that I'd show to him. He'd bring some of his friends with him and they'd watch it."

Though Bolden chuckled at the memory of watching the tapes over and over, it was a genuine source of pride.

"My grandfather played in the NFL, what did yours do?" he said of his playground bragging rights. "It was great just having him as a person I could call on, especially with football. If I needed help with anything, he knows the ins and outs pretty much. He's been my role model since forever pretty much."

Pitts' guidance came more in the form of a kick in the butt than a pat on the back

"(Brandon) would always laugh because he would say everybody would high-five him and tell him what a good game he had," Bolden's grandmother, Diane Pitts, said. "He said, 'Then Papa called me and said I could have run five more yards if I had just done this.'"

After games at Scotlandville Magnet High, Brandon would sit with his father, Michael, and grandfather to break down his performance.

"He'll comment on the game and tell me everything I did wrong," Bolden said of his grandfather. "(He's) my toughest critic and I think that kind of rubbed off on me because I'm my toughest critic as well."

The critical assessments were welcomed by Bolden, who was always eager to improve so he could reach his lofty goals.

"When he was in the 10th grade, one day I asked him what he was going to do for the rest of his life and he told me he was going to play professional football," Michael Bolden said of his son. "We had discussions around what he'd have to do in order to do that and he did it. I'm so proud of him at an early part of his life deciding that's what he wanted to do and he stuck with it and he's worked hard to get there."

### **Game's give 'n' take**

Pitts was diagnosed with Alzheimer's 18 months ago. While he's showing signs of the disease — he's prone to repeating himself, for instance — he still watches all of his grandson's games and offers his evaluation.

"He's very sharp," Brandon Bolden said. "(Alzheimer's) kind of comes on every now and then, but it's not like something that creeps up on him all the time. It's not an everyday thing. He might just have one day out of the week where he has that kind of spell."

Pitts' neurologist determined that there is a link between the condition and his football career. Diane Pitts said her husband is "sort of part of that (head injury) study" and is being taken care of "very well" by the NFL.

"The only thing is the short-term memory," Diane Pitts said. "According to the neurologist, his brain doesn't retain any new information. If we're watching a game, for him to remember and to make the transition from Ole Miss to New England, he'll kind of go back to when Brandon was at Ole Miss. Now he's remembering and I think because football has been his whole life he remembers Brandon's football."

With so much attention being paid to the long-term effects of head injuries, Marva Bolden hopes her son will avoid a similar fate.

"I worry about that," Marva said. "But I just pray for the best and I just think the equipment is a little bit better than it was when my father played in the '60s. I know there's always a chance, but I just try not to think about it."

After putting in years of work and receiving plenty of advice from his grandfather to get to this point, Brandon Bolden also avoids thoughts of what could happen after his career.

"I try not to think about it," Bolden said, suggesting that it's a twist of fate as whether someone develops Alzheimer's or not. "He, unfortunately, got it. It wasn't his fault. It's not like he asked for it. But it happens and life goes on."

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## WR Josh Boyce



### **Football journey: Josh Boyce**

By Mike Reiss

October 12, 2013

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Rookie wide receiver Josh Boyce grew up in Copperas Cove, Texas, and later starred at Texas Christian, so being drafted by the New England Patriots in the fourth round put him a bit out of his comfort zone.

Part of what has eased his transition to a new region, and a higher level of football, has been a bond developed with fellow rookies Kenbrell Thompson and Aaron Dobson.

"It's great to have somebody else going through it with you," the 22-year-old Boyce said. "We hang around each other all the time."

That can mean spirited competition in the Madden video game, or taking their interest in shoes (e.g. Jordan's) to a higher level.

All three have played more than most Patriots rookies receivers compared to past years, with Boyce's playing time the most limited (53 snaps on the year) of the group. The speedy target, also known for his on-field smarts, has one catch for 24 yards.

This is his football journey:

**When he first started playing football:** "My dad got me started in the fourth grade. I was pretty young. I liked playing basketball when I was younger, so he put me in football too."

**First positions:** "Quarterback and cornerback."

**Favorite teams growing up:** "I liked the Lions because of Barry Sanders. It was more Barry Sanders than the team. It was the way he played."

**Role models:** "My parents [dad Travis and mother Jacqueline] and my brother [Travis Jr.]. My brother and dad taught me how to be a man. And my mom taught me to never leave your loved ones, always stick by their side no matter what."

**Memories of Copperas Cove High School, also Robert Griffin III's alma mater:** "Going to the state championship back to back; that was fun. I played both ways, on defense and offense."

**Enrolling at TCU:** "It wasn't too far from home, a couple hours away, so I could still see my parents and things like that. Also, it's a good program. Gary Patterson is a great coach."

**Top memories at TCU:** "The West Virginia game last year. We were down by seven with about a minute left, and I caught a fade for [94] yards to tie it, and then caught the 2-point conversion [in double overtime] to win it. And when we beat Boise at home; we were the first team to do that in a long time. I did the same thing. The Rose Bowl was great too, just to be there. We were the underdog, having gone to the Fiesta Bowl the year before and lost. We got back to the Rose Bowl, 13-0. It was great."

**Drafted in the fourth round by the Patriots:** "I just feel blessed that God has given me this opportunity. It's been great, business, all about football. You have to stay on top of your things, your playbook, and what you have to do. We're not in school anymore, this is our job. It's not like college where you have a scholarship."

**What he loves about football:** "It's the adrenaline, coming out and playing in front of crowds. I really feed off that. Just in the locker room, having fun with your teammates and working hard every day, knowing everyone has the same goal."



**Summing up his football journey:** "Just blessed to be able to be playing football from a young age, and achieving my dream. Everybody wants to play for a long time, and hopefully I can keep my head down and keep working, and keep working some more, and make plays when it's time to make them."

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## DE Michael Buchanan



### Football journey: DE Michael Buchanan

By Mike Reiss

December 7, 2013

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- The Patriots have had success finding front-line contributors in the seventh round of the NFL draft in recent years, and rookie defensive end Michael Buchanan could be next in the pipeline.

The 226th overall pick out of the University of Illinois opened the season as the team's top nickel rusher, a role previously held by the likes of Tully Banta-Cain, Mark Anderson and Andre Carter. While Buchanan isn't currently playing as much on defense as he did earlier in the season, a result of Carter's late-October return to the team, he's still finding other ways to contribute.

"Now I've been asked to take on more of a special-teams role and I'm embracing that," he said. "I want to do whatever I can to help the team win. Even to be out there on the field as a rookie is a blessing."

Buchanan, of course, had a key fumble recovery of a Julian Edelman muffed punt in the team's overtime victory over the Broncos on Nov. 24.

One of the things that stands out with Buchanan is physical traits -- at 6-foot-6 and 255 pounds, he is tall and has long arms. That's been something that has been with him throughout his playing days, which is why he's always worn No. 99.

"The teams I played on [as a youngster], the higher the number got, those usually went to the biggest players -- and I was always tall. So 99 was the only one that fit me," he said. "After that, it kind of stuck with me."

Buchanan, who dons No. 99 with the Patriots, shares his "football journey":

**When he first started playing football:** "I first tried in the third grade but I was too tall and didn't make weight. My mother didn't want me to play up with the bigger, older kids. So my first official year playing was fourth grade."

**What got him started:** "I was always playing sports and was always around sports when I was younger -- just playing in the streets, playing basketball, football, baseball, everything outside. After a while, my mother thought I should start doing organized sports because she saw I was pretty good at it. That's how I got my start."

**First positions in football:** "I was always a defensive end/outside linebacker. I played some wide receiver, tight end, and got to play running back for a few games."

**Favorite football teams growing up:** "Being from Chicago, I was obviously a fan of the Chicago Bears and liked their defense -- guys like Brian Urlacher. I was also a fan of the Eagles. I was always a Donovan McNabb fan and he's from the area also."

**Role models growing up:** "My biggest role model was my mother [Lolita Jordan]. She raised three boys, pretty much on her own. The biggest thing I learned from her was just strength and standing up for your family. I've seen her go through so much. My little brothers' father weren't really in their lives and we had our struggles growing up. She's my rock. We had some tough times but she would never let it impact us; she wouldn't show it and I didn't realize it until I was older. Also, my father [Michael Buchanan Sr.]. One thing he definitely taught me was that somebody might have more talent than you, but hard work can beat talent. That's something I've tried to live my life by, sports wise, always going hard and trying not to take a play off."

**Top football memories of Homewood Flossmoor High School:** "One of the top memories was being elected captain of the team my junior year. The reason that was impactful to me was that we had a number of highly recruited seniors. The whole team was pretty much made up of seniors and for me to be a junior and a captain was pretty big. Also, my junior year, we made a run to the playoffs. We got to the game right before state."

**Why attending Illinois was the right choice:** "For a number of reasons. First and foremost, it's my home state. I definitely wanted to stay in state and represent where I'm from. It was good for me to go there because I'm the oldest

of four and I wanted to be close to home to be around my little brothers and sisters. Also, because I was obviously a big fan of Coach [Ron] Zook at the time he was there. He told me I would come in and play and by my second year I would be starting. That ended up being true."

**Top football memories at Illinois:** "Back-to-back bowl games. That was something Illinois had never done before."

**Expectations entering the NFL draft:** "I really didn't know. I heard a number of different things, but what I knew for sure was that I was given – somehow, somewhere – an opportunity to play in the NFL. That's all I really cared about."

**Reacting to being selected in the seventh round by the Patriots:** "To be in this organization, you're blessed. From top to bottom, this is one of the greatest organizations in the NFL. I knew I would be given a fair opportunity to show my talents. I was really excited when I got that call."

**What he loves about football:** "The intensity of it. If you make that big play, that sack, there is no other feeling like it. I just love being able to play a game when 11 guys are on the field at the same time and working towards a common goal."

**Lessons from the game of football:** "You have to be consistent. Week in and week out, play after play after play, you can never get relaxed. You have to approach every single moment you have like a professional."

**Summing up his football journey:** "It's a journey that is yet to be completed. Still a long journey to go."

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## QB Tom Brady



### **The greatest quarterback ever?**

**A three-time Super Bowl winner, Tom Brady enters the 2012 season seeking No. 4. The New England Patriots QB's standing among the best to ever play is a hotly debated topic, but some believe he already tops the list**

By Albert Breer  
August 29, 2013

Tom Brady won't forget the half-dozen quarterbacks he had to beat out at Michigan, or the uber-recruit, Drew Henson, he had to fight off to become one of most prolific passers in school history. He won't let the memory dull of watching six more quarterbacks go in front of him in the 2000 NFL Draft.

And the New England Patriots superstar quarterback never loses sight of where it all started. As it turns out, his existence at Serra High, a parochial school in suburban San Francisco, was hardly perfect either.

"In high school, the thing they were always on Tommy about was his feet. He was too slow," said John Kirby, one of Brady's best friends, and favorite receivers, from Serra. "That was his thing to prove, that he could roll out, that he could run for a few yards. We gave him a hard time about it, but by the end, he always got the yards he needed to get. I thought he wound up being pretty good at it."

Seventeen years after graduating from Serra, you'll still hear Brady poking fun at his own foot speed. You'll hear him quip about having to "make the team" and "win a job," things he had to do at Michigan and in the NFL.

He'll say those things with a smile on his face. But the ghosts are always chasing him. He doesn't want to lose the memory of how he arrived.

"No," Brady responded to NFL.com, when asked about letting those slights fade, "because you always have to have that lack of self-confidence that you need to build on."

Brady enters his 13th season as a pro with a résumé already unlike any quarterback who has played the professional game. Four quarterbacks have won multiple Super Bowl MVPs. Four have won three Super Bowls. Two have made five Super Bowl starts. Seven have won multiple regular-season MVPs. Seven have averaged 300 yards passing per game over a season. Seven have thrown 40 touchdown passes in a season.

But the kid from San Mateo is the only one to make every one of those lists. So will he wind up being the best ever? Maybe. But if he gets to that abstract mountaintop, it'll be a result of a drive that wasn't born of a desire to become a legend.

"It's the fear of failure," said Tom Brady Sr., his dad. "Isn't that what drives all of them? It's not the challenge of success, because those guys win and forget about it 10 minutes later. I remember [the Patriots] won 21 games in a row, and lost to Pittsburgh, and he said to me, 'Geez, I don't know if we'll ever win another game.' These guys' self-confidence is an inch deep."

The result of that narrow focus might well be the greatest career a quarterback has ever had.

But Brady won't let himself think about that. Insecurity creeps back into the frame. The way he sees it, if he steps back to check himself out, that narrow margin of error he had when buried on the depth chart at Michigan or fighting for a roster spot in New England will come back into play. And he's not going to risk it.

"I guess it's because I feel the same way I've always felt, I feel like I have to come out here and earn a position like everyone else," Brady said. "I try to be the best quarterback on this team, the best quarterback I can be. I don't think about the future, the past. You know, I've been really blessed to be on a great team with great teammates and develop great relationships and win a lot of football games. And that never gets old."

'I get to go to work in sweats'

The risk for Brady, 35, is having football taken away. Most assume the end is in sight anyway. But if he has an exit strategy, he hasn't told many people about it.

"He wants to keep playing," said Aaron Shea, his tight end and close friend at Michigan, who now works as director of player engagement with the Browns. "When I had him out here for my son's christening (Brady is the godfather), I asked him, 'So how many more years do you wanna go?' He said, 'I wanna play 20 years (in the NFL).' That's just him. That's the way he thinks."

His 25 career fourth-quarter comebacks and 35 game-winning drives back that up. But all this wasn't born in the pros. "He's really cold-hearted," says his dad, Tom Sr. "When he was in college, people lost it, but Brent Musburger called him the 'Comeback Kid.' He did it time and again. It was his forte then. It is now. He's very comfortable in that situation."

Where so many players underestimate how difficult it will be to pull away from the game, Brady has no problem appreciating his surroundings.

That underscores one reason why, year after year, he's been so good. It's easier when you love it like he does.

"I talked to him earlier in the year about how long he wanted to play, and he said, 'Dad, I never wanna work as hard as you work,'" Tom Sr. said. "He said, 'I get to go to work in sweats, the Patriots feed me, I hang out with my friends, I get to exercise, and I play games. Why would I ever wanna do anything different?' We've run into quarterbacks who say, 'Geez, at 37, I knew I couldn't do it anymore, that was it.' But I'm telling you he feels the best he ever has."

"Frankly, I absolutely think he wants to play another six or seven or eight years, as long as he can perform or as long as Bill Belichick will have him. I don't know that this story can be written yet; he may only be two-thirds of the way through his career."

But the real proof exists in the meeting rooms and practice fields in sleepy Southeastern Massachusetts. It's on display on those Sundays when he's lighting up the scoreboard. It comes to life on the Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays when very few are watching: He hardly looks like someone riding off into the sunset.

'He's definitely one of the most passionate people I've been around,' said Brian Hoyer, his backup in New England since 2009. 'It doesn't matter if it's an OTA or a playoff game: He's playing every play like it's his last. I give him a hard time about being old, but he seems like he's the same age as me (26). To be that way all the time, it's impressive. And he's so meticulous, to the point where it drives people crazy. He wants to know other people have it down the way he wants it.'

The reason why? Because if people know how he wants it, then he can make them better.

There are few quarterbacks who fit the term "field general" better than Brady. It's apparent in how he lifts the game of those around him. But, as part of that, he also asks more of his teammates than most other signal-callers do. "He's meticulous to the point where it drives you crazy," said his backup, Brian Hoyer. "He wants to know other people have it down the way he wants it."

'He gets it out of everyone else'

Just like Brady's had to will himself to be better, those around him say he's always had a way of making his teammates more able than they otherwise would be.

He's made average groups (the Patriots' 2006 offense) good enough to win when it matters. That is not by accident.

He hasn't had a Jerry Rice, Michael Irvin, Marvin Harrison or Lynn Swann -- like Joe Montana, Troy Aikman, Peyton Manning and Terry Bradshaw respectively did -- which means he's had to adjust. The one thing common is that those who've passed through Foxboro are better for being around No. 12.

"I was at this Allen Conference in Sun Valley, and someone asked me about him, and the best thing I could say is he's a very unique person," said Patriots owner Robert Kraft. "I've met a lot of players. I have a deep affection for a lot of players. But what stands out about him being a leader in a unique way is that everyone who plays with him, he makes them look better. He makes everyone look good. He's a born leader, he's so skillful. And I know part of that drive and energy is he had to work for it."

Shea recounts a story from their senior year at Michigan, playing against archrival Ohio State with a BCS berth on the line. On one particular play, the Buckeyes blew a coverage and Shea came wide open. He came back to the huddle and told Brady about it. Twice.

Brady responded, "Hey, if you're gonna be a little b---- about it, I'm not gonna throw it to you." Shea laughs about it now, because it's an example of the fire that the quarterback has, occasionally redirected in this kind of way, but most often transferrable to everyone else in the huddle.

"Tommy does such a good job of making you feel like you're the best receiver, the best left tackle, the best tight end on the field," Shea said. "He tells you he loves you. He makes you feel good about yourself. He expects a high level of play from himself, and more than any other player, he gets it out of everyone else. He's got Bill, a tough-guy coach there. And then Tommy's there to say, 'Hey listen, we won't drop that again.' He brings out the best in everyone."

It's an understanding, Shea says, of everything around him, and what it'll take to win. And that brings another story up. Brady, his ex-teammate says, would always be up for a game of HORSE, mostly because there was a 3-point bank shot he could hit every time. He knew he'd win with it. But then, Shea continues, if he was challenged to play 1-on-1, Brady would "always have an excuse" to duck out.

The implication here, Shea says, is that Brady knows what it takes to win. And he won't put himself, or his team, in some other position of peril.

"He's very, very analytical," Tom Sr. said. "He has scoped everything out in his life, not just in football. He's very thoughtful, deeply thoughtful, and he does absolutely nothing off the cuff. He tries to be totally prepared for everything."

"We had summer practice back in high school, it wasn't mandatory, and everyone had stuff going on, so you went when you could," said Brady's target at Serra High, John Kirby. "He was there every day, three or four hours a day. ... Granted everything has to fall in place, but he already had the plan. And then, when his time came, he was ready."

'I gotta get a couple more'

That spills over to the guy that Brady is. Hoyer remembers being approached by Brady his rookie year, 2008, and Brady saying, "Hi, I'm Tom." Hoyer said, "I was like, 'No s----.' But for as good a player as he is, you won't find a better person."

He'd been such a normal guy to Hoyer, in fact, that when Brady threw two touchdowns passes in the final 1:04 of the Patriots' 2009 opener -- his first game back from ACL surgery -- to lead a furious comeback win, the backup had to remind himself who he was around.

"I remember driving home and thinking to myself, 'Did that really happen?'" Hoyer said. "I was there, we were down 11 points with three minutes left. How did that happen?"

Around Brady, those close to him say, it's easy to forget who he is, because of, well, who he is.

Shea jokes that these days he might have to wait a day for a phone call back, but his texts are always returned immediately. Kirby says he has a response within 20 minutes every time.

"Knowing Tom Brady, everything about him and the way he works, I don't think he cares about (his legacy)," Kirby explained. "It's about making his teammates better, it's about the success of the team and the staff, it's about doing everything he can to prepare. He'll come through for the team. And I still see that today. I can still call or email, he responds right away. And I know it's not always easy to be a big star. Honestly, I can't say that, if the positions were switched, I'd be able to pull that off."

Kirby, now the assistant AD at Serra, ran the annual "Fund a Dream" event earlier in the year, and Brady's presence helped pull in over \$800,000. His replica Serra jersey fetched \$100,000. When another auction attendee said he'd donate \$100K if someone would match the donation, Brady's hand was the one that went up.

"You get what you give," Kirby said. "I think it's all the same for him, the way he works with community and the high school here, that's the same way he works with his teammates."

His legacy will wind up being directly linked to the final product of all this -- the individual wins, the late-game drives, the sustained success. But what he'd like to be remembered for, according to these guys, probably has more to do with the process than the result.

"I think he'd want to be known as always being there for the guys," Shea said. "He'd hope that every one of his teammates knows he gave everything he had. No one knows how much he does -- the treatment, working on his arm

strength, the film study. He's one of the best teammates I've had. Eventually, he'll walk away and he won't tell himself he was the best. I've told him I think he's the best of all time. He'll always say, 'I gotta get a couple more.'"

We talk about a lot of things outside of football," Kraft said. "I love the guy. He works hard, he associates with excellent people, and channels that attitude into his personal life." When asked about Brady's future with the team, with his contract up after 2014, Kraft replied: "I hope he's here for the rest of his career. But that's for he and his wife to decide."

'I think Tommy is better than Joe Montana'

Shea remembers talking to a 24-year-old Brady just after his first Super Bowl win, and Brady saying, to his stunned friend, that he was just thinking about "next year." Shea reminded his buddy that he wasn't talking to a member of the media. Brady wouldn't relent.

Brady's dad relays a story after the Patriots' third Super Bowl win (and second in a row). His son mentioned to teammate Tedy Bruschi that no team had ever won three straight. Bruschi, according to Tom Sr., was thinking, 'My God, we just won the second one.'

And so, in talking about his legacy, it shouldn't be any surprise how Brady responds when the idea of matching his boyhood idol, Joe Montana, with a record fourth Super Bowl win comes up.

"Well, I'd love to win four, just because I've already won three," Brady said. "You love to win them, that's why we're playing. And we've had some opportunities and we haven't really taken advantage of them. There's disappointing parts of that."

Then, he furthers the point by relaying a story of his own.

"You know, I was saying this morning to some of my teammates, it's not about ..." Brady said, pausing to recall the occasion. "I mean, sometimes, when you're a young player, you don't understand the magnitude of this year, because this is the only year, there's nothing after this year. You don't look down the road anymore as you become a veteran player through your experience, because this is the opportunity that you have. In college, when you're a sophomore, you know you have three years left.

"In professional football, you have one year. And this is the year you're worried about, and you're trying to be the best player you can be, and you're trying to develop some type of different skill so you can add that to a different part of the offense, and the game. That's the challenge every year, to develop new ways to become a better player."

But while Brady refuses to reflect, it's not out of bounds for the rest of us to examine just what we're watching now -- a player whose beaten path to stardom seems to have created the perfect circumstance for a rise to the very top of the all-time list of quarterbacks.

It's easy to forget, too, that Montana wasn't unlike Brady. A run-of-the-mill high school recruit rising to prominence at a storied program. An everyman draft pick paired with the perfect coach and ambitious ownership driven to redefine a once-snake-bitten franchise.

Those same 49ers were Kraft's model when he bought the Patriots in 1994. He has since brought three championships to New England and given the sports-crazed region another superstar.

photoGallery\_thumb

"I think that Tommy, with all due respect, is better than Joe Montana," Kraft said. "I know that's a leap, but I really think he might already be the best of all time. I watch how involved he is, how driven he is. He's like Belichick, he's into the details. And he's got a skill that makes him so special, he can process all of it so quickly. ... And then, he's just got that quality. Certain people have that sincerity. He's a very genuine guy. People can relate to him. People can trust him."

Kraft paused, then said, "He's like a fifth son to me. He's special."

Next month, Brady gets another shot at bolstering that legacy, backing up all those folks who say he's already the greatest. All the while, his focus remains elsewhere.

When apprised of Kraft's comments, the assertion that he has indeed passed his idol, Brady takes a moment to think. But winds up right back in that same place he always does, with nothing more on his mind than what's in his sight now.

"Well, that's my boss. And I love Mr. Kraft for a lot of reasons, and we have a great relationship, and a great friendship," Brady said. "He's been through a lot the last few years. There'd be nothing more exciting for all us players than to win for him, because it means a lot to him, and it means a lot to Coach Belichick. I think the great part about being around here is that the expectation is only to win, and there's nothing else. It's not about selling tickets or t-shirts. It's to win football games."

Brady's done that, to be sure, winning more consistently in the regular season (78 percent of the time), and more period in the playoffs (16 times) than any other quarterback ever.

But in his mind, he's still the slow kid on the high school team, the placeholder for the super-recruit on the college team, and the forgettable low-round pick on the pro team. He's the kid who was confident enough to tell Shea in 2001, when he was fourth-string in New England, that he was planning to beat out Drew Bledsoe, yet insecure enough to never feel his job is totally secure.

So we can all wonder how Brady will add to that robust record, and to all the stats he's compiled in what's becoming a Montana-meets-Marino career.

But he'll just worry about making the team first.

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## OL Marcus Cannon



### **Train eyes on Marcus Cannon**

#### **Staff key to rookie's progress**

By Karen Guregian

Thursday, February 2, 2012

INDIANAPOLIS — In April, the Patriots [team stats] took a chance on a kid who had just been hit with a devastating cancer diagnosis. Where many teams chose to pass on promising offensive lineman Marcus Cannon and not deal with the ramifications of treatments and so on, the Pats used a fifth-round pick on the Texas Christian product.

Ten months later, that kid is preparing to play in his first Super Bowl.

Of course, plenty happened in between: chemotherapy treatments to help put Cannon's non-Hodgkin lymphoma in remission, a program to get the rookie back into playing shape, and ultimately, getting activated and placed on the 53-man roster.

While Cannon persevered through the worst — the seven cycles of chemo — the Patriots training staff took the ball from there.

Head trainer Jim Whalen and strength and conditioning coach Harold Nash were pivotal in Cannon's turnaround from cancer patient back to football player.

Nash, who had just taken over the job from the well-respected Mike Woicik, was especially proactive. He reached out to other training staffs who had similar situations with athletes returning from cancer treatment.

His first call went to the Red Sox [team stats].

They had to deal with starting pitcher Jon Lester [stats], who was diagnosed with lymphoma his rookie season in 2006, coming back after his treatments. So Nash put in a call to then-Sox strength and conditioning coach Dave Page to get an idea what to expect. Page had helped get Lester back into pitching shape relatively soon after treatment, so any helpful hint was appreciated.

"I consulted with Coach Page," Nash said during Tuesday's media day. "We talked about calorie intake, stuff like that. There isn't a big manual, where you got to do this, this and that. We had to be tolerant to some degree, because he'd go to chemo, come back, then go to chemo, and come back."

Cannon underwent treatment back home in Texas and later headed to Foxboro where Nash & Co. tried to help the 6-foot-5, 358-pound lineman maintain his weight.

"When he came, he worked his tail off. He worked extremely hard. He didn't want any extra special treatment," Nash said of Cannon. "Some days, he gave me what he could give me. And that's what I had to accept. Once we accepted that, he did an awesome, awesome job."

Cannon started the season on the reserve/non-football injury list and was promoted to the roster Nov. 15. He got into game action here and there at right tackle, then found himself seeing more time when the Pats employed fellow rookie Nate Solder as a third tight end.

"This guy stared death in the face for a little while," Nash said, "but he held firm, got his strength firm, got his health back, and got his humor back. It was great dealing with him."

The feeling is mutual. Cannon is very appreciative of the efforts of the Pats staff, the lengths they've gone to make things better for him, and do what's best for him.

"They helped me out a lot, a whole lot," Cannon said. "They did a real good job with me, and I'm happy for that. It's been a real team effort."

Cannon said he couldn't even dream of this moment, being here this week, being on the verge of participating in the biggest game his sport has to offer, back in April.

"I really couldn't, but this is awesome," Cannon said. "I'm happy to be here. I'm blessed to be here."

Nash and the Patriots training staff couldn't be more proud of the kid.

"When you look at it, this really didn't have anything to do with football. He had cancer. We cared about him. We wanted to make sure he was healthy first," Nash said. "And then after he was healthy, give us what you can give. We kept training him through the small victories. . . . And it was amazing. I feel like I'm taking credit that I don't really deserve. He did such a great job. He made my job so much easier. It worked out. Look at him now."

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## DB Marquice Cole



### Football journey: Marquice Cole

By Mike Reiss  
September 29, 2012

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- In signing cornerback Marquice Cole to a one-year contract on March 19, the New England Patriots landed a top special-teams player who also could contribute on defense in substitution packages. They had watched him closely the previous three seasons when he played for the New York Jets.

Through three games with the Patriots this season, the 5-foot-10, 190-pound Cole has been a solid fit, appearing on the kickoff coverage, punt coverage and punt return units, as well as playing nine snaps on defense.

To say Cole appreciates the opportunity is an understatement. Based on the hard road he traveled to make it to this point, it's no wonder he's always smiling around teammates and coaches.

The 28-year-old Cole explains why that's the case as he shares his "football journey" with ESPNBoston:

**When he first started playing football:** "My freshman year of high school [Hillcrest High in Illinois]. Before that, I didn't even know they had football for younger kids. Growing up in Chicago, I was more into tumbling [gymnastics] and just having fun as a kid. I never really thought about playing organized sports at that young of an age."

**Top memories of high school football:** "Big games. First round of the playoffs my senior year, I kicked a field goal, extra point, 2-point conversion, and I scored the game-winning touchdown. So that was a big moment. It was just being around friends, having fun."

**First positions:** "I was always a cornerback. I was a big fan of Deion Sanders. Your first day, freshman year, they say 'What position do you want to play?' For me, it was DB."

**Favorite players growing up:** "Deion, of course. He was a great player. His antics and all that off the field, I never really even knew about. I just knew him from watching the games and seeing him play and how good he was and him being a great player, week in and week out, being consistent and always on top of his game. I was a big fan of Randy Moss. Same thing with him, knowing going into a game that you were going to be double-teamed and still being able to produce the way he did and does, it's huge. Brett Favre, too. Even though I'm from Chicago, I was a big Packers fan because of Brett Favre. And Rodney Harrison, so I was a big Patriots fan in high school."

**Role models in his career:** "My high school football coach [Ernie Sutton], my high school gym teacher [Stacey Lane]. Rodney Harrison, who is best friends with my high school coach. I met him when I was in high school and I've done his camp every year; he does it at my high school. They have always been there with advice."

**When he knew playing college football was an option:** "When I got my first offer, going into my senior year. I knew I had played well -- I was all-conference, all-area, all-state -- but it never really dawned on me that I could because I didn't know anybody that went and played college football, or even went to college for that matter. Until I got that offer, I was like 'this is pretty real.'"

**Enrolling at Northwestern:** "I wanted to go to the University of Illinois and they had done well that year; I think they won the Big Ten. They offered me, but the day before my official visit there, the defensive backs coach came to my school and they withdrew the offer, saying I was going to be too far down on the depth chart. So they took the offer back. I had been telling other schools I was going to Illinois. When that happened, Northwestern came in and I was like, 'Yeah, I'll get to play against Illinois, and I'll be able to play early.' So I decided to go there and also get a great education [degree in communication studies]."

**Entering the NFL as a rookie free agent:** "It started in Oakland [in 2007]. I was there throughout the preseason. I got released and then I was out of football until Week 13. Then Tennessee called and I ended up getting on their practice squad for the rest of that season, and then they signed me for the next season. I went to their training camp, got released, and was out of football again until Week 13, 14. Then it was on to the New Orleans practice squad. They didn't sign me [for the 2009 season], and I had a tryout with the Jets. They signed me and I made the opening roster. But after Week 1, they released me, and brought me back on the practice squad for a week. I was getting

interest from some teams, but a couple of DBs got hurt in Week 2, and they put me on the active roster and I was active ever since.”

**Top memories of the Jets:** “Everything was fun. Coaches. Just having an opportunity to make a team and having an opportunity to go out there, play and make plays, and feel like you’re part of a team helping a team win games.”

**After three seasons, not being tendered by the Jets as a restricted free agent:** “They let me go into free agency. I had some interest from some teams, and the Patriots offered me. I looked at the good tradition of winning, and also the DB situation and how it got kind of thin at the end of the year, so I figured I could come here and have a chance to play -- not only on special teams but also on some defense as well.”

**Happy with the Patriots:** “Any opportunity that I get in life to do stuff that I want to do, I’m happy and can’t complain. All the guys say I’m always joking, always laughing, always smiling. Coaches say, ‘You’re never mad.’ If you see me around here, with a job, you’re not going to see me mad. There is no point walking around sad. We’re blessed to do what we do. That’s the way I was brought up and the life I’ve lived up to this point, the situations I’ve been through. Things could be a lot worse.”

**Describing the culture with the Patriots:** “It’s a lot of fun. When you get here, it’s like you’re automatically a part of the tradition, the Patriot Way. You see the way things go and you get in line and fit in. Whatever it was before you got here, when you get here, you see how people want it to be done and you follow that and do it.”

**What he likes about football:** “A lot. It’s a game and to be compensated the way we are, to play a game, is amazing. And then the friendships you come into. In football, those friendships are tied to how you have to rely on teammates. Our jobs intertwine. There is a trust that you generate and that makes it fun.”

**Support at home:** “My girlfriend [Rebecca] has stuck by me through those tough times. I was out of football for 27 weeks in two years, so no job, and she was pushing me to stay in shape. Then after that, when my son [Marquice Jr.] was born, you have to grind harder. This journey I’m on right now is just an awesome story that I’ll have for my son. It’s one of those stories I don’t have to make up or read out of a book. I have living proof, to be that role model he looks up to. Everything is not always going to go your way, but you stuck through it and fought through all the garbage to provide a way for him to go to good schools and have clothes and food and all of that.”

**Summing up this football journey:** “It’s just like life. You’ll have your ups and downs and it’s just about what you’re willing to do when you hit those downs. Are you going to give up and take the easy road? Or is this something that you want that you’ll keep fighting for? You persevere through it.”

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## OL Dan Connolly

# The Boston Globe

### **Connolly starting but still centered**

By Michael Whitmer  
January 31, 2012

INDIANAPOLIS - The number of times Dan Connolly has heard "You can't" in his athletic career? Way too many to count.

"Oh yeah, tons," Connolly said. "Of being undersized, [from a] small school, not having the experience. I've heard it a lot."

For the record, the undersized (6 feet 4 inches, 313 pounds) small college product (Southeast Missouri State) who was released by the Jaguars and joined the Patriots as a practice squad player will be New England's starting center in Sunday's Super Bowl XLVI.

Surrounded on the line by multiple Pro Bowlers and high draft picks, Connolly's journey from afterthought to Super Bowl starter might not be the most improbable of any of the Patriots getting ready to face the Giants. Then again, it might be.

"It's kind of been a hard road: Playing small college football, being undrafted, just trying to make a team, then being released from that team, trying to just be on somebody's practice squad," said Connolly, a 29-year-old St. Louis native. "I assume that my hard work over the years has paid off."

That and his versatility. Connolly has started for the Patriots at three offensive line positions over the past two seasons. He spelled Logan Mankins at left guard last season when Mankins was injured; took over for right guard Stephen Neal later in the season when Neal was hurt; and has logged 11 starts this season at center in place of Dan Koppen, who fractured his ankle in the season opener.

Because of injuries, the Patriots have been forced to move players around on the offensive line all season, with right guard Brian Waters the only one to start every game at the same position. Given an opportunity, this season and last, Connolly has seized it.

This isn't Connolly's first trip to the Super Bowl. After spending his first two years in Jacksonville (spending 2006 on injured reserve), he signed with New England on Sept. 12, 2007, and was with the Patriots throughout that season, which began with 18 victories and ended with a painful, last-minute loss to the Giants in the Arizona desert.

But Connolly spent that season on the practice squad, getting his teammates ready during the week, standing on the sideline out of uniform during games.

To be so close to perfection, without ever appearing in a game?

"It was great to be there," Connolly said. "I would have wished that I was playing, but it was fun to just be a part of it."

He was part of the Media Day frenzy at the Super Bowl four years ago, when he estimated that only four or five questions came his way. The entire time. This morning, when he and his teammates spend an hour talking to the media at Lucas Oil Stadium, Connolly's assigned spot figures to generate a bit more traffic.

Many Patriots fans still remember Connolly for his 71-yard kickoff return last season against the Packers, the longest ever in an NFL game by an offensive lineman. He's reminded of it often, including yesterday.

Asked what he'd be doing if he wasn't an NFL offensive lineman, Connolly didn't hesitate: "Kick returner, right?"

It's doubtful the Patriots will need him there come Sunday, but Connolly has shown the ability to transform himself into anything his team needs him to be. That flexibility is a big reason he's still with the team.

"I think I've shown I can play all those positions, being able to step in when needed," Connolly said. "It's really helped me stay here, I think."

Fortunately for Connolly, he's landed on a team that's developing a reputation for finding undrafted or discarded players and turning them into dependable, serviceable pros. Including Connolly, the Patriots have 18 players on their 53-man active roster who were never drafted; nine are starters.

In Connolly, Bill Belichick found exactly the kind of player he looks for, said Mankins.

"He looks for people who can fit his program. He looks for guys who work hard," Mankins said. "To make the team and stay in the NFL . . . those are the kind of guys he finds."

That undrafted bond has created a kind of brotherhood.

"The more I talked to people they'd say, 'Oh yeah, you were on practice squad too,' and I noticed that people work their way up the ranks and became starters," Connolly said. "It's good to have other guys around that have been through the same things I've been through. I think it builds team character, to have guys that have really had to work hard to get where they are."

Especially those who have seen what it's like when the spotlight wasn't on them, or in places where the spotlight doesn't even reach. Asked by a reporter yesterday about his years at Southwest Missouri State, Connolly quietly corrected. "It's Southeast; you're not the first."

Connolly takes unintentional slights like that in stride, and why not? Overlooked by big schools, then by the NFL, then released when he finally did crack the league, he knows what's important. Film work, practice, preparation. And above all, personal belief. It's gotten him this far.

"It's a very thin line," Connolly said. "It's very easy to end up working at a bar. I guess it's not as easy to be the center at the Super Bowl.

"What drove me? I guess the love of playing the game. I guess I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. I've always had to prove myself."

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## S Kanorris Davis



### **Football journey: Kanorris Davis**

By Mike Reiss  
January 4, 3014

The Patriots have had success in identifying core special teams players in Bill Belichick's 14-year coaching tenure, in some cases drafting them solely with that in mind. Matthew Slater (fifth round, 2008) and Nate Ebner (sixth round, 2012) are the two most notable players in recent years.

Rookie Kanorris Davis, a college linebacker turned NFL safety, could be the next.

After going undrafted out of Troy in 2013, Davis was surprised when the Patriots reached out with a contract offer because he hadn't heard much from them up to that point.

"When I was doing my training, I never spoke to the Patriots. They came off the radar," Davis said this week at Gillette Stadium during the Patriots' playoff bye week. "They told me they loved my special teams abilities and told me I could make a living on special teams. I'm here today."

The 5-foot-10, 207-pound Davis, who has a chiseled muscle-cut physique, was sold.

He opened the year on the Patriots' practice squad, then was promoted to the roster for two games -- against the Falcons (Sept. 29) and Bengals (Oct. 6) -- before returning to the practice squad until the regular-season finale against the Bills (Dec. 29). Davis got the most recent call-up when cornerback Marquice Cole was injured in practice, and he's filled his special teams role in games, which includes playing the role of "gunner" on the punt coverage team.

He shares his "football journey":

**What got him started playing football:** "We used to go outside and play tackle football without pads when we were younger. I hit one of my cousins one day and he threw up. That's when people said to me, 'You ought to go out for football. You'll be good.' So I tried out. Ever since then I've been playing."

**Positions he first played:** "I was a nose tackle. I was 5-7, 5-8 and 167 pounds. When I got to Perry (Ga.) High School, the first three years I played nose tackle and defensive end. My senior year, I played linebacker."

**Favorite memories of Perry (Ga.) High School:** "My senior year, the playoffs, we were on a roll and making school history. Everybody was treating us like celebrities. We received great respect. The football program came from very little and was built up, and my senior year, everything started to click. We had an awesome team, with guys who ran hard and respected the game. When we went to school, you could sense the higher spirit because we had something going. That feeling was amazing."

**Why attending Troy was the right decision:** "I had a couple of schools, like Purdue, which offered me a scholarship. It came to a situation where I was going to be short some credits and they didn't know how that was going to go, in terms of me being eligible. So they went ahead with guys who were ready to play. A lot of schools ended up backing out on me at the last minute, but Troy stuck with me throughout the whole thing. The recruiter came to games and stayed on top of me and was telling me, 'You're going to do this and surprise a lot of people.' They had belief in me and I knew that if I got there and got into a tough situation, they would still take care of me."

**Top football memories at Troy:** "When I first got there, they pulled me off the field and told me that I wasn't going to be eligible, so I had to end up staying with a teammate, Bear Woods. He was an [All-Conference] linebacker, a great guy and a great personality, and he took me in like a little brother. I slept at his apartment, rent-free, because he said he knew how hard it was being away from home and not knowing anybody. That was the first time I had been away from family. Just getting to know people that way, it made me feel comfortable and gave me the courage to just keep on driving and never give up. Also, my first start, I was on special teams and running down and ended up making a big play. From there, everything built up and I started getting more playing time. Then I ended up on billboards and people started loving me like back home. I felt like I had two homes -- in Georgia and also one in Alabama."

**Playing linebacker at Troy and switching to safety:** "[The switch] happened in my training [for the draft]. When we did my Pro Day at school, I worked out with the linebackers and also worked out with the safeties on the same day. I went from one drill to another drill, and also played a little safety in the bowl game I got invited to [Raycom College Football All-Star Classic in Montgomery, Alabama]. But it was only like two or three coverages. I ended up leading the team in tackles and had two pass deflections. I actually went into that game playing linebacker, but I also asked to play safety, to give the scouts another perspective of what I could do."

**Expectations to play in the NFL:** "Basically, I just worked hard and kept my head up, did what I needed to do, and made myself available for anyone that would give me a chance. I got closer with family and friends, kept myself in a stable place, and made sure that no matter what happened I would keep my head up. I had graduated college [majoring in criminal justice] and that was one of my dreams, to graduate with a degree. Once I got that degree, everyone was like, 'I'm really proud of you.' My feeling was, 'I'm not stopping there.' I still wanted to live my dream and every opportunity I got, I went hard. If I made mistakes, I made them going full speed. I kept in mind that if I worked hard, it could take me where I wanted to go. Keeping that faith, keeping that belief, keeping that inside your heart, helped get me here today. Now I need to capitalize on it."

**What he loves about football:** "I love the contact and speed. It separates the boys from the men. You can go out there and hit someone hard. You can fly around and have fun. When you're dominating, the game is more exciting. You might get tired of the waking up early and being sore, lifting weights when you're sore, but when it's all said and done, you don't want to have any regrets. You keep your mind on the ultimate goal and that's having fun and living for the game."

**Role models growing up:** "My older sister [Demetrish Harris]. She used to get upset at things, but all of a sudden, she changed and it was like nothing could bother her. She never let anything get under her skin. She stayed calm and she always talked to me about Bible verses, keeping me in her mind and heart at all times. Even though I'm a grown man and I should be making great decisions on my own, she makes sure I stay on the right path. I also have a brother [Dec Davis], and now he's a man of God, and that change alone just made me want to strive to be a better man."

**Teams and players he followed as a youngster:** "I never really had any favorite teams, but I had a couple of favorite players. Peyton Manning, watching him when he played with the Colts. Troy Polamalu. Still is. And Ray Lewis, I just like his drive for the game. And now one of my favorites is Tom Brady. He's an awesome guy, being in the same locker room with him and how physically he's able to come out in any situation, that really inspires me. It makes me drive to want to keep going."

**Summing up his football journey:** "When I first started playing, I was just playing to play, just having a lot of fun to stay out of the streets and to stay out of trouble. Now it's to make a living. All the things kind of connect with each other. When you're living the dream, you're living the dream. It's not like you're sleeping and wake up and it's gone. You can live it every day and I'm just going full speed."

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## **DB Alfonzo Dennard**



### **Football journey: Alfonzo Dennard**

By Mike Reiss  
October 20, 2012

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Rookie cornerback Alfonzo Dennard is on the rise.

The seventh-round draft choice from Nebraska didn't play in the first four games of the regular season, but has logged 78 of a possible 156 snaps over the last two games. Dennard (5-10, 200) was initially used as a nickel back, before replacing starter Kyle Arrington on the third series last Sunday in Seattle.

Growing up in a big family in Rochelle, Ga., the now-24-year-old Dennard was a late bloomer in the game of football. He's had a quick rise, although his draft stock dropped after an off-field incident the week before the draft, and this week he shared his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com:

When he first started playing football: "My sophomore year in high school. My twin brother started in ninth grade, but I wasn't as big on it until I was a sophomore. I liked to play dodgeball."

**Favorite players and teams growing up:** "Playing wide receiver, I was a big Steve Smith fan. With teams, I had a couple of them. I was the type of person who would jump bandwagon to bandwagon, with whoever was winning -- Carolina Panthers, Atlanta Falcons, New England. My friends didn't like that."

**Top memories of Wilcox County High School:** "Playing with my twin brother [Lorenzo]. He was the quarterback and I was the receiver. My high school wasn't that big. We had like 80 people in our graduating class, and close to 40-50 players on our team. It was really small; it's a town of 1,400 people. I'm the first person from my school to leave and go to the NFL and play D-1 football."

**A play that stands out with his brother:** "It was a quarterback/wide receiver pass. He was at quarterback, he threw it to me, and I was at receiver in the slot. Then he rolled out and I threw it back to him for a touchdown. That was a good memory -- Dennard to Dennard."

**Enrolling at University of Nebraska:** "I had committed to North Carolina, but the secondary coach from North Carolina [Marvin Sanders] went to Nebraska. We had a good relationship, we still talk to this day, and I had trust in him. He told me that if nothing worked out at North Carolina, I had a home at Nebraska. I just went with him. I also had an offer from Alabama, UAB and Clemson."

**Top memories at Nebraska:** "There are a lot of them. I'd have to say my first interception -- against Idaho. I just jumped a slant and did a front flip with it. It was pretty exciting."

**Role models in his life:** "I'd say my older brother [Andrew]. He's big on kids around the community and he helped everyone. He kept my mind on the right track, and made sure I pushed myself to make it higher and higher -- don't stop until I make it where I want to go. He's a special guy."

**Being part of a big family:** "I have 10 brothers and it's good. For Christmas time, it was very good when we were younger. They gave me and my twin brother everything. We were the youngest."

**What he loves about football:** "Team chemistry and how everyone comes together to compete and have fun."

**Best moments/toughest moments in football:** "When we get a win, I'm happy. The toughest thing is financially. I have so many brothers and sisters, siblings, that I have to hold off. I can't help them like I want to. I'm trying to stay focused on the field. Whenever I get to that point, that's when I can help them."

**Summing up his football journey:** "It's taught me how to be a very humble guy. My sophomore year of high school, I wasn't that big. I didn't get much recognition. I feel like I never gave up because I had that mentality that I wanted to go higher in life to help my family."

## **RB James Develin**

# The Boston Globe

## **James Develin carves out niche with Patriots**

By Michael Whitmer  
DECEMBER 06, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — Like most Ivy League students, James Develin had thoughts of a successful professional career motivating him as his college days drew to a close.

Armed with a degree in mechanical engineering from Brown, Develin began lining up interviews with companies he felt might best be suited for the technical skills he had learned. His head might have been preparing for life in the corporate world, but his heart couldn't let go of an athletic dream, far-fetched as it was.

Develin, an All-Ivy defensive end for the Bears, wanted to continue playing football. He wanted to switch from defense to offense — fullback seemed like a good fit — and play in the NFL. Despite the fact he had really never played fullback, and despite the fact he wouldn't be getting drafted by any NFL team.

### **Talk about long odds.**

"Football is something that is not around your entire life. I've got that degree in my back pocket, and that will be there with me until the day I die," Develin said. "I knew if I didn't give it my best shot to play football as a career, that I'd always regret it. I took a little bit of a risk, and luckily it worked out."

Develin was saying this from inside the Patriots' locker room, a place he's quietly called home for two seasons. It required a route that wasn't exactly direct, with stops in the Arena Football League and the now-defunct United Football League, but Develin somehow made it to the NFL. As a fullback.

Prior to Sunday, there likely were some Patriots fans who didn't know who Develin was, or what he looks like, or what number he wears. But then he scored on a 1-yard touchdown run against the Texans, when he seemingly made contact with all 11 defenders on the field before barreling across the goal line. Develin caught a 12-yard pass, too, in the Patriots' 34-31 win, and has spent much of the time since answering questions about his star turn and the legendary touchdown run.

Develin had never been given a rushing attempt in the NFL before Sunday, and had caught two passes in his career. But he was a vital piece to the Patriots' win, which is rare; usually, Develin spends most of his time blocking and playing special teams. Anonymous roles, far from the spotlight. You know, the dirty work.

He is a trained mechanical engineer, after all.

"It's a very selfless position. You're not going to get a lot of carries or catches. It's really about springing holes for other people, and whether that's the running back or protecting for the quarterback so you can drop back and throw it to the receivers, it's all about the team at that position," quarterback Tom Brady said. "He brings it. He's earned that spot."

Develin joined the Patriots at the beginning of the 2012 season, after he spent more than a year on Cincinnati's practice squad. That's also where he started with New England, before earning a promotion to the active squad late in the year, when Develin was inactive for three games but appeared in one, making his NFL debut and playing on special teams against the 49ers.

He's been in uniform for all 12 games for the 9-3 Patriots in 2013, and is expected to be out there again on Sunday, when the Browns visit.

There might not be any rushing attempts or carries, but whatever Develin is asked to do against Cleveland, he'll embrace.

"I don't think he's ever going to be out there for every play offensively, that's not his role, but when we do have him out there or when we have him out there in the kicking game, he works hard at what he's asked to do and he's been

a good contributor for the team,” offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels said. “He’s smart, he’s tough, he works hard, he’s a very dependable guy, and there’s an awful lot to be said for that.”

There’s a lot to be said about Develin’s football journey, too. After graduating from Brown in 2010, he briefly latched on with the Oklahoma City Yard Dawgz (who have since been put down) in the Arena Football League, then played for the Florida Tuskers of the United Football League. Before any of that, though, he needed to convince his parents that exploring the professional football business and letting his Brown degree collect dust was in his best interests.

“My parents were kind of doubting that choice, but I knew I wanted to play football somewhere, didn’t matter what level,” Develin said. “They knew I would make the smart choice for me. It was a personal decision, I needed to try to see what I could do with football, because that was my dream.”

He’s done more than most would have imagined so far. Despite only getting five touches on the season — two carries, three catches — Develin has personified what a good role player is: dependable, versatile, and opportunistic. His touchdown run against the Texans may have had teammates doing a double take twice — once in the huddle when the play was called, then in the film room watching the replay — but it’s the kind of hard-nosed determination play that coaches like to hold up as a model for the effort they’d like to see from everybody, especially with the playoffs fast approaching.

“We were so happy for him,” fellow running back Shane Vereen said. “We watched it again and gave him a little more praise, but he’s a humble guy, so he just took it as what he’s supposed to do.”

That’s the career path Develin has selected, perhaps unconventionally, when common sense might have sent him toward regular work. He’s paid his dues in lower leagues that many laugh at, but there Develin was, scoring a highlight-reel NFL touchdown on Sunday.

“You really can never doubt yourself when you’re trying to accomplish your dream, you just have to take the right steps to get where you’re trying to go,” Develin said. “If things didn’t work out, so be it, but I wanted to fight and do everything that I could to put myself in the best position for this to come true.”

And if this football thing ever stops working for him in the near future, Develin still has that mechanical engineering degree from Brown. It’s a nice fall-back option. He’d certainly have some interesting stories to tell at a job interview.

“Hopefully I don’t need it,” he said.

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## WR Aaron Dobson

# The Boston Globe

### **Aaron Dobson's evolution, education continue**

**Coverage recognition led to rookie WR's long TD catch against Steelers**

By John Powers, Globe Staff

November 11, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — The moment came during the final half-dozen minutes of the Pittsburgh game, just after the visitors had clawed back to within 10 points. Aaron Dobson lined up near the left sideline on first down and noticed that cornerback Ike Taylor was poised to jump the run. Tom Brady noticed it, too.

"We were talking about that play all week and giving [Dobson] a chance to get behind the defense," the quarterback said. So Dobson altered his route and Brady hit him for an 81-yard catch-and-run score that put the Steelers out of commission.

"It was great coverage recognition and those are things that, the more you do with quarterback-receiver, they know when I'm looking and when there will be a great opportunity for them to get the ball," said Brady, who had thrown to Dobson for a 17-yard touchdown earlier in the quarter. "That's what receivers do. They try to do everything they can to get the ball. They want to know where they need to be so they can get the ball."

For Dobson, who submitted the first 100-yard day of his career, it was another step in the ongoing education and evolution of a rookie receiver who is developing into the long-range weapon the Patriots hoped they were getting when they took him in the second round out of Marshall, their highest draftee at that position since Chad Jackson in 2006.

"I think the adjustment for a rookie receiver is huge in this league, in any offense," observed coach Bill Belichick, who pronounced himself pleased with Dobson's progress. "I really can't speak for what the other 31 teams do but I just think in terms of the overall sophistication of the passing game in the National Football League: the players, the amount of press coverage on the perimeter, the number of different coverages and route adjustments that you have to make, situational play — third down, red area, two-minute, end-of-game situations — all those plus the normal plays, all that gets pretty complex."

Dobson was flattered that a franchise that had won three Super Bowls in four years with a future Hall of Fame signal-caller saw him as a desirable addition to its offensive arsenal. "I was excited about it because I felt like they saw something in me that maybe they didn't see in other people," Dobson said. He knew there would be accompanying expectations and that he would not immediately hit the fast lane in overdrive. He also realized that knowing the playbook cold was merely the entrance exam.

"You've got to learn a lot, you've got to be on your thing," Dobson said. "You've got to study a lot because there's so much. You've got to see what happens before the snap and after the snap, so there's a lot of things that play into it. You've got to buckle down and study and know what you've got to do."

With Wes Welker, Brandon Lloyd, and Danny Woodhead departed, an intensive group tutorial with Brady was in order for Dobson and fellow rookies Kenbrell Thompson and Josh Boyce. "It's still going on to this day," said Thompson, who started the first seven games after arriving undrafted out of Cincinnati. "We're trying to get on the same page with [Brady] and make sure that we're doing what he wants us to do."

For the newbies, that was not unlike bookmarking a volume with 500 pages that were turning rapidly. "I think there are some challenges that are built into playing with a veteran established quarterback that we have in Tom," said receivers coach Chad O'Shea. "I look at it as a great advantage in being able to play with somebody like that."

Brady is peerless in his ability to find the open receiver among multiple moving targets and then get the ball to him. What he expects is that said receiver will be where he's supposed to be and will make the catch. Early on when Dobson wasn't or didn't, he received Brady's annoyed stare.

"Obviously, I've been watching Tom since I was young so I know what type of player he is — he's a perfectionist," Dobson said. "You can't take it personally. It's going to happen. If we mess up he might be yelling at us but we can't take it personally."

As the rookies gradually have come up to speed, Brady's exasperation with botched plays has diminished. And as Dobson has become more comfortable with the speed and sophistication of the pro game, his quarterback has come to appreciate his diligence and dedication. "Aaron has grown since the time he got here and his caliber of play and his level of execution, his understanding of our offense, has gone up significantly," Brady said.

What Dobson understands is that the X's and O's look decidedly different on the field. "On paper it looks cool, it looks easy," he said, "but executing it takes time." Though Dobson had plenty of company whenever he ventured near the end zone in his Marshall days, the collegiate defenders were smaller and slower than those he sees now and the pace was more moderate.

"The whole speed of the game amps up from college," said Dobson. "It's how everybody moves. Every second matters. You've got to get into your route because if it takes a little bit too long the hole might be closed. Everything just moves that much faster."

Dobson can accelerate, too, and his basketball background (he was an all-state high school performer in West Virginia) has made him adept at wresting away a ball in traffic. And he's learned how to take a licking and keep on ticking. "He's taken some hits," said Belichick. "He's fought through some bumps and bruises and he stays out there and keeps going and gets through it. That helps because you learn but you can't really improve [by] watching. You have to go out there and do it and get the timing and execution with your teammates, and he fights through and does it."

After sitting out the opener and coming off the bench in three of the subsequent four games, Dobson now is a fixture in the starting lineup and he has learned the secret of attracting Brady's attention before the hurly-burly begins. "Trying to see what he sees," said Dobson. "When he alerts and maybe changes it around maybe I see it before he sees it or see it at the same time, so I'm looking forward to seeing him checking. It's all about being on the same page."

So it was against the Steelers, and as Dobson's evolution and education continue during his first semester, the Patriots are hoping for more of the same from the man they call "A.D." "The longer we play together, the better we're going to be at those things," predicted Brady. "It's constant improvement, and you don't ever stop in this game. It evolves and changes but you've got to figure out ways to improve yourself and improve your team and hopefully that leads to more wins than losses."

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## WR Julian Edelman



### **Competition fuels Edelman's fire**

**Undersized, underappreciated WR's success no surprise to those who know him**

By Jackie MacMullan

January 9, 2014

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- The receiver was running at half speed.

The quarterback, Julian Edelman, simply could not stomach that.

Edelman had warned his Kent State teammate before. Run precise routes. Don't go through the motions. Do your job, even though the team had nothing left to play for but pride.

"But the kid just wasn't listening," said former Kent State coach Doug Martin.

The receiver was tired of Edelman riding him. He tuned out the diminutive QB, the know-it-all perfectionist who challenged coaches, baited teammates, kept pushing, pushing, pushing everyone to the brink.

"A lot of the guys didn't like him," admitted former Kent State safety Brian Lainhart.

They didn't understand how tirelessly Edelman worked for this opportunity, how many programs looked right through him like he wasn't there, even after dominating in high school, junior college and Kent State.

He was too small, barely 5-feet-2 through his first two years of high school. He had the ability, the drive, but he was manhandled by boys who had already reached puberty. His father Frank assured him, "The Edelmans are late bloomers. Wait 'til you are their size. It won't be fair."

His father drilled him every day, seven days a week, season to season, football to basketball to baseball, before practice, after practice, on weekends. It was agility drills, conditioning drills, then 200 spirals or 200 jump shots or 200 ground balls.

"No more!" his mother Angie protested. "We're on vacation!"

But the father couldn't stop. He invented conflicts, challenged Julian mentally, reducing his son to tears. "I'm 12 years old and he's in my head," Edelman said. "I'm over there crying and he says, 'You have to master this part of it,' and finally I'd get so ticked off I'd battle him back.

"Keep on competing. That's all I knew."

The Kent State receiver was messing with the wrong undersized, underappreciated football player. So when Edelman launched a pass and the kid didn't make the extra effort to haul it in, the option quarterback sprinted downfield, pinned the receiver to the ground and pummeled him with a flurry of fists.

"It was a brawl," Martin said. "But that was Julian, the most fiercely competitive kid I've ever had."

Five years later, Edelman (now listed a 5-10, 198 pounds), is no longer a quarterback. He's a receiver, a punt returner, and, two seasons ago, when New England's secondary was depleted with injuries, a makeshift defensive back. Edelman will line up against the Indianapolis Colts on Saturday night as the most dangerous receiver in Tom Brady's arsenal, a player with over 100 catches and 1,000 yards, who couldn't convince a single NFL team to surpass the incentive-laden \$716,000 the Patriots are paying him this season.

"I may have overreacted with that receiver at Kent State," Edelman said, "but I like to do things the right way. I was a fiery guy. I still am."

In preseason, when players are vying for roster spots on the Patriots, skirmishes are frequent, heated, particularly among the receivers and the secondary.

"It's Edelman," said Devin McCourty. "If you are looking for someone in the middle of it, it's almost always him. There's no love lost between the DBs and Julian in training camp."

"It's an everyday occurrence with him," confirmed corner Kyle Arrington. "He's an extreme competitor. He came out with that chip on his shoulder, a small guy from a small school. The chip's still there."

Tight end Michael Hoomanawanui marvels at how Edelman bounces to his feet after crushing hits, still talking, still taking everyone on.

"It's every day," Hoomanawanui said. "It doesn't matter if it's big or small, Julian has something to say about it. It will be 'Why did you run that way?' or 'How come I didn't get the ball on that play?'"

"The fire is always burning with him. Little man's syndrome, I guess."

Frank Edelman lost his father when he was 3 years old. He was small but naturally gifted, and when his mom frequented the local taverns, he tagged along with his baseball mitt and a tennis ball. He played baseball in the back, designating a brick as his home run target. Sometimes he'd borrow his mother's hair spray cap and kick imaginary field goals.

When Frank was a freshman cornerback in high school, he got beat on a deep route.

He quit. He had no father to encourage him to go back and try again.

Regret can be a powerful, lingering, aching sentiment. Frank Edelman's dreams ended when he went to work at an automotive shop to support his mother. He became consumed with making sure his sons fulfilled their potential.

"I was very athletic without any coaching at all," Frank explained. "I figured if my kids had a little help, maybe it would get them over the hump."

So he put Julian in a pair of glasses with one eye plugged up with tape and threw him a football. He forced him to dribble left handed while his right hand was tied behind him. He threw him fastballs, right near his head.

Parents drove by and yelled out the window, "Frank! Why are you throwing bee bees at your 10-year old son?"

"It was so bad," Frank lamented. "I was so possessed. We'd drive around and find a local baseball field and I'd hit him grounders, just enough not to ruin his arm. It was wrong."

And, yet, the results were striking. Julian led his team to a 12-and-under national championship in Pop Warner. In basketball, he was to go to guy for the last shot. He was a vacuum at shortstop, a .500 hitter.

He was the best athlete in his class -- until all those kids he ran circles around started growing. Edelman entered Woodside (Calif.) High at 4-foot-11, 70 pounds. Suddenly everyone was taller, bigger, stronger.

For years Edelman had been chiding Sam Alipape, a talented but marginally motivated football teammate. Suddenly Alipape had 75 pounds on Edelman, so when Julian barked, "Move your lazy butt!" Alipape grabbed him and slammed his head into the locker.

"It was a rough three years," Frank said. "These kids he had been dominating wanted some pay back."

Julian Edelman finally grew his own 6 inches between junior and senior year. He led Woodside to a 13-0 mark with 2,237 yards and 29 touchdowns passing, and 964 yards and 13 touchdowns rushing.

He waited for the scholarship offers, but no one came calling, so he visited the College of San Mateo with his parents. Coach Bret Pollack proudly gestured to the photos of the All-Americans on the wall behind his desk. Edelman studied them, then asked Pollack, "Coach, where are you going to put my picture?"

Pollack was a physical education teacher and a fine badminton player. Edelman had never taken a swipe at a shuttlecock in his life, but declared, "I can beat you."

The first game was 15-1. The next one was 15-2. Twenty games later, Edelman was only losing by a 15-9 margin, but his coach finally shut him down. "Kid," he said, "I've got to go home." Edelman desperately persisted. He couldn't handle "no."

"He gets a little fiery, but you can't take it personally," Pollack said. "He just wants to get something done."

Pollack charted out each football practice, assigning points for a poor throw or a crisp route or a successful scramble. Edelman was the only player who kept track during workouts.

"I'd grade him on a slant route and he'd say, 'That was the receiver's fault. I should have 2 points here,'" Pollack said. "My other coaches said, 'Aren't you bothered he's questioning you all the time?' I said, 'Hell no. He's paying attention.'" Edelman stayed at San Mateo only one semester, just long enough to throw for 1,312 yards and rush for a school-record 1,253 yards. Martin, scouring talent in the Bay area, liked the kid's spunk and offered him a spot on his team.

Martin already had a quarterback, a 6-foot-6 transfer from Baylor. Edelman had never met him, so when he showed up for 7 on 7 drills in the summer he strode toward him.

"What are you doing?" Edelman asked.

"Practicing my quick kicks," the QB answered.

"Keep on practicing those, because pretty soon that's all you'll be doing," Edelman said. "I'm taking your job."

He did, throwing for 4,997 yards and 30 TDs and rushing for 2,483 yards in three seasons at Kent State.

"He changed the culture of our whole program," Martin said. "He wasn't going to stop until he proved everyone wrong."

Edelman roomed with Brian Lainhart, a safety with pro aspirations who shared his competitive nature. They became best friends, even though they were on opposite sides of the ball. Because he was the quarterback, Edelman wore the "no contact" red jersey in practice.

"So one day I pick off one of his passes," Lainhart said. "I'm jogging into the end zone. He's got the red jersey on, but he comes at me full throttle and sends me sprawling. He hits me so hard I do a flip. 'This is my best friend, my roommate, a groomsman in my wedding, and he's taking me out at the knees.'

"We went at it. I'm screaming, 'You're wearing the red jersey, Julian!' and he comes back with, 'You should have known I wasn't going to let you score!'"

Edelman and Lainhart competed in darts, Xbox, games of H-O-R-S-E in the backyard. When Edelman lost, he kicked the ball into the woods.

"He's like a 12-year old," Lainhart said, 'but it's his best trait. Julian's still playing like a little undersized kid that nobody thought would make it."

In Edelman's senior season, Kent State was milking a lead over Buffalo in the final seconds. It was third and 14 and a first down for Kent State would clinch it. "Julian has the ball and he's in trouble, but he runs over two guys, makes another one miss, and dives for the first down," said Martin. "That personified his career."

Lainhart's lasting memory was against Akron when Kent State was down 7 and facing a 4th and 31 with under a minute left. Edelman retreated, cut, ducked, avoided a slew of would-be tacklers and scrambled for 64 yards. Then he threw a TD to tie the game.

Kent State lost in overtime. A disheartened Lainhart, who picked off 3 passes, asked rhetorically, "What else could we have done?" Edelman growled, "[Expletive]! We've got to do more." Edelman knew he had no future as an NFL quarterback. Martin allowed him to return punts on a day scouts were in the stands so they could be exposed to his versatility. "Truth was, we muffed a few punts in previous games," Edelman said. "If things weren't going right, I'd go up to the coaches and say, 'Let me do it.' Coach Martin was the kind of guy who would actually let me." With the 232rd pick in the seventh round of the 2009 draft, the Patriots selected Julian Edelman, Kent State, quarterback, personal punt protector and resident agitator. When Bill Belichick called, he said, "I don't know what we'll do with you, but we'll find something."



Edelman's early attempts at punt returning were a series of misadventures. He was booed by the discerning New England fans and retreated to the film room, asked for extra reps after practice. Four years later, he's now one of the premier returners in the game.

The task of transitioning from quarterback to receiver was painstaking, at times demoralizing, and required the one thing Edelman did not possess: patience.

"People can criticize all they want, but he had never played receiver in his whole life," Frank Edelman said. "Now he's battling how to get out of press coverages. I'm so proud of him."

Last season, Edelman was being groomed as a replacement for Wes Welker, his good friend and mentor, who was approaching free agency. But Edelman broke his foot and his narrative -- the little tough guy who can't stay healthy -- dogged him.

New England later signed injury-prone receiver Danny Amendola to a multi-year contract worth millions. Edelman received a tiny nibble from the Giants but returned to New England for short dollars.

"It was frustrating for Julian," Lainhart said. "It was frustrating for him going into camp. He had to rehab.

"Everyone else was in minicamp, OTAs, and all he could do was ride the bike."

Amendola was billed as the able replacement for Welker, but that was wrong. The overlooked kid from Kent State and San Mateo and Woodside and Frank Edelman's back yard is the one who stepped up.

"One thing I've learned from everyone around here is be prepared for your opportunity," Edelman said. "Whether it's taking actual reps, or mental reps, or watching extra film, make sure you're ready.

"Sometimes it's gone my way and sometimes it hasn't. But I don't want to go back one day and say, 'I wish I had done this' or 'I wish I had done that.'"

Frank Edelman says he wishes he wasn't so hard on his son. He frets he did the wrong thing. Julian Edelman won't hear of that.

"I wouldn't be here now without my father and the love of my mother," Edelman said. "It was a great balance. They are my foundation."

He will not be overlooked this time in free agency. He and Brady are kindred spirits, establishing a solid connection from offseasons of "gentlemen's bets," tallying points for bad throws or missed catches. Edelman's leap in production from last season is stunning: from 21 catches to 105, from 235 yards to 1,056.

"As a competitor, I'm not shocked by what's happened, but as a New England Patriot, I'm groomed not to think about those accolades right now," Edelman said. "Maybe when the season is over you can take a look at what you did, but it's only going to get harder, because you have to do it again."

He will not let up. He can't. How else could he have secured his photo above coach Pollack's desk? How else could he have changed positions on the fly, a seventh-round pick with the numbers of a first-round talent?

He still pushes and pushes and pushes, but as Hoomanawanui noted, "He's the first one here and the last to leave. He's a great example for everyone."

The defensive backs who want to punch him in training camp now feed off his urgency, his fire. Edelman is a marked man in these playoffs, and he knows it.

Practice has been edgy this week in preparation for the Colts. There's chance a punch or two has been thrown, though Arrington would only smile knowingly when asked for confirmation.

"That's Edelman," Arrington said. "Man, I love that guy."



## **NFL notes: Athletic Julian Edelman can handle it all**

By Karen Guregian  
December 1, 2013

The first time the Patriots laid their eyes on Julian Edelman, they were taken with him.

It was 2009, and the scouts watched him play quarterback at Kent State. But Patriots coach Bill Belichick didn't dispatch anyone from his staff to work him out throwing the football. The Patriots already had a pretty darn good quarterback running the show. The Pats had other ideas for how Edelman might be an asset in the NFL.

Belichick was drawn to him, much as he's taken by any pure athlete. He sees potential and possibilities with guys who have abilities that translate beyond one sport. If you read the bios of many Patriots players, their early sporting lives consist of more than football.

Quarterback Tom Brady, kicker Stephen Gostkowski and wide receiver Danny Amendola were terrific baseball players. Special teamer Nate Ebner was a rugby star. Linebacker Dane Fletcher was a standout at both hockey and baseball. And at one time, wide receiver Aaron Dobson looked as though he might have a promising hoop career.

Then there's Edelman.

Two years ago, he literally walked in off the street and took batting practice with the Toronto Blue Jays, thanks to being friends with Toronto catcher J.P. Arencibia. Edelman merely hit five balls into the second deck of the left-field stands at Rogers Centre. It stands as the best exhibition ever put on by a celebrity/athlete from another sport.

Later, while taking grounders at shortstop, Edelman was so impressive, so smooth, Blue Jays second baseman Kelly Johnson picked up some tips just by watching how he fielded the position.

Red Sox third base coach Brian Butterfield, who held the same title for the Blue Jays at the time, remembers Edelman's visit vividly.

"He was very, very impressive taking ground balls at shortstop," Butterfield told the Herald last week. "He had tremendous feet. Kelly Johnson even came up to me after batting practice, and said, 'I wish I had the opportunity to take ground balls with him more often. In a short time, he showed me how to use my feet better, just by watching his feet.'"

Those feet have made Edelman one of the best punt returners in the game and this season a trusted slot receiver and outlet for Brady. With both Amendola and Rob Gronkowski missing much of the early going, Brady leaned on Edelman to pick up the slack. He asserted himself as a dependable target when one was most needed.

And now, with Gronk and Amendola back, Edelman is still delivering, last week upstaging Wes Welker's return, by stepping up for nine catches for 110 yards and two touchdowns in the 34-31 overtime win.

Frank Edelman, Julian's father, would have preferred his son play baseball. But he knew which sport Julian was most passionate about.

The former Pop Warner coach also knew something else. He knew the unique athletic qualities his son possessed would distinguish him and give him a shot at the pro level.

While "Jules" — as he is referred to by his father, Butterfield and others in the Patriots locker room — wasn't invited to the NFL's scouting combine, he had a pro day, and ripped off times in the short shuttle run (3.91) and long shuttle (10.74) that would have been the fastest recorded at the combine for any position.

"Jules ran this super-fast speed, but the (NFL people) said, 'No, there's got to be a mistake.' So he did it again. And he did it faster," the elder Edelman told the Herald in a phone interview Wednesday. "So that's kind of how the ball got rolling. This guy beat the combine. He beat every receiver at the short shuttle, and that's kind of the slot position."

Edelman's time was so fast, Belichick knew he couldn't pass on him in the draft and hope to sign him as a free agent, using a seventh-round pick on him.

Knowing Edelman's speed and ability to cut in tight spaces, not to mention elude would-be tacklers in small windows, it screamed slot receiver and punt returner to the ever-creative thinking Belichick.

Special teams coach Scott O'Brien worked out Edelman, as did running backs coach Ivan Fears. Initially, the Patriots thought Edelman would be a third-down back, but eventually, they couldn't resist moving him to receiver given his unique skill set.

"That was always his gift, he'll make you miss with a ball in his hands. He can flat out run," Frank Edelman said. "Whatever that elusiveness is, whatever the mindset of that is, how to make guys miss in short spaces, that's his gift."

He also has that rare natural ability to pick up things quickly. Edelman's dad told the story of how at age 2, Julian put on a pair of roller skates "and off he went. He was gone, just like that."

The Patriots receiver is a bit more modest when discussing his talents. He said it's been a process learning the receiver role, and it's not something that just came to him overnight.

"I'm still constantly trying to learn," Edelman said. "My dad always put it in my head, when you're green, you're growing, when you're ripe, you're lost. When you're done learning, you're done."

"I have to practice fundamentals because I haven't done it that long, whether it's catching the ball extra, running routes keeping my shoulders over my toes; all that kind of stuff. I'm a practice player. I have to practice to do well."

Edelman leads the Patriots with 61 catches for 610 yards with four touchdowns. He's also in the NFL's top 10 in punt return average (11.7) this season. With a 12.7 average over five seasons returning punts, that's the third-best career average in NFL history behind George McAfee and Jack Christiansen, both at 12.8.

So that quick first step and elusiveness has really paid off for Edelman and the Patriots.

"When you're able to watch him, like we were able to watch him take ground balls and take fly balls and batting practice, the Patriots do such a good job using their imagination and being creative, it's real easy to see the potential," said Butterfield, a Maine native and longtime Pats fan. "The foot quickness is what makes him such a great punt returner, being able to evade that first wave, or those first couple of guys. Then you talk to him, and see he's a real focused kid. There's an awful lot to like beyond the raw athletic ability."

The Patriots saw the ability, and paying him this year at the veteran minimum (\$715,000), Edelman's a steal.

A history of injury problems dried up interest in the wide receiver on the free agent market last year, but that will change based on his performance this year.

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## DB Nate Ebner



### **Nate Ebner's remarkable journey to NFL**

By Kaitee Daley  
October 25, 2012

Patriots rookie safety Nate Ebner didn't take the traditional route to the NFL. In fact, he never ran one route in high school football.

The quiet, bearded guy with kind, dark eyes and a body built to hit people is still learning the game, with three tackles in his first seven games. But if his past is any indication, it won't be long before he makes an impact.

Ebner took his early love of rugby, a sport his father taught him growing up in Ohio, and translated it to a starring role on the United States U-19 and U-20 national teams. Then, without any high school football experience, he walked on at Ohio State and eventually earned a scholarship on special teams. And though no one was projecting an NFL future for Ebner, he dominated his pro day and got drafted in the sixth round.

How does one go from MVP of the rugby World Cup to Ohio State football and an NFL roster spot? It started with a simple promise to get a degree.

When Ebner got to Ohio State, his athletic prowess and academic responsibilities tugged him in different directions. Touring on the international rugby circuit wasn't conducive to classes and homework, and there was something about football -- particularly the promise of playing for the team he grew up watching -- that drove Ebner to try out.

"Walking on was a big step for me, not playing football in high school. I was sticking my neck out there ..." said Ebner, who at 6-foot, 210 pounds had the size to play.

Ebner talked to his father, Jeff, about his new goal. But tragedy would keep his dad from seeing his son's football dreams realized. In November 2008, Jeff was killed during a robbery at the family's auto-salvaging business.

"It was real hard for me. I mean my dad and I were best friends," Ebner said.

Ebner channeled his anger and reeling emotions into Buckeyes football.

"It was a distraction because I could put all my energy into it and focus on it," Ebner said, "as much as a distraction as you can have from something like that."

Ebner's father, a former college rugby player, pushed his son to finish strong in whatever task he took on. When Ebner's aunt came across rubber bracelets bearing the "FINISH STRONG" message in bold white lettering, Ebner and his support system, including many of his Ohio State teammates, started wearing them as a powerful reminder. The words stretch across Ebner's wrist at every practice and game.

It was his ability to finish strong that caught scouts' eyes on Ohio State's pro day. Ebner logged a 4.55 40-yard dash, 4.04 shuttle and 6.59 three-cone drill. Though he had played just three defensive snaps for the Buckeyes in 2011, the Patriots' track record of turning under-the-radar athletes into NFL success stories wasn't lost on Ebner's backers.

"Before I even knew anything about the Patriots I had people telling me I would be a good fit in a place like New England," Ebner said. "When I found out I was coming here ... I can't put it into words, it was awesome. A dream come true."

Ebner was taken with the 197th pick in the 2012 NFL draft, by no means a lock to make the Patriots' roster -- to the outside observer. Ebner, on the other hand, expected nothing less.

"Obviously it was my goal to make the team. Why else would I be here working as hard as I can?" Ebner said. "So when I found out [I made it] it wasn't really a big thing where I was excited and celebrating, it was just what I came here to do."

Being a 23-year-old rookie has its perceived challenges -- new town, teammates, playbook. But the rugby-phenom-turned-NFL-special-teamer is taking a pragmatic approach to his first season.

"I just think about what I want to do every day -- make an impact and be productive for the team and obviously earn the respect of the guys," Ebner said.

The respect, it seems, has already been earned.

"It's pretty impressive to make it here," captain and four-time Pro Bowl guard Logan Mankins said of Ebner. "He's been a good addition to the team. Hard worker. Does everything the coaches and other players ask of him."

Even fellow rookies sense Ebner's natural leadership. "He learns quick so sometimes I might have a question and instead of asking a veteran I can ask Nate and depend on him," first-year safety Tavon Wilson said.

Lately, the Patriots have had to depend on Ebner for more than just special-teams play.

Injuries in the Patriots' secondary have led to increased defensive snaps for Ebner. And it hasn't been easy -- he had a good look at Russell Wilson's winning 46-yard touchdown in the Patriots' Week 6 loss to Seattle. But the rookie workaholic already has the perspective of a veteran.

"That's part of the sport. They're good athletes on the other side of the ball -- they get paid, too," Ebner said of on-field gaffes. "So, you just kind of swallow it and have a short memory when it comes to that stuff."

By developing rookies like Ebner and getting consistent play from their veterans, the 4-3 Patriots are hoping to do something Ebner's proven quite good at.

Finishing strong.

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## **LB Dane Fletcher**

# The Boston Globe

### **Great recovery for Patriots' Fletcher**

By Shalise Manza Young, Globe Staff  
August 22, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — It was exactly one year to the day.

On Aug. 9, 2012, Dane Fletcher fell to the turf while covering a punt in the first quarter of the Patriots' first preseason game, against the Saints. He knew almost immediately: He'd torn his left anterior cruciate ligament. His season, which was to be his third in the NFL, was over.

On Aug. 9, 2013, Fletcher was back on the field, this time against the Eagles, covering the opening kickoff.

He survived. And that's when he realized he was back.

"It was a big milestone after that first preseason game, just to prove to myself that I've still got it," Fletcher said after practice this week. "I went out and did exactly what I wanted. I always want to do more, but I felt comfortable out there, I moved around in space, I wasn't worried about people taking out my knees, and that was the main thing I got out of it."

He played 37 snaps on defense against the Eagles and was credited with three tackles, plus a tackle on special teams.

In the cramped visitors' locker room at Lincoln Financial Field that night, Fletcher said the previous 365 days had marked the longest year of his life.

"It was. It's good to be past it, it's good to be back on the field and having fun again. I'm enjoying myself," Fletcher said.

Undrafted out of Montana State in 2010, Fletcher came to the Patriots as a defensive end, but was quickly pegged as a prospective linebacker. After being listed as inactive for the first three games of his rookie season, Fletcher played in the remaining 13 and New England's playoff game.

In 2011, he missed six games because of injury but made five starts.

He was slated to play a big role again last year, but it ended before it ever really began.

"I just dedicated myself to stay positive, stay motivated, and take as much as you possibly can out of it when you're not on the field," Fletcher said after the year of surgery, recovery, and rehab. "I look at everything with two sides, and in a way I learned a lot more about the game than I probably would have known if I was out on the field, so that's what I took out of it."

Being able to take a step back, he explained, meant he had no choice but to pay closer attention in the classroom, watching more film and really learning more about what offensive coordinators and quarterbacks are trying to do, and how he can try to stop them.

One of Fletcher's focuses has been to improve in pass coverage.

His approach and comeback have impressed many within the organization; Bill Belichick spoke highly of the 26-year-old this week, as did linebacker Rob Ninkovich, and Fletcher was one of 10 players recognized by the strength and conditioning staff as an offseason award winner for his dedication and improvement during the workout program.

Belichick indicated Fletcher might be a better player now than he was a year ago.

"Dane has worked really hard. He worked hard last season, after the surgery — while everybody else was playing, he was working hard in the weight room and rehabbing. He had a full spring [of workouts and OTA participation],"

Belichick said. "I think he's moving well. I think his play has improved. I think he has a lot of confidence in his physical ability and he hasn't missed anything.

"He's been out there all spring, all training camp. He's had a big role for us in the kicking game. He's played well, definitely, so I think he's had a real good comeback from that injury."

Ninkovich believes Fletcher is physically stronger than ever, and was surprised during their offseason workouts when Fletcher was keeping up with him in the weight room.

"He worked really hard to get back to where he was when he got hurt," Ninkovich said. "It's just a reflection of his character — hard-working kid that really loves the game, so he puts a lot of effort in, not only during the season, but definitely in the offseason to not only be big and strong and fast but mentally to get the game down.

"Every year he plays, he's improving. Last year with not having the year playing, it was definitely a tough year for him. I've been there . . . he's come back and he's doing well for us.

Ninkovich tore an ACL during his rookie season when he was with New Orleans. He noted that everyone assumes a player who suffers the injury these days will be just fine, but he knows it's not a simple procedure.

"It's not that easy. You have to have the surgery and the rehab time and it's one of those things: What you put in you'll get out," Ninkovich said. "[Fletcher] was the guy putting in all the time and working hard to get his knee back and he's back and playing well."

He joked that perhaps Fletcher's upbringing in Montana, "growing up in the country and killing ox and moose or whatever he was doing to eat dinner made him pretty tough as well."

Learning more about his position wasn't the only thing Fletcher learned during the longest year of his life.

"I forgot how much I love the game, really," he said. "It gets demanding and stressful, and just to step on the game field again, it was just so much fun. Now I'm having fun with it again. For a minute there, it was more of a job, but now I'm taking away what it was back in high school, back in the old days, just getting back on the field with my buddies."

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## K Stephen Gostkowski

# The Boston Globe

### Replacement player

**What pressure? Gostkowski has been an able successor to Vinatieri**

By Peter Abraham

February 4, 2012

INDIANAPOLIS - The statistics show that Stephen Gostkowski has been a better kicker than Adam Vinatieri over the last six years. He has made a higher percentage of field goals in his career and missed only one extra point.

Since Vinatieri left the Patriots for the Colts as a free agent following the 2005 season, Gostkowski has made 84.4 percent of his field goals and Vinatieri 82.9 percent.

The trend holds in the postseason. Gostkowski has made close to 87 percent of his field goals and Vinatieri a little more than 83 percent.

The differences are slight, but enough to lend credence to the idea that the Patriots did not take a step back when they replaced the popular and dependable Vinatieri with a rookie from the University of Memphis.

But Gostkowski, through no fault of his own, is missing an important line on his professional résumé. He has yet to win a playoff game with a field goal in the final minute.

"I'd welcome the opportunity. It just hasn't happened yet," Gostkowski said Thursday. "There's really not much I can do about that except be prepared for it when the time comes."

Such situations were a specialty for Vinatieri. His 45-yard field goal through the teeth of a blizzard tied a division playoff game against the Raiders in 2002 with 27 seconds remaining. He then won the "Snow Bowl" with a 23-yard field goal in overtime.

Vinatieri also kicked field goals to win Super Bowls XXXVI and XXXVIII. The first was as time expired and the second with four seconds to go. In all, Vinatieri kicked 18 game-winning field goals [regular season and postseason] with less than a minute remaining during his 10 seasons with the Patriots.

Gostkowski doesn't have any, although he did kick the winner with 1:10 remaining in the Patriots' 24-21 win over the Chargers in a division-round game in 2006. He also hit a 35-yarder with 1:56 remaining in overtime to beat the Ravens on Oct. 17, 2010. His 24-yard field goal with 1:51 remaining in regulation tied that game.

It would not be a surprise if Sunday's Super Bowl came down to a last-second kick. The Patriots were beaten, 24-20, by the Giants earlier this season and are favored by 3 points on Sunday.

"I'm just excited to play and kick as many field goals and extra points as possible. If it comes down to the end of the game, I'll be ready," Gostkowski said.

For Gostkowski, it's something he can't help but think about. But he does not want to dwell on it, either.

"This game is so hyped up and publicized. You know what you're getting into when you sign up. One thing is that I've never been scared to fail," he said.

Gostkowski believes his background helps him handle the pressure. He originally attended Memphis on a baseball scholarship before joining the football team as a walk-on. A righthanded pitcher with a 90-mile-per-hour fastball, he had a 3.99 earned run average as a sophomore.

Baseball is a sport of constant failure, and learning how to rebound from mistakes gave Gostkowski the confidence he might not have gotten from football alone.

"Kicking hasn't been the only sport in my life. I take experiences from everything I've done. I've dealt with difficult situations and I've struggled before in every sport I've played," he said.



"If you go into a game thinking you're going to screw up, you're probably not going to be at a professional level. Stuff like that doesn't cross my mind. When I go out in practice, I go out to make every kick. When I don't, I try to make the next one. If I freaked out about every kick I missed in the NFL, I wouldn't be sitting here right now."

Gostkowski has handled playoff pressure well. In addition to kicking the winner against the Chargers in 2006, he kicked a 50-yarder earlier in that game, a postseason franchise record.

Giants kicker Lawrence Tynes has both flourished and failed in clutch moments. He missed two potential game-winners against the Packers in the 2008 NFC Championship game, but made a kick in overtime to send the Giants to the Super Bowl.

Tynes also made a 31-yard field goal in overtime to beat the 49ers in the NFC title game this season.

"It helps you mentally when you've been there before and been successful," Tynes said. "Every kick is different, but I do have the advantage of having done it before."

Gostkowski isn't looking at the Super Bowl as a chance to show he can perform in the waning seconds. His goal is to contribute to a victory.

"This game is a team game and it's about winning a championship," he said. "If they need me to kick five field goals and the game-winner, that's great. If they need me to kick five extra points, that's great. I'm ready, and anything can happen in each game."

"The toughest thing about this position is that you don't know what situations you'll be put in. You can't make your own opportunities. You have to take advantage of the ones that you get the best that you can. That's what I feel like I've done."

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## S Steve Gregory

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots drawn to Steve Gregory's smarts**

By Michael Whitmer, Globe Staff

January 10, 2014

FOXBOROUGH — It starts, like it always does, with the eyes. They scan the field, back and forth, searching for signs. Once spotted, those signs are sent to the brain, immediately decoded, and transferred to the mouth, which is ready to alert teammates what to look for or expect on the upcoming offensive play.

The eyes belong to Patriots safety Steve Gregory. So does the brain and the mouth, which speaks in a thick, quick, unmistakable New York accent. Combined, they offer solid proof that Gregory is one of the smartest players, at least when it comes to football knowledge, the Patriots have. Maybe the smartest.

"It's something I've never, ever seen in someone before, how smart of a football player he is," said fellow safety Duron Harmon, a rookie. "The ability to dissect an offense, before the snap, at the snap, after the snap? His football knowledge is at a different level."

There's a scene in "Good Will Hunting" where Matt Damon's character is trying to describe to his love interest how he can solve math problems that stump everybody else. To help make his point to a skeptical Minnie Driver, he compares his uncanny ability to Beethoven and Mozart playing the piano.

"I look at a piano, I see a bunch of keys, three pedals, and a box of wood. But Beethoven, Mozart, they saw it, they could just play," Damon says in the movie. "When it came to stuff like [math], I could always just play."

That's Gregory on the football field. Pretty much since he began playing.

"I've always had an understanding for the game, whether it's the X's and O's of it, or schemes and things like that. I just seem to 'see' the way it's supposed to be," Gregory said. "It's a combination of the years of playing, film work, and just having a sense for football, I guess."

Gregory's smarts will be tested at Gillette Stadium on Saturday night in an AFC divisional-round playoff game. He'll be matching wits with Colts quarterback Andrew Luck, who has had similar adjectives describe his own football intelligence.

Luck, 24, is in just his second season, and already has shown a maturity well beyond his years and NFL experience. Gregory, who turned 31 on Wednesday, is in his eighth season. He views his ability to figure out what's happening or about to happen just as highly as his physical skills.

"Yeah, I'd probably say that's right at the top, it's something I rely on a lot," Gregory said of his football smarts. "I've been fortunate enough to play in the league eight years now, and I've grown a lot over those eight years: I've played in a lot of football games, a lot of playoff games, a lot of big-time games, so those valuable experiences that I've gained throughout my career have paid dividends."

Gregory's mental edge can take many forms. In the film room, where he can spot tendencies of an offense and point them out to teammates. On the field, where he'll pick up presnap hints of what play might be coming: a formation, personnel grouping, anticipating motion, who's on the line of scrimmage, who's off, where a specific playmaker is lined up.

Then, when the snap is made, Gregory can frequently figure out in a split second, based on a receiver's initial break, what routes are being run on that particular play.

"There's only so many combinations of routes that a team can do, and understanding those concepts and being able to recognize them quickly and react to them quickly, those things help you out," Gregory said.

He's also not shy about speaking up.

"If he's on the sideline and I'm in and I make a mistake, he'll come and tell me, 'This is what you need to look for, because if you look for this you would have seen that, and you wouldn't have been in that position.' Or in the film

room, he might say, 'See this right here? That will give you the tip that they're about to run this,' " Harmon said. "It's crazy, because you start looking at things different now."

Gregory's helpful observations aren't limited to his teammates.

"When we're preparing for games, he's not only able to watch film and see things coming, but he's able to go to the coaches and say, 'Why don't we tweak this defense this way, because it better fits what they do?' " said Devin McCourty, who started alongside Gregory at safety in nine of the Patriots' 16 regular-season games this season. "When we're in meetings we'll have something in the defense and we're watching [film] and Steve will say, 'Why don't we do this?' We'll all sit there and look at him and be like, 'You're right, that probably would be better.' I think that's what makes him so good.

"Steve always has something each week we play that he sees and things we can do. That's why we call him a future head coach."

Gregory has heard that before, that when his playing days are over he'll naturally be drawn into coaching. Maybe, maybe not.

"I haven't really thought about that much, to be honest with you, so I don't know. Could I do it? Probably," Gregory said. "I could see it happening, but I don't know if that's something I want to pursue. Those guys put in a lot of time. Hopefully I'm playing a few more years, and I'll cross that path when I get to it."

The path for Gregory and the Patriots to cross now comes from the Colts, who stand between the Patriots and a third straight trip to the AFC Championship game. Gregory's current coach knows how important it is having his safety on the field; Gregory missed two games after breaking his thumb. He wore a large, cumbersome cast when he returned.

"Steve is a very instinctive player, not only smart but he has good anticipation and awareness of what's happening back there. I think that's definitely one of his strengths," Bill Belichick said. "He's very instinctive in the running game and the passing game, [with] formations. Yeah, we're really fortunate."

It takes some level of intelligence to play football in the NFL, no matter the position, and Gregory is hardly the only player who has been singled out by coaches and teammates for his ability to read, interpret, and react to things an opponent might be doing. It's a trait he's developed into a strength, one that manifests itself to those around him on a regular basis.

"I don't know if I'm surprised, but I definitely appreciate that," Gregory said, when told about some of his teammates calling him the smartest player they've ever played with. "I'm just a guy that goes to work every day. I study as much as I can."



## Steve Gregory on right path

By Jeff Howe

August 19, 2012

FOXBORO — The kid from Staten Island stood in Derek Jeter's office, stabbing ground balls at Yankee Stadium in front of a handful of pro scouts. Then he showed his skills in center field, where Mickey Mantle and Joe DiMaggio once called home.

For a high schooler, that's the type of experience that can shape an entire life. And to an extent, it did for Steve Gregory, but there was something missing. The baseball dreams were great, but didn't stand up to his passion for football.

"It was just my love," Gregory said. "I love the competition of it. I love the contact of it, the physicality of it, competing every down and having 10 other guys out there with you trying to accomplish the same thing. It's something special, that team camaraderie, that atmosphere in the locker room, going out to try to win a game and then winning it. It's something special."

With that, Gregory put the glove in storage and focused on football midway through high school. Just a few days ago, the Patriots [team stats] safety glowed given the chance to tell his story about the tryouts at Yankee Stadium and Shea Stadium, and how he truly cherished the experience. But again, it wasn't football.

The decision to give up on baseball might be the only thing Gregory and his father, Steve Sr., have ever come close to disagreeing over.

"I kind of wish he would have stuck with it a little longer to see how it would have went, but I'm not disappointed at all, to be honest," Steve Gregory Sr. said. "It worked out for him, that's for sure. He's a dream son, let's put it that way."

Father and son have forged a tight relationship. Gregory's mother left when he was 3 years old, and his father raised him with the help of his current wife, Judy. Not that Gregory needed to be steered in the right direction, but the father always kept a watchful eye to make sure his son wasn't running the streets in Staten Island.

That's typical of any good father, but part of the guidance came from Gregory Sr.'s career as a Brooklyn police officer. He worked patrol, as well as the task force before taking an administrative position at the end of his career.

"He's been in the streets," Gregory said of his father, who is now retired. "He's seen all of the stuff that people get into, all the trouble, how easy it is to get steered off into the wrong path. He just kept me in line."

Their close connection reached a scary moment on 9/11, when Gregory's father was called to the towers. Everyone in the area lost cell phone reception, and Gregory couldn't reach his father until the next day.

"It's amazing when you can't get in touch with somebody and there's such a horrific thing going on like that, the things that go through your mind," Gregory said. "To fathom the idea of losing someone so close to you in your life, it's just horrible. When you finally get to hear that voice on the other end of the line, it's a relief."

"He was really active during that time. It makes me proud that he was down there helping our country, bringing everyone back together and rebuilding the city. It was a scary time, but also a time that I can look back on and be proud of what he did for the city of New York."

The pride is reciprocated. A four-year starter at Syracuse, Gregory signed with San Diego as an undrafted free agent in 2006. He cut his teeth as a special teamer before earning more responsibility on defense. The Chargers kept trying to find someone else to replace Gregory, but he kept getting onto the field, starting 28 games the last three seasons.

The Patriots gave Gregory a three-year deal worth up to \$8.8 million this offseason, and he has shown his value this summer, intercepting a pass in the preseason opener and a few more in practice.

The team has been happy with his progress. His father knows his son has made it.

"I already ordered my Patriots jersey. I have my hat," Gregory Sr. said. "I'm ready for the season."

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## DB Duron Harmon



### **Football journey: Duron Harmon**

By Mike Reiss

November 16, 2013

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- With starting New England Patriots safety Steve Gregory unlikely to play on Monday night with a broken right thumb, rookie Duron Harmon is primed to move into the starting lineup.

Harmon was a surprise third-round draft choice out of Rutgers as many media-based draft analysts (and a handful of teams we've spoken with) had him projected to go in the later rounds, if at all. But the Patriots saw something others didn't and to this point it has worked out well for the team.

Harmon has played in eight games as the No. 3 option on the depth chart, totaling 125 snaps on defense (mostly in sub packages) while also contributing on special teams units. The Magnolia, Del., native has had an interception in each of the past two games and coaches have credited him with nine tackles.

He shares his "football journey":

**When he first started playing football:** "I've been playing outside ever since I can remember, but I actually started in a league when I was 10."

**What got him started playing football:** "My grandfather used to take me to Delaware State football games every Saturday, every home game, and we would sit in the same seats."

**First positions:** "Running back and I played corner in Little League. I didn't start playing safety until high school."

**Favorite players growing up:** "Michael Vick and Ricky Williams. At one point, I thought I was a quarterback and [Vick] was the guy at the time. And with Ricky Williams, when I played running back, I was also a Dolphins fan growing up. My mother bought me a Dan Marino jersey, a whole outfit when I was younger, and I used to just wear that around."

**Role models in his life:** "Definitely my mother [Dawn]. She's a middle school teacher in Delaware. Also my father [Derik] works hard every day, a blue-collar worker; he works at Kraft General Foods. He missed a lot of my games in high school because he works at night, but he's somebody I definitely look up to."

**Top football memories of Caesar Rodney High School:** "Winning the state championship -- growing up with a bunch of guys and doing what we set out to do our senior year, that was special."

**Choosing to play football at Rutgers:** "It was an up-and-coming program. I really liked the direction that Coach Schiano was taking the program, and it was close to home."

**Favorite football memories from Rutgers:** "Winning the Big East championship, even though the season didn't play out at the end that we all hoped it would. Still, being the first Rutgers team to ever win the Big East championship was special."

**Drafted in the third round by the Patriots:** "It was exciting. Any time you see your dreams unfold before you eyes, it's a great feeling."

**Reaction to being labeled a 'surprise' pick by draftniks:** "My agent was telling me 'You could go anywhere, you did well in workouts and a lot of teams like your numbers, so just keep watching, you'll definitely be drafted and things will be fine.' I can't really be upset that people didn't know too much about me. There were a lot of great players on the [Rutgers] team -- Steve Beauharnais, Khaseem Greene, Logan Ryan, Jonathan Cooper -- so for me to get overlooked, there isn't anything you can do about that. All I can do is continue to keep working, just trying to get better, and improving on my game."

**Describing life as a Patriot:** "It's been a learning experience. Things are definitely different in college football, so all I can do is try to soak up as much knowledge from players like Steve [Gregory] and Dev [Devin McCourty] and keep learning, using this year as a year to get better."

**What he prides himself on as a player:** "Consistency. Coming into the league, you're going to have your bumps and bruises, especially as a rookie. I'm just trying to learn how to be consistent, week in and week out."

**What he loves about football:** "The real question is what not to love about football for me. I like the idea of having a group of guys, a group of teammates, a group of brothers, and going out there and fighting for each other. I love that. I also the physicality of the game. I just like how you can apply what you experience in the game to life. There is always going to be adversity in football. No game is ever going to be the perfect game. When you can see that on the football field, it makes life a little bit easier. Are you going to stand up to it or run away from it?"

**Lowest point in football:** "I would probably say the Louisville game last year. There was a play that I could have made, I didn't make it, and they ended up scoring. It's a play that nine times out of 10 I know I'd make, but I didn't and we ended up losing the game. I put a lot of pressure on myself after that. It was a tough time to get out of that little slump, but I got out of it."

**Summing up his football journey:** "There have been ups and downs, highs and lows, some good days and some bad days; that's what I love the most about this game, it hits you with adversity and shows you what type of person you are and what type of person you want to be and can be."

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## LB Dont'a Hightower



### Football journey: Dont'a Hightower

By Mike Reiss

December 1, 2012

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Rookie linebacker Dont'a Hightower has made a favorable impression in his first season with the Patriots, earning a starting role on the strong side of the team's 4-3 scheme.

Hightower has played 42 percent of the team's defensive snaps, a total that would be higher if he didn't miss almost three full games with a hamstring injury. Coaches have credited him with 45 tackles (31 solo), which ties for the fourth-highest total on the team, to go along with his three sacks.

Strong against the run and still developing his game in pass coverage, the 6-foot-3, 270-pound Hightower doesn't carry himself like a rookie. Teammate Jerod Mayo previously referred to him as an "old soul."

The 22-year-old Hightower shared his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com:

**When he first started playing football:** "As soon as I was able to run around, that's when I started. A few of my older cousins did around '97, and that's when I did."

**Favorite memories at Marshall County High School (Lewisburg, Tenn.):** "In 2008, winning Mr. Football in the state meant a lot. That was definitely one of my goals growing up. I had an older cousin, Ray Hightower, who won it in 2002. Through high school, I wanted to match everything he did and try to do it better -- from the weight room to the field."

**Why he attended the University of Alabama:** "I'm from a small place, from the country, so we're real big on tradition. Alabama is a really good school, education-wise and in football; Nick Saban has done a great job everywhere he's been. It came down to Alabama and Vanderbilt."

**Top memories at Alabama:** "My last year, winning a national championship. We had won it in '09, but I wasn't on the field."

**Selected by the Patriots in the first round of the 2012 draft (25th overall):** "It was a great experience. I feel like I've landed at the perfect spot. It's a lot like Alabama, big on tradition, great coaches and everybody is humble and comes to work every day. That's what I went through in college and it's something I hoped to come to in the NFL. I'm blessed."

**What he loves about football:** "Everything about it. The teamwork, the communication, and everything that goes in with it. Definitely the physical part; it would stink to be a big, fast guy and not be able to use it. I definitely try to use my size (6-3, 270) to that nature."

**Favorite players as a youngster:** "Growing up, I didn't really watch a lot of NFL. But when I did, there was a guy named Jason Gildon, an outside linebacker who played for Pittsburgh. I always liked watching him. Ironical as it sounds, I used to watch Mayo when he played at Tennessee. I used to love watching Patrick Willis play at Ole Miss. I took a [college] visit there, it was his last year, and I almost committed. Those are the three guys I loved watching play."

**Favorite teams growing up:** "I didn't really have one. I was a fan, more or less, and liked watching different styles of defense. I loved Dick LeBeau, so when I was going through the whole draft process, I got to finally meet him. I used to love watching what he does on the defensive side of the ball."

**Role models in his life:** "My grandfather [John Hightower] was always there for me, taking me to practices in baseball. He took care of me. I lost him in 2008, when I was just starting at Alabama. One of the things that made that easier was that he got to watch me. He's still with me in spirit and I know him and my grandmother [Lillian Hightower] are looking down on me now."

**Summing up his football journey:** "Definitely a dream come true. I couldn't ask for anything more from it, starting out small to now. God has given me all the valuable resources to do it, given me a great mom and sister, a great family. My girlfriend and her family did a really good job of taking care of me, looking out for me, making sure I'm still humble. Then just my friends, and my teammates with the Patriots and in college, it's kind of hard to mess up or not be focused and do the right things whenever you have Vince Wilfork and Tom Brady, Mayo, [Brandon] Spikes, Brandon Lloyd, [Niko] Koutouvides -- all the right guys around you to bring you up. I'm definitely glad I've been put in the situation with all these great players around me."

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## TE Michael Hoomanawanui

# The Boston Globe

## **Patriots' Michael Hoomanawanui a TE with game**

By Michael Vega

November 6, 2012

FOXBOROUGH — You begin the tongue-twisting trip with a bit of deception posed by the silent 'H.' From there, the navigation of Michael Hoomanawanui's polysyllabic Polynesian surname is not unlike an uncharted trip to the South Pacific — phonetically speaking, of course.

Uh-oh-ma-na-wanui.

After dealing with the tricky silence of the first consonant in the Patriots tight end's 12-letter last name, you are surprised by the double vowels that follow. It produces an 'uh-oh' moment. The next step is a cliff diver's leap of faith into 'ma-na' before making the final splash into 'wanui'.

Uh-oh-ma-na-wanui.

When you finally master its pronunciation, and can get it to roll off your tongue mellifluously, you almost cannot help but conjure a trip to a tropical paradise, replete with swaying palm trees, shrieking gulls, and a gentle surf rolling up on a sun-dappled beach.

"Our last name means, 'To be patient,'" said Hoomanawanui's father, Isy, a Hawaiian native who played football at Illinois State and was his son's position coach at Central Catholic High School in Bloomington, Ill., where Michael played as a freshman on the varsity at tight end and defensive end.

"Things happen for a reason, so you just have to be patient," Isy said.

While Rob Gronkowski and Aaron Hernandez are the household names among the Patriots' tight ends, Hoomanawanui, a 6-foot-4-inch, 263-pounder in his third pro season out of the University of Illinois, has had to bide his time. He has toiled in relative anonymity as the fourth tight end — except for his last name.

"I still have to double-check myself when I say it," said George Godsey, the Patriots tight ends coach.

To his phonetically challenged teammates, Hoomanawanui has become known, simply, as "Hoo-Man."

"I've had a couple of nicknames over the years," said Hoomanawanui, whose football acumen and position versatility enabled him to create a niche with the Patriots, even with Daniel Fells third on the depth chart. "It's obviously not an easy name to pronounce, so any way they can shorten it up and help everyone out is OK. It's been cool. A lot of guys have played with a bunch of Polynesian players before and they come up and look at the name and they get it the first time."

Originally drafted by St. Louis in the fifth round (132d overall) in 2010, Hoomanawanui made 20 catches for 229 yards and three touchdowns (all in his rookie season) over 16 games (11 starts) in his two seasons with the Rams before he was released Sept. 2.

Three days later, the Patriots signed Hoomanawanui as a free agent.

"He's just a young tight end with a lot of flexibility," Godsey said. "He's worked in the backfield, he's worked as an in-motion tight end, he's worked on the line at the point of attack, and he's worked in the slot, so he's just another flexible tight end, which we try to do as much as we can with them."

Hoomanawanui's transition from St. Louis to New England was smoothed by his familiarity with the concepts of offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels, who had the same job during Hoomanawanui's time with the Rams.

"It's been a roller coaster ride ever since I got let go by St. Louis," Hoomanawanui said. "Coming in here and having a little familiarity with the system already after having Coach McDaniels last year made it kind of easier once I got back into it."

"Now I've added a kind of a new role, playing fullback, and it's been fun. So anything they need me to do or want me to do, I'm up for it. Whatever helps us win."

Hoomanawanui made his first start for the Patriots at fullback in a 31-30 setback at Baltimore Sept. 23 and made his first catch, a 4-yarder. The following week, with Hernandez on the shelf with an ankle injury, Hoomanawanui started at tight end opposite Gronkowski.

"Gronk and Aaron, being who they are and what they can do, you've got to find a way to help in this offense," Hoomanawanui said. "So anything I can do, whether it be on special teams or playing fullback, I'm going to try and do."

Hoomanawanui suffered a concussion in Week 4 at Buffalo and was inactive for the next two games before he returned in a limited capacity for the 29-26 overtime victory over the Jets.

With Hernandez inactive and resting back home, Hoomanawanui was pressed into service against — of all teams — the Rams in London, where he had his number called on an 18-yard reception, in a 45-7 romp at Wembley Stadium.

"Any time you can contribute to a win, you feel a lot better than sitting on the sidelines," said Hoomanawanui. "But that's just the competitive nature we all have as professional athletes, so it was definitely nice to be in there and to get that opportunity."

Did he realize he was an option for Tom Brady when the quarterback called the play in the huddle?

"Oh, yeah, every play you've got to have that mentality, because the play you don't [expect] is the play it's going to come to you and you'll be on 'C'mon Man' or something," Hoomanawanui said, referring to the lowlight segment on ESPN's NFL studio show. "It's just the mentality and the preparation that you put into it."

Said Godsey, "I think, with Tom, if you're not looking for the ball, you're going to get hit in the head with it. He's looking at all five options and those guys need to be aware that the ball could come at them at any moment."

When Hoomanawanui seized upon his moment in London, it triggered an immediate reaction stateside among family and friends.

"Usually if Mike does something good on the TV, then my phone just goes off," said Isy, whose cellphone was bombarded with text messages after Michael's 18-yard catch. "We get one after another from all over. We get them from Florida, New Mexico, Hawaii, they all start coming in. We got people watching from all over."

Said Michael, "It makes you realize how big this game is. Even guys who aren't Patriots fans watch us because I played with them in high school or college."

They all have a rooting interest now in the Patriots tight end with the tongue-twisting last name who remains eager to earn his place — and make his name — in New England.

"It's a lot for a first-year player in this system to learn," Godsey said of the challenges facing Hoomanawanui. "I think it's just a gradual process that continues to improve, at least from our impression. I think as the next half of the season goes, we'd like to continue to see it improve and I think he would, too."

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## DE Chandler Jones

# The Boston Globe

### **For Chandler Jones, athletic success is family business**

**New Patriot part of athletic clan that knows triumph, pain**

By Shalise Manza Young

May 10, 2012

ENDICOTT, N.Y. - The three brothers were together again, something that doesn't happen nearly as often now that they are adults, now that their careers have taken them away from home, though they talk every day. Their parents were there, as they always have been.

As happens in life, it wasn't just the five of them - it couldn't be. There were significant others and babies, and at least one camera crew. But for a while they were all crammed together on one couch, just like old times, and glued to the television.

And then came a phone call, from a man widely considered to be the greatest professional football coach of this generation, whose team has become synonymous with winning, year in and year out.

Bill Belichick wanted Chandler Jones, wanted him so badly that he moved up six spots in the first round to draft him - and he hadn't moved up in the first round, for any player, in nine years.

But clearly the Patriots coach saw something in the 6-foot-5-inch pass rusher from Syracuse - the size, the speed, the smarts, the potentially disruptive front-line force his defense hasn't had on a consistent basis for several seasons.

On television, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell announced Jones as the 21st overall pick in the draft, headed to New England.

The Jones boys - Arthur III, a defensive tackle for the Baltimore Ravens; Jon, the mixed-martial arts champion; and Chandler, the newest member of the Patriots - celebrated, Chandler putting his arms around Arthur Jr. and Camille, the parents who have been there through triumph and tragedy.

Three sons, and now, three professional athletes.

"It was a great experience just having the whole family together, just sitting on the couch like we used to do growing up," Jon said. "Growing up, we had such a small couch and we were all so big and we used to sit right in each others' laps.

"So to do that again in my house, my first home, it was just a great feeling. It felt like the ultimate housewarming gift to have everyone there, and to share such a special moment with Chandler.

"It was a wonderful moment for me, a wonderful moment for our family."

#### **Death in the family**

The boys were born in Rochester, N.Y., but moved to Endicott, a village just outside of Binghamton, when Chandler was 8. Their father, Arthur Jr., is the longtime pastor of a small church in Binghamton, and mother Camille works in the ministry with him.

Years ago, Camille thought her oldest boy would be the only one who had a career in sports, perhaps as a coach. Jon, she believed, might be an actor. And Chandler, whom she still lovingly calls "her baby" would use his intelligence to do great things in the business world. Eventually, they would all be pastors, just like their father.

At least, that's what she thought.

They are all 6 feet 3 inches or better, and Arthur jokes that their size is the result of the family's home being next to a former IBM plant; perhaps some of the fumes, he said, caused the boys to grow so large. Camille points to the Southern-style cooking she and her husband served, making big pots of beans and rice ("and, when all else failed, spaghetti").

Whatever it was, it led to three strapping boys.

But it wasn't always just the boys. They had an older sister, Carmen, who was almost 6 feet and played some basketball but was more of a girly-girl, happiest doing hair, cooking, or redecorating the family house on a whim.

Not long after the Joneses moved to Endicott, Carmen was diagnosed with brain cancer. Over the next two years, Camille, Arthur Jr., and her brothers took care of her; Carmen made it clear she didn't like nurses. So they all had a role in tending to her, holding her while her mother bathed her and smoothed lotion on her, helping with her feeding tube, until she lost her fight and died just shy of her 18th birthday.

Until recently, none of the brothers talked about Carmen, certainly not outside of their home and sometimes not even inside it.

"They didn't want to talk about her, they felt that a conversation about her was very sacred and they just didn't want to share her," Camille said.

Arthur III and Jon will talk about Carmen now, but Chandler, who was just 10 when Carmen died, is still reluctant.

"It affected us a lot," Arthur III said. "It caused us, as young kids, to grow up. It's funny because when they see us, people say you're really mature to be only 22, 23, 25, whatever, but it's because we've been through a lot.

"When other kids were outside playing sports, we had to be in the house taking care of our sister. It definitely pushed us in a way to grow up faster."

None of the boys complained, Camille said. Perhaps it was because Carmen had taken such good care of them, cooking meals and doing chores - the chores she was supposed to dole out to her brothers. It wasn't until after she died that Camille realized none of the boys knew how to do housework; they admitted that they never had to, because Carmen had done it for them.

"She's in a better place watching us, front row, in all the arenas we play in," Jon said.

### **A mother's challenge**

The experience of caring for and ultimately losing Carmen brought the family closer. Their faith has bonded them, and continues to provide solace now, as Camille wages her own battle with diabetes. The disease has robbed her of her sight.

She still attends every football game, every fight. Arthur Jr. provides the play-by-play of what's happening, though at times he gets too excited and forgets to tell his wife what's going on. So Camille has learned to station herself next to Arthur III or Jon's fiancée or Chandler's girlfriend, and they fill her in.

Her blindness isn't a reason to get down, Camille says. Arthur, clearly the family comedian, says they call her dark glasses her "stunner shades," a hip-hop term for oversized sunglasses. The boys will poke their mother, aware that she doesn't know who the culprit is until she hears his voice. Sometimes Camille will retaliate by turning off the lights in the room and saying, "Welcome to my world."

It doesn't make her sad that she can't see her sons excel in their sports; she has been blind for just a couple of years, so she has seen them in action. What bothers her now are things such as not being able to picture in her mind the beauty of the Denver area, even as her husband described it to her, when Jon had a bout there.

Camille has already ordered custom-made jerseys for Sept. 23, when the Patriots travel to Baltimore for a prime-time showdown; one half of the shirts will be New England road white, the other half Ravens home purple.

Arthur III says it may not sink in that baby brother is in the NFL until that day, when he sees Chandler on the field in his uniform.

### **It began with a bang**

For Shane Hurd, the Union-Endicott High football coach who has known the Jones boys for more than a decade, and athletic director Josh Gannon, it isn't a surprise that Chandler is about to begin a career in the NFL.

Hurd loves to tell the story from the start of his sophomore year, when Chandler was in his first season with the varsity team and still a middle linebacker, still a "bit goofy" and getting used to his new body after a major growth spurt.

U-E had traveled to face Shenendehowa for a preseason scrimmage. The Shenendehowa quarterback rolled to his left, then reversed field, looking for all the world as though he were going to run out of bounds. Only he didn't. He cut back near the sideline.

Chandler, the gangly kid with the great hips who had been pursuing the quarterback from the far side of the field, hit him in full-on sprint – wham! The collision was so violent it sent every coach on the field running toward the quarterback, afraid he'd been seriously hurt.

After that, U-E put its quarterbacks in red noncontact jerseys for scrimmages, not wanting a similar fate to befall them.

That play became the opening scene in Jones's college recruiting tape. It showed that he could run, and it showed he could hit. He was moved to defensive end when he grew to 6-5, but those two things haven't changed.

On the night of the draft, Gannon, who is a Massachusetts native and Patriots fan, and Hurd, who is a Jets fan, rejoiced. Hurd was overcome with emotion for his former star player, and he will happily put aside his dislike of the Jets' biggest rival to don a New England jersey with "Jones" on the back.

"He is such a great kid," said Hurd. "Someone like that, with that personality, he should have great things happen to him."

According to Gannon, Hurd uses all three Joneses as an example for current student-athletes – that you can be a success and still be a great person, that it doesn't have to be one or the other.

### **Great expectations**

Thanks to his long arms, large frame, and Big East background, Chandler has already been compared to Jason Pierre-Paul, the Giants' pass-rushing demon.

His defensive coordinator at Syracuse, Scott Shafer, believes Chandler can be every bit the impact player that Pierre-Paul has become for New York.

"I remember watching Jason in high school, and I got to watch him live and I had to coach against him when he was over there getting sacks at South Florida, and I really do, I think Chandler can definitely do those things," Shafer said.

"He's got some of the same skill set. He's got a little bit different style to his game than Jason. One thing about Chandler is that he is an extremely intelligent young man, too. Playing for Coach Belichick and that scheme and those coaches there, I think they can really develop him into being an extremely productive guy in that league."

When Jones was out with his knee injury, Shafer said, he didn't get down, and instead spent time with the team's younger defensive ends to get them as ready as they could be to step in during his absence.

That's where his leadership showed. Chandler isn't much of a fire-and-brimstone type, but Hurd, the high school coach, recalled that if U-E was having a bad practice, Chandler would provide inspiration by putting a hard hit on a teammate (which his target likely didn't appreciate as much as the rest of the team did).

He'll do whatever is asked of him in New England, from the film room to the weight room to the practice field, Shafer said.

They're all biased, of course, but everyone - from Hurd and Gannon to Shafer to Camille, Arthur III, and Jon - boasts about Chandler's magnetic personality, his great character, his work ethic, and his quest for perfection on the field.

"They're getting an awesome person," Jon said. "They're getting a person who is a winner, a person who comes from a family of winners, a person who is a hard worker, a person who has great energy, very charismatic, he's a gentleman. You'll never have to worry about Chandler getting in any bar fights or DWIs."

"He's extremely passionate. He's just a great, great individual, a total winner, in the true sense of the word 'winner.'"

"I think with years under Belichick and just being around the team and Tom Brady, being around greatness, he's going to mold right in and be a great individual and a great player."

"Chandler's a special kid; he really is. I think that's why Belichick picked him. He recognized the talent when he sees it. He's something special, and you guys are going to be able to see it."

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## OL Josh Kline



### **Football journey: OL Josh Kline**

By Mike Reiss

November 30, 2013

When offensive lineman Josh Kline first joined the New England Patriots in May as an undrafted rookie free agent out of Kent State, he was a long shot to make the 53-man roster. Now he's one injury away from being in the starting lineup.

The 6-foot-3, 295-pound Kline projects as the top backup at guard on Sunday, and also played right tackle in college. Similar to former Patriots guard Stephen Neal, he has a wrestling background as he was an Ohio state champion in his senior year at Mason High School, posting a 45-1 record.

Thanks in large part to offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia, the Patriots have had success in developing unheralded players into top contributors, and Kline, who turns 24 on Dec. 29, is one of the most recent blockers added to the pipeline.

**When he started playing football:** "Third grade. I was in Mason Pee Wee. All throughout Pee Wee, I had to cut weight. I ran every morning, because I was always a couple pounds over the weight and I didn't want to go up [one level] because I wanted to be with my friends. I wore soccer shoes, anything that was lighter, because you had to weigh in with all your stuff on."

**First positions:** "Running back and linebacker. Then in middle school, I played some tight end and defensive end. In eighth grade, I moved to tackle, then played some center in my junior and senior year."

**What got him started playing football:** "It was always my passion. Me and my brother always played in the backyard, with a bunch of kids from the neighborhood. It's a game that I love and I still love it to this day."

**Favorite teams and players growing up:** "I was a Browns fan. My dad was from Northeast Ohio. I didn't really have any favorite players. I just loved watching the game."

**Recollections of rooting for the Browns:** "It was really devastating when they moved. That kind of hurt us. I always watched the Bears too, because I was born in Chicago and my mother [Julie] is from there. I had them to watch when [the Browns] were gone. When they came back [in 1999], I watched them a lot, even though they had some bad years. Cleveland is a blue-collar city and that's how the team is – through thick and thin, you stay with the team."

**Top memories of football at Mason High School:** "The camaraderie that you had with your buddies. You have the 'Friday Night Lights' going. You still miss it to this day. You have nothing like that, in college or even now. You'll have camaraderie but it's not with the people you grew up with for most of your life."

**One high school moment that stands out:** "Maybe when we came back from Middletown my senior year. It was a shootout game and it was fourth-and-goal from either the 2 or the 1, and they ran it behind me and my buddy, Pete Noxsel, the left guard, and I just remember him growling that we got it in [the end zone]."

**Enrolling at Kent State:** "I grew up, before moving in second grade, in Hartville, which is probably 10 miles south of Kent. My grandparents still live there. I was familiar with Kent and knew the area well. I preferred it to Akron. I got recruited by the other MAC schools but it was a combination of having a chance to play and an opportunity to help change the culture a little bit. We did my senior year. It was a good experience and I'm glad I picked it."

**A familiar face at Kent State:** "I got recruited as a center, and when I got there my freshman year, I was on the team with Julian [Edelman]. That was his senior year. I didn't play any games, so I kept my redshirt."

**One Kent State moment that stands out:** "Probably this past year. Just winning all those games and having such a great season. It was just a totally different experience after those losing seasons. We didn't finish it like I wanted to, but it was great to go to a bowl game, and great to go out with a bang like we did as a senior class."

**Expectations leading into the NFL draft:** “You always want to get drafted, but I knew I would get picked up as a free agent somewhere if it didn’t happen. I really didn’t worry about it much. I went golfing on the first day of the draft with my buddies to get my mind off it. It’s hit or miss and you never know what can happen.”

**Going undrafted and signing with the Patriots:** “It wasn’t a surprise, but I just had to get on the phone with the teams that wanted to sign me as a priority free agent and see what my best chances were on making a squad. I picked the Patriots, because if you want to be the best you want to learn from the best. The Patriots are a great organization and I wanted to be part of that.”

**Summing up his rookie season:** “It’s definitely a learning experience, from being an undrafted rookie and moving up and down [between the practice squad and roster]. They told me I would do that, so it was to be expected. You just have to get better every day, that’s what I’ve learned.”

**What he loves about football:** “Hitting and the camaraderie that comes with it. It’s not like basketball and the other sports where you can have one person take over the game. You have playmakers out there who can do that in football, but if one person screws up, it’s going to screw up the whole play. It’s just a great team game.”

**Role models in his career:** My older brother [Chad] and my father [Rick]. My grandfather [Glen] too. I’ve had great role models in my life. I feel blessed to have those guys in my life, and some coaches growing up. There are a lot of people I could say helped me along the way.”

**Summing up his football journey:** “It was my dream to make it to the top tier in the NFL. I feel very blessed and very grateful to be in this position, and now it’s about setting other goals and strive to achieve those.”

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## DT Chris Jones



### Football journey: Chris Jones

By Mike Reiss  
October 19, 2013

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Things have happened quickly for rookie defensive tackle Chris Jones with the New England Patriots.

Claimed on waivers Sept. 11, and a healthy scratch in his first two games with the team, Jones is now filling a crucial role after injuries to starters Vince Wilfork and Tommy Kelly. In last Sunday's 30-27 victory over the Saints, he played every defensive snap.

"In a short amount of time, he's become a pretty dependable guy for us," coach Bill Belichick said. "He's a hard-working kid that has some skills."

The 23-year-old Jones also has picked up some frequent-flier miles this year, as he joined the Patriots after being drafted by the Houston Texans in the sixth round, and spending a week with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in early September.

This is his "football journey":

**When he first started playing football:** "I was about 6 or 7. We were in Dayton, Ohio, and I played for the Wee-Vikes. The high school team was the Vikings so we were the Wee-Vikes. I played my first two years there. My next eight years, we were in Michigan, all through Little League, middle school and two high school seasons. Then we moved to Indiana and I played the next two high school years there, in Brownsburg."

**Why he first started playing:** "My dad just took me one day. I was in baseball, T-ball, and he decided to try a different sport. Ever since then, I fell in love with the game and have been playing ever since."

**First positions:** "Running back. I was a stocky kid, but I was kind of quick. I had some shuffle to me [smiling]. I didn't play defensive line until middle school, eighth grade."

**Moving with his family and football helping those transitions:** "It was my parents' jobs. They were finding different opportunities, stepping up the ladder. Now they're settled in Indiana. Football definitely helped. One of the reasons I love playing the game is you get a lot of friends and meet a lot of people. Some of my best friends who will be in my wedding are past teammates of mine."

**Top football memories from two seasons at Brownsburg High:** "That's a long time ago. We struggled a little bit. My junior year, when we first moved there, we beat the No. 2 team in the state, Hamilton Southeastern on a last-second play."

**Earning a scholarship to attend Bowling Green:** "I had Toledo, Ball State and Illinois State, and Bowling Green was the first offer. The visit I took just blew me away. The players that were there took care of me. They are awesome guys. The people, all around, sold me. It was the right feeling."

**Top memories at Bowling Green, where he started for three-plus seasons:** "I can't even answer that. I wouldn't go as far to say football. That was awesome, and I have so many memories of football, but it's more about the memories you have with your friends and the people that you meet. The people I met in college are the best of friends. I consider a lot of them my brothers."

**Reaction to being drafted in the sixth round by the Texans:** "I was speechless when it happened. I didn't know what to say. Then your name pops up on the screen, and everyone is screaming. It was a great experience. It was cool having all my friends and family there supporting me."



Waived by the Texans on Aug. 31: **"I was kind of surprised. I already had a place in Houston. I got to learn what the NFL is like, what the coaches expect out of you, and what you need to expect out of yourself as an individual. I thought I worked hard in college, but now I realize there is a lot more that I need to do."**

**Claimed by the Buccaneers on Sept. 1 before being waived Sept. 10:** "I talked to [Buccaneers] Coach [Greg] Schiano. He's a great guy, but he said they needed to release me. At that point, I went to Houston. The NFL is a tough business. If you don't love it, it's probably something in which you won't be successful."

**Claimed by the Patriots on Sept. 11:** "I really didn't know what to think, to be honest. I was excited and I know this is a great organization. Being here now, I realize this is a great fit. Coaches are taking the time, working with me, and I've been blessed to have this opportunity. The biggest thing is the expectation. There is a huge expectation of you. It's high everywhere, but it's higher [here]. You walk out and see the [Super Bowl] trophies and it's like, 'Wow, there is so much recent history here.'"

**Role models in his life:** "Definitely my dad. When I was growing up, there was no one else around me more. He really kept me disciplined. I didn't get in to a lot of things when I was younger, and that helped me to get here. Also, Ronnie Goble, who I met at Bowling Green. Becoming a Christian was the best thing that has ever happened to me and he really opened my eyes to that."

**Favorite teams growing up:** "I never really had a team, but I will say, I liked the Patriots. Tom Brady was the guy I watched and when they won three Super Bowls, you're like, 'They're obviously doing something right.'"

**What he enjoys about football:** "There's nothing like coming out here with your teammates and going to work. You get to enjoy not only playing the game, but it's also the people you're around. Then the competition, at this level, that's the biggest thing. Every year it steps up. Even in college when you're getting older, your game is getting sharper and the same is true for the other guys. So you have to find different ways to beat people."

**Summing up his football journey:** "I feel very blessed. I've been moving my whole life. I thought of it when I was younger, 'What would it be like to be in the NFL?' I'm watching all the guys, and now to be here ... God's kept me healthy through all the years. I can't complain about a thing."

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## QB Ryan Mallett

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots backup Mallett would be ready in a snap**

By Michael Whitmer  
October 20, 2012

FOXBOROUGH — One of the second-string quarterbacks in Sunday's Patriots-Jets game might have been the story of the year in the NFL last season, a lightning rod of attention with his every move, his throwing motion scrutinized like perhaps never before, his in-your-face beliefs vilified or deified by much of the public, his No. 15 jersey becoming — and remaining — one of the top-five sellers in the league.

The other second-string quarterback on Sunday? That would be Ryan Mallett, who also wears No. 15, for the Patriots.

Unlike the Jets' Tim Tebow, he's yet to take even one snap in a regular-season NFL game, much less push his team into the playoffs, get traded, create a quarterback controversy, or become a spokesman for an underwear company.

At least not yet.

Mallett has done enough, though, to convince the Patriots that he's qualified to be Tom Brady's backup, a clipboard-toting position held by Brian Hoyer the past three seasons. Of much more importance to Patriots fans, Mallett is the emergency quarterback the team will turn to if Brady suffers an injury.

"I'm one play away, so I've got to be prepared every week like I'm starting the game," Mallett said. "And that's what I do every week, prepare like I'm starting, so if something happens, if something were to happen, I'd be ready to go."

That scenario probably sends shivers down the spines of Patriots fans, who recall a knee injury suffered by Brady in the first game of 2008, the only time in the last nine seasons the team has failed to qualify for the playoffs.

Mallett doesn't want to see that, either.

"Obviously, you don't want anything to go wrong with the guy ahead of you, it's a good friend of mine now, it's my teammate, and you never want to see that happen to anybody," he said. "But it's part of my job, I have to be ready in case that does happen."

Mallett outplayed Hoyer in the four exhibition games, completing a higher percentage of passes, for more yards, more touchdowns, and a better rating. Along with four preseason games from 2011, it's the only book Patriots followers have on Mallett, a big (6 feet 6 inches, 245 pounds), strong-armed slinger who was a third-round pick out of Arkansas, although he spent his first college year at Michigan, Brady's alma mater.

After a rookie season in which he backed up Brady and Hoyer — he was active for one game, vs. Buffalo, but didn't play — Mallett's second year has been nothing like his first.

"Yeah, a little bit different," Mallett said. "When you're not active for the game, it's a different mind-set, so this year I'm enjoying it, having fun with it."

"I'm attacking practice, trying to get better every day in my overall game, in what I'm thinking, in what the defense is showing me."

The decision to release Hoyer could have served as a vote of confidence for Mallett. But he was already confident.

"I knew what the deal was," he said. "I felt like they saw that I've improved over the last year, and I've gotten better, and I understand more what's going on, and I felt like I saw that and they made their decision."

Because there are only two quarterbacks on the roster, Mallett is getting more opportunity to show his coaches and teammates what he can do. He runs the scout team, but gets plenty of reps with the Patriots' offense, too.

"I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, I'm doing what I'm told to do, just trying to do my job," Mallett said. "I definitely see more reps, a lot more than what I took last year."

Running back Stevan Ridley, who also was selected by the Patriots in the third round of the 2011 draft, said the first year was beneficial to his teammate, and the second season is proof.

"He had a whole year in front of him last year, and then the roster was adjusted, so I think that speaks volumes in itself, the kind of work he's put in here and what he's doing," Ridley said. "He's just really waiting on his shot, and he's playing behind one of the great ones, so he's got to learn everything he can, and when they call his number he's going to be ready."

It's rare that a quarterback plays every snap for an entire season, so it's probable that Mallett will see some game action. Preferably, from the Patriots' perspective, near the end of a blowout win. Possibly Sunday.

Until then, he'll keep preparing — himself as Brady's backup, and the defense, as the scout team quarterback. So this week, with the Jets coming to town, is he Tebow out on the practice field, or starting quarterback Mark Sanchez?

"I'm probably both," Mallett said.

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## G Logan Mankins



### **Logan Mankins tractor-tough as ever**

By Jackie MacMullan  
January 11, 2013

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Change is unavoidable. It has been impossible, for instance, for Logan Mankins to ignore the subtle shift in the way his body responds (or doesn't respond).

Some other differences have been more jolting, a shock to the system, like sticking your feet in a bucket of frigid water. That's how it felt when he lost his longtime partners on the offensive line, Matt Light and Dan Koppen; one retired, one released, just like that.

Like it or not, the football life of Logan Mankins is evolving.

"It's a little different," Mankins conceded. "I played next to those guys for seven seasons. We've been through a lot together, and all of a sudden, they're gone. I went from the third oldest to the oldest (on the line) very fast."

The newly anointed "elder statesman" is the anchor charged with protecting Tom Brady against J.J. Watt and the Houston Texans in Sunday's playoff game at Gillette Stadium. The O-line's job is paramount to the success of the Patriots, who have learned when Brady is under duress, his job becomes infinitely more complicated.

Mankins, a cattle rancher's son who prided himself on never missing a game under any circumstances, has been sidelined a career-high six games this season. According to the perpetually murky Patriots injury report, he has battled hip and calf injuries. It has been a source of frustration for Mankins to be unable to play up to his capabilities, even though he still garnered his fifth Pro Bowl invitation.

In the first five seasons of his Patriots career, he played all 16 games, regardless of what was ailing him.

"I had a pretty good streak for a while," Mankins said, "but this year has been injury-plagued."

Mankins has been targeted by impatient fans who believe the Patriots ran the ball more successfully while he was sidelined, by national pundits who questioned the veracity of his Pro Bowl selection.

Former teammate Tedy Bruschi, now an ESPN analyst, said such scrutiny is preposterous, particularly since Mankins played most of last season with a torn ACL.

"Some have reported it as happening late in the year, but it was the entire season," Bruschi noted. "It happened in the Miami game (Week 1).

"Think about this: How amazing is it that he played through that, had major surgery, and didn't even start the season on the PUP (physically unable to perform) list? Actually, he probably came back too soon, and maybe it affected other things. That could explain some of these injuries. The trainers call that overcompensating."

It remains unclear whether Mankins unknowingly played through the ACL tear, or knew exactly what was happening and chose to soldier on quietly all the way to the Super Bowl.

"You don't ever ask him how he's feeling," explained tackle Sebastian Vollmer. "You just assume he's going to play through anything."

The mention of Mankins elicited a wide range of adjectives describing his uncommon grit: "a rock," said tackle Nate Solder; "nails," offered linebacker Niko Koutouvides; and "tougher than boot leather," submitted coach Bruce Vegely, who coached Mankins both in high school football and baseball.

That toughness was hatched in Catheys Valley, a rural California town with a population of 800. When Mankins wasn't chopping wood, building fences or wrangling livestock three times his size, he was riding horses, hunting game and felling trees with a chain saw.

"Playing football in the NFL was a lot easier than working on that ranch," claimed Trace DeSandres, Mankins' high school basketball coach.

"He never lifted a weight in high school," Vegely added. "He's just flat-out country strong."

Mankins was a champion roper and a three-sport star at Mariposa High. He stood 6-foot-4, 240 pounds, and when he caught the ball on the block in basketball, opposing players shrank from the contact.

"It wasn't enough for him to score," DeSandres said. "Logan was going to punish you on the way to the basket."

Mankins was on course to breaking the school's basketball scoring record in his senior season when, in the first quarter of a game against the Delhi Hawks, he hauled in a rebound. One player jostled him for the ball, while another came up from behind and tried to poke it free.

"So Logan chinned the ball, and when he brought it up, he threw one kid in one direction, and elbowed the other kid in the chest and sent him 10 feet in the opposite direction," DeSandres recalled. "It was the most amazing thing. The refs threw him out of the game, even though it was totally legal."

"He was on his way to 30 that night, but he only had 4 points when he got tossed. It cost him the scoring title."

On the baseball field, Mankins was, his coach said, "a mountain" playing third base. When players stepped into the batter's box, they determined bunting down the third base line was a viable strategy.

Those who dared to raise Mankins' ire by questioning his speed blanched as he thundered down the line, scooping the ball. What they didn't realize was he was also a pitcher, and delighted in firing a fastball in the mid-80s toward first base within a hair of their ear, to remind them to think twice about challenging him again.

It was more of the same on the football field, where Mankins played tight end, fullback and linebacker.

There was the time Mankins came barreling across the middle at tight end just as his quarterback threw 3 feet behind him. Without breaking stride, Mankins reached back with one hand, grabbed the nose of the ball and pulled it in. Then there was the time he lined up at fullback and flattened the linebackers on back-to-back plays with such force, the third time they simply turtled and let him score.

Mankins wanted to play college ball, but Mariposa was a small school and not many recruiters found their way to the valley. When a coach from Fresno State showed up and asked Vegely if he had any good juniors, the coach told him no, but there was a senior he should see. Vegely showed him a film clip of Mankins playing tight end and leveling a defensive tackle.

"I told the Fresno State coach, 'See that kid on the ground? That's the kid you just gave a free ride to,'" Vegely chuckled. "He said, 'Wait, let me see that again.'"

"I showed it to him again, and he said, 'Are you sure that's our kid?' He watched it three more times before he said, 'Can I have that tape?' Next thing you know, we're pulling Logan out of class and they're talking to him about playing football at Fresno State."

Mankins redshirted in his freshman season, then went on to become the first offensive lineman in the history of Fresno State to be named their team MVP.

He was drafted by the Patriots, bought his first suit coat for the press conference, then set about convincing a tight-knit group of offensive linemen that he could fill in for the wildly popular Joe Andruzzi, who had signed with Cleveland as a free agent.

"Obviously I had big shoes to fill," Mankins said. "They had just won a Super Bowl. But I didn't have much time to think about it. They just threw me in to see what I could do."

Mankins had played tackle his entire career, but the Patriots switched him to guard. It didn't matter. The rookie who was flat-out country strong made an immediate impact.

Linebacker Bruschi, playing in the 3-4 defense, found himself lined up against the new kid on a regular basis in practice. He went home one afternoon and peeled off his pads and his shirt to reveal bruises on his arms and dark welts on his back.

"I had all these strange marks on my body, like someone had me in a vise grip," Bruschi said. "My wife Heidi was appalled. She said, 'What are those from?' I said one word: 'Mankins.'"

Bruschi knew what to expect because of a film clip the coaching staff had showed him in advance of the rookie's arrival.

"It wasn't the devastating blocks Logan made, although there were plenty of those," Bruschi said. "It was what he was doing after the devastating blocks. He'd destroy the guy, and the guy would try to get up, then he'd destroy him again, and push him down one more time.

"After I saw that, I figured, 'This guy has a short fuse. I better be nice to him.'"

While Mankins was quiet, respectful and understated off the field, he exhibited a fury on the field that could be terrifying. Vegely termed it "just the right amount of ornery."

"If you pissed him off," Vegely said, "you were in trouble."

Broncos defensive end Ebenezer Ekuban discovered the dark side of Mankins in 2005. Ekuban was, according to Patriots teammates, hitting Mankins after the whistle. Mankins became so incensed he punched Ekuban in the groin, which earned him an ejection and a \$7,500 fine. While teams generally frown upon such underhanded tactics, Bruschi confessed, "We liked it. You need at least one guy like that on the line."

Mankins' goal was to never miss a game. He made it all the way to 2010 before a contract dispute that caused him to sit out broke his streak. It was a miserable dose of reality for a kid whose work ethic was his proudest attribute.

"It was tough," Mankins said. "But once I came back it was like nothing ever happened."

By then he was a Pro Bowl regular who stayed true to his valley roots. When the NFL arranged for a pig hunt in Hawaii, Mankins enthusiastically participated, gleefully returning to his luxury hotel donned in a blood-soaked T-shirt while horrified guests gasped.

"I can see it now," Andruzzi said. "Lots of blood and a big smile."

Andruzzi serves as a part-time strength coach for the Patriots during the offseason and maintains Mankins is one of the "top guys in the weight room."

His results on the close grip bench press have been unmatched, as well as the subsequent chest presses he piles on top of that. Lead by example, Mankins said, when asked about the limits to which he subjects his body.

"I have more responsibilities now," Mankins said. "Everyone is always looking to you.

"If you want to take a day off because you're beat to hell, you don't, because you don't want them to follow."

The line has been solid, though Mankins maintains there are "plenty of plays we'd like back," particularly during a bruising loss to San Francisco.

They have a close group, he said. He has hosted barbecues at his home for his line the way Light and Koppen did for him.

Mankins isn't big on discussing his legacy or his place among Patriots greats.

"The best thing I've ever heard another player say is, 'I hate playing against you,'" he shrugged.

Bruschi was reviewing the game tape of the first Patriots-Texans game and noticed something he hadn't before. It was Mankins, who wasn't just blocking his own guy, but shoving some additional Texans to the turf, whether they were his assignment or not.

"So we're saying that for two years now he hasn't been right physically, but he's still pushing guys all over the place," Bruschi said.

The man they liken to a mountain, a rock, some nails and a piece of boot leather knows the shadows of time are inching closer, and no matter how tough, how strong, and how disciplined he remains, there is an end to all of this.

He will be 31 in March. He figures he's got some good years left, but he has been to two Super Bowls and come up empty both times.

"It's tough," Mankins admitted. "You only get so many opportunities. Hopefully this is the year."

Ask Bruschi what word he'd use to describe his friend, and he doesn't hesitate.

"A tractor," Bruschi said. "A green and yellow John Deere tractor."

The tractor has been under repair, but it's up and running again. Logan Mankins may be evolving, but he's still a guy who favors T-shirts soaked in pig's blood, a flat-out country tough guard who plows on in search of a ring like the ones his old pals from the line already have.

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## **DB Devin McCourty**



### **McCourty is the hot corner for the Pats**

By Glen Farley

Posted Aug 16, 2011

FOXBORO — Competitive type that he is, Devin McCourty entered his first NFL season with expectations.

Then he went out and exceeded them.

"(You're) expecting to always do well as a player, as a competitor," the Patriots second-year cornerback said, "but I don't think anyone can imagine coming in and having that kind of year. So I'm just trying to get better and build on that."

The foundation he laid was indeed impressive.

After all, McCourty played to rave reviews.

"He was tremendous," said Kyle Arrington, who joined with McCourty to form the Patriots' starting tandem at cornerback last season. "To be able to come in that young and be asked to do what he did, you really can't put into words (the manner in which he performed). I really can't commend him enough."

The 27th overall pick in the 2010 NFL Draft, McCourty emerged from Rutgers to perform at a level his rookie year that made him worthy of mention alongside Mike Haynes and Ty Law, the greatest cornerbacks of Patriots past.

A starter from Day One, McCourty tied Pittsburgh's Troy Polamalu and Patriots-turned-Philadelphia Eagles cornerback Asante Samuel with seven interceptions, second in the league only to Baltimore ball hawk Ed Reed's eight. The total was also the second most by a rookie in Patriots history to the eight passes Haynes stole in the first year (1976) of his Hall of Fame career.

Selected to the Pro Bowl, McCourty became just the fourth rookie in Patriots history to earn that honor, following in the footsteps of Haynes, John Stephens (1988) and Curtis Martin (1995) before him.

Haynes' footsteps took him straight to Canton, Ohio, a fact not lost on McCourty, who strives to be what his predecessor from another football era was.

"He's a Hall of Fame corner so I don't think anybody that's played this game can not have an appreciation for guys like that," McCourty said following another day of practice at the Patriots' Gillette Stadium training complex. "I was thankful to meet him and get to talk to him."

"Getting a chance to meet Mike Haynes after one of the games and talking to him for a little while, I think that's the beauty about playing this game. When you get those opportunities to meet the players before you that have broken records and have made a name for themselves, when you kind of follow in their footsteps, get a chance to meet them and talk to them, I think that's one of the great opportunities you have playing in this league."

McCourty's appreciation for the game's history began at an early age.

"I won't say I patterned (my game after other cornerbacks)," said McCourty, "but I watched all the greats."

"When Deion (Sanders) was playing and Darrell Green was playing for years down there in Washington, (I watched them). (I remember) watching Rod Woodson, all those great guys. I was a big Cowboys fan so watching Larry Brown and all those guys compete and go against different receivers, that's where it all started for me playing the cornerback position - just having that competitive mindset to go out there and just compete."

Now, McCourty aims to continue what he started, hoping to transform the sudden impact he made in 2010 into prolonged consistency for years to come.



"The kid, he does everything right," said Matthew Slater, the Patriots' special teams standout who doubles as a wide receiver on the side. "I really respect him and I'm happy to be his teammate. He's got some great God-given ability and tries to do everything he can."

"I feel like I can still learn so much at this cornerback position and as a player," said McCourty, "so I came in kind of anxious to learn more having a vet back in Leigh (Bodden, who missed all of last season with a rotator cuff injury) and a bunch of guys coming back. We have a bunch of corners that have played in this league so I think each day we're trying to get better, having that same approach each day."

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## TE Matthew Mulligan



### **Football journey: Matthew Mulligan**

By Mike Reiss  
September 14, 2013

Every Saturday, the “football journey” of one New England Patriots player will be highlighted as part of a regular feature.

This week, tight end Matthew Mulligan is in the spotlight. He was signed as a free agent Sept. 3, released by the team two days later, then re-signed Sept. 10.

He played 10 snaps in Thursday's 13-10 victory over the New York Jets, used mostly as a blocker.

Mulligan has a different-from-the-norm journey in the sense that he didn't play football Penobscot Valley (Maine) High School because there was no team. The 28-year-old comes across as down-to-earth and appreciative of his unexpected success in playing in the NFL.

**When he first started playing football:** “I guess it really depends on how you define it. My first opportunity was in my sophomore year at Husson College. But they didn't require much of me, really. They basically said, ‘Run out and we'll throw you the ball.’ As far as blocking went, it was just ‘kind of get in front of someone.’ I was thankful for the opportunity, but I always attribute, really, that I first started playing football my junior year of college [at Maine]. I played two years there.”

**Recollections of attending Husson College:** “When I first got there, I went to play basketball, for coach Warren Caruso and then after that I played for Gabby Price. It was a great opportunity to get my feet wet playing football and just kind of grow up a little bit. You're still young at 18 and 19 years old.”

**How he got into football at Husson:** “My cousin's friend had been pushing me for a while, ever since he had met me when I was 13 years old. He was saying, ‘Look, you're playing the wrong sport. You need to play football.’ But we didn't have it at my high school, so I just played soccer and basketball. When I was at Husson my sophomore year, he called Gabby Price and said ‘You should go talk to this kid. He should be playing football.’ I don't know if I ever would have played, because I was comfortable playing basketball and everything. He kind of went around me and did it anyways, and Gabby came and talked to me. I always wanted to play football, but basketball was my first love and I wasn't going to jeopardize that. When Gabby Price came to talk to me, I've been real thankful since then. That's how it got started.”

**Top memories at University of Maine, where he played in 21 games (18 starts):** “Catching my first touchdown. Being on local television, people talking about that, it was a great experience. Just initially getting there, and the type of atmosphere that coach [Jack] Cosgrove has up there, it's a good place. I'm from the area anyways, and that's the big program in our state. So it was just an all-around amazing experience.”

**Favorite football players growing up:** “I can remember loving Emmitt Smith. Not playing football, I didn't really know the positions, I just knew who the big names were. Troy Aikman, Michael Irvin, Charles Haley.”

**Signing as an undrafted free agent with the Dolphins in 2008:** “Very difficult. The learning curve was so steep, having really no football experience besides Maine, going to a different offense. Maine did a really good job of catering to my strengths, and trying to bring me along. Once you get into the NFL, they're like, ‘Either you can do it or you can't.’ The tight-end group I had down there was a really good group -- Anthony Fasano, Justin Peelle, David Martin, Sean Ryan. They really did a good job with me, but it was tough -- the heat, I'm a Maine boy and was in Miami. The temperature difference was crazy for me. Just the whole experience, it was difficult, but at the same time I was thankful to go through it because it's made everything a whole lot easier, too.”

**Landing with the Tennessee Titans' practice squad and staying with them through 2009 training camp:** “Jeff Fisher is a tremendous coach. The tight ends that were there -- Alge Crumpler was a great leader and I learned a lot from him blocking-wise. That's when I really felt like I started to work on my craft, being able to watch him. Also with

the other tight ends that were there, one of my close buddies Craig Stevens, who is still there. That was a good learning experience, seeing another side of football, because the way Jeff runs his camp is different than most."

**Signing with the Jets in Rex Ryan's first year as coach in 2009 and spending three seasons there:** "I really owe a lot to them because they really gave me my first shot -- keeping me for three years and grooming me. I was behind Ben Hartsock and he taught me a lot about being a professional. It was awesome. My best friend, Mike DeVito, played there. He and I lived together when I first got there and it helped me transition."

**After becoming a free agent in 2012, signing with the Rams:** "[Former Jets offensive coordinator Brian] Schottenheimer was there and I felt like it was too good of an opportunity to pass up to go with him. I knew the offense and he's been great to me. That was one of my most fun years in athletics in general, just being there with those guys, and the camaraderie we had."

**Signing with the Packers as a free agent:** "My agent [Kristen Kuliga] had a lot of teams calling and it came down to Green Bay and the 49ers. We felt like Green Bay was the best decision and I wouldn't change anything. Things didn't necessarily play out the way we wanted, but it's a very stand-up organization, a lot of history, with a great head coach in Mike McCarthy and a great tight-ends coach in Jerry Fontenot. The players over there, it's almost like a college atmosphere there. They really accepted me."

**Getting released after training camp and hooking on with the Patriots:** "I didn't expect it, but you never know who is looking at you. The news was out before I had actually signed and everybody in Maine was blowing up my phone. It was just awesome. When they called, I was really happy because it's basically like coming home. I know a lot of people. Obviously, it's a fantastic organization and a chance to further my career."

**Role models in his life:** "My parents. Still to this day I run everything by them, what my wife and I do -- big decisions. Also, my church family. I've had a great pastor my entire life as well. That type of stuff, when you have people you can trust and lean upon, I feel like I've been very fortunate and blessed -- to not just have a great set of parents and a brother but also a great church [community]."

**What he loves about football:** "Sometimes it can be the most difficult thing, but sometimes it can be the most rewarding thing. You can always get better. There is not a day where you're coming in to play football and you say, 'I have it all down today.' Technique, your plays, your sharpness, there's always a way to get better and I feel that stimulates your mind. The ceiling is as far as you can push yourself."

**Summing up his football journey with numerous stops along the way:** "I joke with my wife that it's her fault, because she said she always wanted to travel the country; that's what God is doing to us, putting us all over the place. I just feel really blessed to have an opportunity to play for so many different teams and meet so many great teammates. There is something to be said about a guy who is good enough and respected enough that the team loves him to stay in one place. But I wouldn't change what's happened to me."

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## DL Rob Ninkovich

# The Boston Globe

### **A niche for Ninkovich**

**Given the opportunity, he has carved out his place on Patriot defense**

By Michael Whitmer

January 19, 2012

FOXBOROUGH - Unable to stay healthy, unwanted by not one but two franchises, Rob Ninkovich headed for New England 2 1/2 years ago, wondering whether the hourglass on his NFL career was down to the last few grains of sand.

Funny what can happen in a few short years. Signed by the Patriots on Aug. 2, 2009, as a failed long snapper with some untapped defensive skills, Ninkovich has authored a textbook tale of maximizing opportunity.

The last time the Ravens played the Patriots in the playoffs, Ninkovich saw the field on only a handful of special teams plays. When the Ravens return to Gillette Stadium this Sunday for the AFC Championship game, the 27-year-old linebacker might take a few special teams plays off, but not much else.

He is the poster boy for a maligned defense: Considered by some not big enough, fast enough, or good enough, Ninkovich has kept working and progressing, despite the skeptics. Now he is a win away from playing in the Super Bowl.

Safe to say he has exceeded expectations - both his and the team's. It's apparent the Patriots needed a player like Ninkovich. It's even more apparent that he needed a team like the Patriots. It has been a perfect match.

"My expectations? I wanted to stay in the NFL," he said. "I didn't want to be out of the league, so I knew that this was one of my biggest opportunities I could ever have for staying in the NFL, because I knew I was close to getting out.

"I was almost out as a long snapper, so I came here willing to do anything, as long as I was playing.

"I knew I had all the skills to play in the league, but there's a lot of luck and opportunity involved in playing, so I came here and was given an opportunity, and made it the best."

Taken by the Saints in the fifth round of the 2006 draft, Ninkovich bounced between New Orleans and Miami for the first four years of his career. Waived by the Saints. Claimed by the Dolphins. Waived by the Dolphins. Claimed by the Saints. Waived by the Saints. Two season-ending knee injuries and questions about where he fit in best - long snapper? linebacker? edge rusher? - hampered his cause.

He appealed to the Patriots, though, because they were looking for someone who could do a variety of things. A contributor initially on special teams, Ninkovich has steadily been asked to do more. Over time, he has become invaluable, playing more snaps on defense this year (980, according to ProFootballFocus.com) than any Patriot not named Wilfork, Arrington, or McCourty.

"He'd been with a couple different teams in the league," said coach Bill Belichick, "and we felt that in our system maybe he had a chance to do more versatile things, rather than just zeroing in on one specific thing like rushing or covering, but a combination of those, plus playing in the kicking game, and he's really done that.

"He's contributed for us on first down, second down, third down, and fourth down since he's been here. He's been a very versatile guy. Smart, hard-working, tough kid, really dependable.

"He's out there for us every day and works hard, does a great job of doing whatever role we ask him to do, whether it's on the punt team or kickoff-return team or goal line or rush the passer or jam the tight ends. We've asked him to do so many different things. He's really embraced those roles."

That's not hollow praise from Belichick. The team gave Ninkovich a two-year contract extension back in September, a deal that will keep him in a Patriots uniform through the 2013 season, and pay him nearly \$4 million.

Ninkovich reacted to the new deal by having his best season. He had a career-best 62 tackles, forced a fumble, recovered two, and was one of only two players in the NFL with at least six sacks (he had 6 1/2) and two interceptions.

The other? Baltimore's Terrell Suggs, who will be on the opposite sideline Sunday.

To many, Ninkovich's rise from fringe special teamer to reliable defensive starter might be a surprise. To others, especially those who draw paychecks from the Patriots, it's about finding the right player for the right spot.

"It's all about development with players, and you see it time and time again in the New England system, players stepping up and taking those strides, and he's one of those guys," said former linebacker Willie McGinest, who spent 12 of his 15 seasons in the NFL with the Patriots.

"I think he's a smart guy, he can make big plays, and he gets after it. He can rush the ball, he can drop into coverage.

"It just doesn't happen overnight for everybody. If you look at what he's done, he's progressed every year, and Bill trusts him enough to give him that opportunity to go in there and play."

Said Nick Caserio, the Patriots' director of player personnel: "With Rob, it was just a matter of opportunity. He came here and he took advantage of his opportunities and I think he's improved on a daily basis. Rob takes a lot of pride in what he does and he's got ability. He works at his craft."

He has been motivated to work when others would have abandoned the journey long ago. No Division 1 school initially offered Ninkovich a scholarship, so he went to a junior college. When he transferred to Purdue, the Boilermakers didn't offer him a scholarship right away, and didn't even have him playing defense.

Once drafted, failed stints with the Saints and Dolphins never damaged the dream, as dark as those days were.

He is here now, focused not on where he has been but on where he wants his team to go.

"You've just got to take every day as a great day to prepare for what you have to do on Sunday," said Ninkovich, who turns 28 Feb. 1, the Wednesday of Super Bowl week. "I'm going to be excited to play Sunday, and I'm happy that we're there, but the big picture is to win this game and be able to continue.

"You really can't think about what's beyond this game, because you have to win this game or else you're not going to go there."

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## RB Stevan Ridley



### **On the Fast Track**

**The Pats sprint forward with running back Steven Ridley.**

By Christopher Price

August 2013

Being the lead running back in a Tom Brady-led offense is the NFL equivalent of entering the witness protection program. Even though he's now well into his 30s, Brady remains the face of the franchise, and his star wattage overshadows just about any offensive player who might hitch himself to the Patriots' wagon.

Running back Stevan Ridley aims to break those stereotypes. The LSU product, entering his third season with the Patriots, emerged as a breakout star on offense last season, finishing with 1,263 rushing yards (seventh in the league) and coming within 10 carries of being the first New England running back to hit the 300-carry plateau since Corey Dillon did it back in 2004.

Known as a dynamic runner, the 5-foot-11 220-pounder combines elusiveness and power, and in his relatively short NFL career, he's enjoyed an almost unprecedented run of success in the New England offense. The only back in Patriots history who had a better season than Ridley before the age of 24 was future Hall of Famer Curtis Martin (1,487 yards in 1995 at the age of 22).

Of course, you can't approach Ridley with the same preconceived ideas you have about most running backs. The first sign you're dealing with an individual comes with his sense of style. In 2012, he introduced the Patriots' locker room to the onesie, and posted a picture on Facebook of the entire running back crew rocking the unusual fashion choice. In January, he took it a step beyond that when he showed up in the locker room in his personalized blue onesie and gold-studded backpack.

On a team in which fashions swing between extremes—hunting boots and barn jackets for offensive linemen, throwback Zubaz for Rob Gronkowski, the finest European designer duds for Brady—Ridley makes a unique statement. He says he draws on his Southern “country boy” roots for inspiration.

“I’m not really worried about what the next man says or what anybody says—I just go with what I like,” Ridley says. “I think that’s something that’s always been a part of me. I’m comfortable being myself and the way my mom raised me. Just go out there and be who you are. And as long as you’re confident with yourself, that’s all you have to worry about.”

His philosophy can be summed up thusly: As long as it's OK with his mother, Carolyn, it's OK with him.

“She’s a Christian lady and she raised me in the church,” he says with a grin. “As long as God is the head of my life, I’m good. I’m not worried about what anyone else says who is walking the earth.”

Ridley, who was born in Mississippi, spent his formative years in the South and admits it took some time to get used to New England winters. With help from his family and teammates (including next-door neighbor and fellow running back Shane Vereen), he's started to settle in, finally adjusting to the snow and wintry conditions. Maybe it's the rainbow moon boots he was seen sporting late last season: In a locker room where UGGs are pretty much par for the course (thanks to the quarterback, who routinely provides complimentary pairs for his teammates), Ridley again stands out.

“I just have fun with it, man,” he says. “If I think it's cool or if it's off the wall, then most likely, I'll probably have it on. To me, it's just living life.”

Like most 24-year-olds with fame and fortune, Ridley likes to have fun. Apart from his adventures in couture, he's an enthusiast of interacting with fans via Twitter. But he's also well aware of the job at hand. Entering this season, Ridley's challenges include one that would separate him from every other back who played for Bill Belichick: In his 18 years as a head coach in the NFL (13 with the Patriots and five with the Browns), Belichick has had some truly elite running backs, like Dillon, but he's never had a running back finish with at least 1,000 rushing yards in back-to-back

seasons. After his 1,263 yards in 2012, Ridley has a chance to be the first. It's something he's ruminated on over the course of the offseason.

"Going to back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons was actually a goal I set for myself at the beginning of the year," he says. "It's something I'm going to come in here and work hard to be. [Belichick is] one of the great all-time coaches, and I'm honored to be playing for him. It's something I'd like to do, to set a goal of my own, but also for the team. And then, for him as well."

Ridley seems modest. "I haven't said anything to [Belichick about the stat], out of respect for the kind of coach that he is. He'd rather me just come out here and do it instead of talking about it... and then it not happening. So I'm just going to come out here and work hard every day and try and put myself in a position to go out there and execute and get a good number for the team."

He should have even more opportunities this year, as the New England offense underwent an extreme makeover during the offseason: Four of the top five pass catchers from 2012 (Wes Welker, Brandon Lloyd, Aaron Hernandez and Danny Woodhead) are gone, and the fifth (Rob Gronkowski) will likely open the season on the sidelines because of offseason surgeries on his back and forearm.

That will mean more work for Ridley and the rest of the backs, particularly right out of the gate. Three of the first six teams the Patriots face this year include some of the worst run-defenses in the league from last season. So, while they wait for Gronkowski to return and all of the rest of the disparate parts of the passing game to come together, New England could open in a run-heavy set the likes of which we haven't seen since Dillon and the Patriots ground out wins on a regular basis in 2004.

"We really just come out here and do our job," Ridley says. "There's going to be a spotlight on Brady. But our deal is this: If we can go out there as a unit and we can get defenses something else they have to respect, it takes pressure off Brady to be the quarterback that he is. It's hard to execute when you have 11 people zoning in on you on the field. So it's just our job to go out there, as Coach says, and do our job. Be productive on the ground, through the air and picking up blockers and blitzers as well."

Practicality is the expected mantra from a Belichick player, and Ridley is no exception. "If it's playing in the shadows, then so be it. We're just going to get it done on the ground and do whatever this team needs us to do."

It hasn't all been moon boots and rushing milestones. Ridley has had his fair share of growing pains in the New England system: He got a late start on his rookie offseason because of the 2011 lockout, and ended up sitting and biding time behind starter BenJarvus Green-Ellis for much of the year. As a backup, he had issues with ball security, and didn't play in the Super Bowl that season. More fumble problems popped up when he assumed the starting role last year, including one in the AFC title game against the Ravens after a nasty helmet-to-helmet collision with Baltimore safety Bernard Pollard.

So he counts improved ball security among his goals for 2013. "Every year, you have to improve. If you're not improving, you're falling behind," he says. "I follow the people in front of me, our coaching staff and my QB. So I follow the leaders I have, and if I can follow in their way, I'll be all right."

Humble words, but Ridley now stands poised to lead the crew of backs. This includes his neighbor Shane Vereen (who will likely be asked to do many of the things that Woodhead did the last couple of years) and youngster Brandon Bolden, along with veteran additions Leon Washington and LeGarrette Blount.

"I think in the running back room, we know we have a lot more experience now," he says. "We're a year older. Not to say we've made it or we're close to where we need to be yet, but with the experience comes confidence."

It's confidence backed up by Ridley's emphasis on that most Patriot of virtues. On the factor that won the team its championships. On what makes them great. On teamwork.

Despite being such a classic individualist, Ridley sums it up this way: "We rely on each other."

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## CB Logan Ryan

# SUN CHRONICLE

### **Patriot rookie not so green**

**Ryan has come a long way**

By Mark Farinella

January 2, 2014

FOXBORO - There's a feeling in professional football locker rooms that once you've played a full regular season, you're not a rookie any more.

"I don't think anyone's a rookie any more once you've got that many games under your belt," said Patriots' cornerback Logan Ryan, who's come a long way since he stepped on a pro football field for the first time back in September.

Ryan, who leads the team with five interceptions, will likely see a lot of action when the Patriots begin their playoff quest a week from Saturday at Gillette Stadium against a yet-to-be-determined opponent. With Alfonzo Dennard still limited with a knee injury, Ryan has become a frequent option for regular shifts as opposed to simply being inserted in nickel or dime coverage packages.

Ryan, a native of Voorhees, N.J., and a member of the significant Rutgers contingent on the Patriots' roster, said he feels the difference between now and when he was legitimately a raw rookie.

"I just feel like I'm in a rhythm," he said. "It's the same routine, week in and week out. This is my first year that I can focus solely on football and not have to worry about school, and I don't have to worry about other things like that. I think that helps out a lot, too.

"It's a job now," he said. "That's how I approach it each and every day, I wake up and go to work."

The 5-foot-11, 195-pounder said he has figured out, from personal observation and the friendly advice of others, that the intensity takes a big step up when the games become single-elimination in nature.

"Football is football," Ryan said, "but everything's more important in the postseason. You want to make sure you have your best game, but at the end of the day, it's still football.

"I would say there's more focus, but to play for this organization, you've got to be really focused and very detail-oriented. It just goes along with being a Patriot," he said.

Among the veterans that have tried to spread the message of what to expect in the playoffs are a few that were injured and sidelined earlier in the season, like Vince Wilfork and Jerod Mayo.

"That says it all," Ryan said. "That says a lot about that those guys who are on (injured reserve) but they stick around the locker room still, giving advice to young guys like me. It shows the chemistry of this team and it shows the standards of a Vince Wilfork and a Jerod Mayo, that they uphold. You don't want to let them down."

The bye week has been dedicated to self-scouting, and Ryan said he certainly needed to review his performance and improve what needed to be improved.

"I had some good plays throughout the year, but also had some bad plays, some I wish I could get back," he said. "So I'm going to try to tighten that up and limit the bad plays through the postseason.

"The bye week's been good," he added. "We've been improving each and every day and have been looking back at what we did, what we need to work on, and we're trying to fix that stuff up."

Some players won't be watching this weekend's televised playoff games, but Ryan said he'll be parked in front of the TV on both days.

"I'm going to watch all of them," he said. "I'm a football fan first and foremost. So I'll watch all the games and definitely all the teams we can end up playing, so it'll definitely be interesting."



## **DL Sealver Siliga**



### **Family support carries Sealver Siliga**

By Mark Daniels

January 11, 2014

FOXBORO — The TV was on, but he couldn't bear to watch. Too painful.

For Sealver Siliga, the NFL highlights on ESPN only made the feeling worse. Seeing the game reinforced the idea that nobody in the game wanted him. And during a time where he was surrounded by family, Siliga, for a moment, felt all alone.

The defensive tackle was released by the Seattle Seahawks on Oct. 4. He moved back into his parents' home in West Jordan, Utah. And after multiple tryouts, he hopelessly waited over the next three weeks for a call.

"It (hurt) every day. It got to a point where I didn't even want to watch ESPN or anything just because it reminded me," Siliga said. "When that happened, it really hit home. Like, nobody wants me. That really was tough."

In 2012, he nearly made it. Siliga was on the Denver Broncos' active roster, but appeared in just one game. It was a step up from 2011, which he spent on the team's practice squad.

Now, he was out of football. It tested his patience and will. Before the Patriots signed him on Oct. 24, Siliga had too much to lose to give up. He couldn't let it end. Not with what his family's been through.

All he had to do was think about his mother, Sinatala, who worked night and day to support her kids. Or what his family suffered in San Bernardino, Calif., and the gang culture that swallowed up his five older brothers.

"All the strength I have (is from my family)," Siliga, 23, said. "I'd be lying if I'd say I'd do this all alone. I couldn't have done this all alone. If it was just me, I would have quit a long time ago."

### **Band of brothers**

There's 634 miles between San Bernardino and West Jordan, Utah, a location that was perfect for Sinatala and Siala Siliga. They wanted better for their family and their youngest, Sealver, who was 1 when West Jordan gave them a place to practice their Mormon faith. It also gave them a chance to escape the city that nearly tore everything apart.

Both parents came to America from Pago Pago, American Samoa, looking for opportunity, but got more than they bargained for in the gang-enriched San Bernardino Valley. By the time they made the move, all five of their oldest sons were entrenched in the gang lifestyle. Two with devastating consequences.

"One of my brothers is in prison for life and the other has passed away," said Siliga. "The late '80s, early '90s, the gang lifestyle in California was on the rise big time. My parents were like, 'Let's go to Utah. There are no gang problems over there.'"

Siliga never had to look far to see what his life would be like if he made poor choices. He grew up watching his three other brothers — Michael, Sofa and Mo — get out of the lifestyle, and he's also stayed in contact with his imprisoned brother.

"I write letters and stuff and that's probably the closest I've gotten to him. I haven't seen him since I was 1 year old," Siliga said. "He's been in there a long time. He's the second oldest. He got caught up deep in the lifestyle and it put him behind bars for life. He's in there for some bad stuff."

Michael, Sofa and Mo, who range from 15-20 years older than Sealver, didn't want their younger brother to make the same mistakes.

"Seeing what they went through, it put a guideline in front of me," Siliga said. "So I mean, I do this, this is going to happen. If I do the opposite, who knows what's going to happen?"

## Moving time

Going to Utah didn't solve everything.

Siliga's father, who seriously injured both knees, was unable to work so his mother supported a house of seven. Working day and night at Shafter Beverages, she put clothes on her children's backs and food on their table. She worked so much there were days Siliga didn't see her. So when it came to football, Siliga worked hard in hopes he could support his family.

University of Utah head coach Kyle Whittingham described Siliga as the type of player a college coach dreams of having. The defensive tackle worked hard to lose 60 pounds so he could play as a true freshman. He quickly became a leader and a force.

"He was really a motivated, driven individual and really wanted to succeed," Whittingham said. "He had a burning desire to succeed."

## Taking advantage

That desire was fueled by his family's hard times. After his junior year, Siliga turned pro to help his loved ones financially.

"They had some struggles. There's no doubt," Whittingham said. "And that's part of the reason Sealver decided to come out early. One of the primary reasons was so he could help out his family and try to give them some support."

Siliga earned an opportunity with the Patriots after injuries to Vince Wilfork and Tommy Kelly. He made the most out of it, finishing with 23 tackles and three sacks in five games. Tonight, he'll make his postseason debut against the Colts.

It wasn't easy to get to this point, but Siliga knew if his family could fight through the hard times, so could he.

"It helped me with dedication," Siliga said. "Even when things look hard, knowing that if I keep pushing, it'll work out."



## Football journey: Sealver Siliga

By Mike Reiss

December 14, 2013

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Second-year defensive tackle Sealver Siliga stands out for both his size (6-foot-2, 325 pounds) and unique name.

After earning his first extended opportunity to play in the NFL last Sunday against the Cleveland Browns, he's now hoping most to stand out for his play.

Siliga, who joined the Patriots' practice squad on Oct. 23 and was promoted to the active roster on Nov. 27, started at nose tackle and did some positive things which caught the eye of coach Bill Belichick.

"I think he's a hard-working kid. He's improved a lot since he's been here," Belichick said. "Some of the things we've asked him to do are a little bit different than what he's been doing, but he's adapted pretty quickly. He's spent a lot of extra time here, working on his technique and some conditioning in the weight room.

"I thought he hung in there and played real competitively last week against Cleveland. Obviously, he's a young guy [23] and there is a long way to go, but I thought he definitely did a lot of positive things."

The Patriots are Siliga's fourth NFL team in three seasons as he entered the league with the 49ers in the lockout-shortened offseason of 2011, and later landed with the Broncos and Seahawks. That naturally affected his development, but it's possible he's finally found a home in New England.

Born in West Jordan, Utah, and one of 11 children, his unique first name is part of being a Latter Day Saint. He explained that his aunt and uncle were sealed in a temple, and Sealver is a combination of “seal” and “forever.”

He shares his football journey:

**When he first started playing football:** “At the age of 9. I was a real active kid, a chubby kid growing up, and I had an old brother who saw my big body and was like, ‘You stay home too much. I’m going to sign you up for football.’”

**First positions:** “O-line and D-line.”

**Top memories at Cooper Hills High School:** “The school wasn’t known for its football team. My freshman year, we had five [wins] and that was the best record we ever had in school history. But I grew up with all those kids and played Little League with them, so by the time you get to high school, we’d known each other our whole lives and the biggest memories are from hanging out in the offseason and before and after everything.”

**Enrolling at Utah to play football:** “I was a big fan of [defensive coordinator] Gary Andersen, who is now the head coach at Wisconsin. He was one of the biggest reasons I committed to Utah, and also for my parents and how costly it would have been for them to come watch me play [out of state]. It was either there or some of the California schools, or Oregon State.”

**Favorite memories at Utah:** “I had so many. Probably the biggest thing is how Coach [Kyle] Whittingham controlled our football team. The way he recruited – one-third white, one-third brown, one-third black – and he made sure we never sat by color. We got to know each other and it got to the point where everyone was involved with each other, and we were all friends with each other. You got to know a lot of different backgrounds and we were all there for one purpose.”

**Starting 21 of 37 games while recording 97 tackles and 2.5 sacks:** “We were real good. My first year, we went to the Sugar Bowl and smashed [Don’t a] Hightower’s [Alabama] team [laughing]. We never went under 10 wins when I was there.”

**Entering the NFL in 2011 after his junior season, a decision which surprised some, and landing with the 49ers as an undrafted free agent:** “That was a good learning experience. I was thrown right into the fire, almost like you are thrown to the wolves and you have to fight your way back out. All I knew was college, and that was the year of the lockout, so it wasn’t like we had [organized team activities in the offseason]. Learning from [defensive lineman] Isaac Sopoaga, [fullback] Will Tukuafu and all them – after I got released, that really helped me. As bad as it hurt to get cut, I knew what to expect. I knew what to fight for.”

**Signed to the Broncos’ practice squad in October of 2011 and playing one game in Denver over two seasons:** “I loved it out there. That’s a great organization and that was a great experience. I met a lot of great people over there as well – Ty Warren, who used to be here [in New England], he was a big impact on me. I’d ask him questions all the time. In the locker room, it was Elvis Dumervil, Ty Warren and me, so I’m sitting there watching these two older guys and learning from them. Kevin Vickerson ... Justin Bannan ... there were a lot of guys to learn from.”

**Traded to the Seahawks in August of 2013:** “We had played [Seattle] two days before; that was rough. When I got traded, you’re thinking, ‘I’m good. I’ll be playing for this team.’ But then I got released and put on practice squad. Then I got released again. Then I got signed to the practice squad again, before getting released again [Oct. 4]. From that point on, it was a journey again of basically putting my nose down and working, hoping for the best but planning for the worst. I’ve been through it, so I knew what to expect.”

**Signing with the Patriots’ practice squad in October of 2013:** “I had worked out other places and came here; I was privileged that they gave me the opportunity to show them what I can do. It was a great feeling. It’s been great. I’ve been treated well. This organization speaks for itself and I’m blessed to be a part of it.”

**Role models in his life:** “Definitely my parents. I’m LDS [Latter Day Saint], so I’m big with my Heavenly Father. And then in football, players like Isaac Sopoaga, Ty Warren, Elvis Dumervil ... guys I’ve always asked questions to and they’ve never shied away from them, always reaching out their hand to help.”

**Favorite teams/players growing up:** “I didn’t watch that much football growing up, but I was a big Steve Young fan, being from Utah.”

**What he loves about football:** “The game is a brotherhood. No matter if you’re playing high school, college, the NFL, it brings a bunch of men from different places together. There aren’t a lot of jobs you can do, where at the end

of the day it's game-time and there is one purpose and no one puts themselves in front of anyone else. That's pretty cool."

**Summing up his football journey:** "In the process. I'm still not where I want to be. So it's in the process and still fighting to become what I want to be. I have a lot of work to do."

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## WR Matthew Slater

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots' Matthew Slater got work ethic from his father**

By Shalise Manza Young  
January 6, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — The game is violent, made for large men like him, and carrying his name onto a football field would be a burden.

Or so the father thought.

As Jackie and Annie Slater raised their two sons in the Anaheim, Calif., area, they tried their best to steer them away from football. Jackie coached their older son, Matthew, at the YMCA, introducing him to soccer, baseball, and basketball.

But when they weren't at the Y, young Matthew went with his father to work, at the Los Angeles Rams practice facility. After his father ran, Matthew ran. When his father was in the weight room, Matthew watched, his wrists taped so he looked the part.

While his father was putting in all the hours necessary to stay on the field, to rehab from injuries, to honor the game he loved, Matthew had a front-row seat.

Jackie Slater, a 6-foot-4-inch offensive lineman, was with the Rams for 20 seasons. A third-round pick out of Jackson State in his native Mississippi in 1976, he didn't become the starting right tackle until his fourth season. Once he took over the job, however, it was a long time before he surrendered it.

Matthew was born at the start of the 1985 season, midway through what was a Hall of Fame career for his father.

Jackie never intended that the time Matthew spent with him at the Rams facility would be on-the-job training.

"It was a really hard way for me to go, and it was very physical and very demanding, and I was a big guy, I was always a big guy, and I have always felt football is a big man's game," Jackie said.

"I saw that he was going to be a little man and there was very little I was going to be able to help him with as a smaller player. I didn't know enough about the skill positions to teach him and help him and so I just kind of discouraged him away from it.

"To be perfectly honest with you, I just didn't think that he was going to be cut out to play the sport."

Matthew was smaller than his father — though, of course, most men are. But he was fast. And he loved the game his father played, in spite of Jackie's reluctance. He begged his parents to let him take up football.

"My dad did everything in his power when I was young for me not to play," Matthew said. "I think part of that was he didn't want me to feel the pressure of living up to being 'Jackie Slater's son' and secondly he didn't want me to get injured because he understands this is a dangerous game and he wanted his son to be healthy.

"But what he didn't know is he was the reason I wanted to play. Because even talking to my dad now, you hear him tell the stories of when he played, he still loves the game so much. You can see it in his eyes, and that was kind of contagious for my brother and I — what is this game that's bringing so much joy and passion in my dad?"

Eventually, the Slaters relented.

### **From Bruin to Patriot**

Annie Slater isn't sure when Matthew started excelling at football. He was a stellar student at Servite High, the top-notch all-boys Catholic school he attended, and his college choice came down to two schools: UCLA, not far from home, or Dartmouth, an Ivy League college in the East.

He was a standout track athlete, tying for second in the 100 meters at the California Interscholastic Federation state meet in 10.67 seconds, and was part of a state-champion 4 x 100-meter relay team.

On the football field, though, he had modest numbers: 39 receptions for 707 yards as a senior. But he had enough tools that he was appealing to college programs. He settled on UCLA.

Slater was a versatile performer with the Bruins, playing at receiver, in the secondary, and on special teams. He had the most impact as a kickoff returner, obliterating the school's season record for kickoff-return yards in 2007 with 986 yards on 34 returns (a school-record 29.0 yards per return), with three of those going for touchdowns.

What former UCLA coach Karl Dorrell most remembers, however, is Slater's work ethic.

"His effort and how he did things, it stuck out like a sore thumb, so to speak," said Dorrell, now quarterbacks coach for the Houston Texans. "If you go through practice and scan everybody that was practicing, there was always one guy that was just going so much harder and so much faster than everyone else, and that was Matthew Slater.

"He just kind of stuck out that way."

When his career with the Bruins was over and the draft process began, Slater had no sense of what would happen for him. He had established himself as a special teams player, but he didn't know whether that would be enough to earn him a shot with an NFL team as a free agent, let alone receive a phone call telling him he'd been drafted.

If Dorrell had gotten his way, Slater would have been a Dolphin. After a 6-6 season in 2007, he was fired by his alma mater and wound up in Miami as receivers coach.

"He can do so many different things, and his effort and how he did things was really unmatched compared to what most people would do," Dorrell said. "I was trying to get [the Dolphins] to draft him because I felt that strongly about his ability."

But Miami didn't draft Slater. A surprise team, one that he'd had little to no contact with in the previous weeks, chose him in the fifth round: the New England Patriots.

"When you look back on it, it was a perfect fit because they appreciated guys like me around here and they still do," Slater said. "They view things a little bit differently in regards to special teams. So it was a perfect fit with the way my college career went for me to end up here."

His rookie season of 2008 is not one Slater remembers fondly. He struggled on the field, averaging just 14.1 yards on 11 kickoff returns, and off the field, the transition from college student to professional — far from his family and his familiar Southern California surroundings — was difficult as well.

And then came Scott O'Brien, the mustachioed, frenetic special teams coach the Patriots hired after Slater's rookie year, the yin to Slater's quiet yang.

O'Brien rebuilt Slater's confidence, believing in the young speedster, making him believe he could be a great player.

### **Appreciating the grind**

Jackie Slater believed that his son liked the grandeur of the game, that he enjoyed sitting in the stands with his mother and brother and seeing the Rams welcome different teams to Anaheim Stadium.

That was not the case.

"What I much later found out, the thing that had the biggest impact on him was, he'd watch me go through the grind, and I think the biggest thing that happened out of all that to him was he just learned to appreciate the underside of it, the mundane side of it, when nobody's watching and you just have to go to work and get yourself ready," said Jackie Slater.

"Those are some unique times, when we actually spent quite a bit of time together, when I was trying to retard the aging process and he saw that. He got up close and personal with the grind of the game, the hard work and everything that goes into it, the respect that you have to pay the game on a daily basis, the practices — that's the thing that he seemed to have remembered the most."

Matthew believes “95 percent of what I’ve learned as far as being a professional and how to work as a pro, and how to respect the game of football” came from his father.

“If there’s one thing I remember about my dad, it was his work ethic,” said Matthew. “As a little kid, going to Rams Park with him and watching him work out, and I didn’t understand why he was doing so much and why he put so much time into it, but as I got older, I began to realize why he was doing that and he always — even now — is talking to me about being a professional, what it means to be a pro, what it means to respect this game.

“This game owes none of us anything; we’re very privileged to be playing this game and we have to give it its just due in the way we prepare on the field and off the field so we’ll have no regrets at the end of the day. I got a lot of that from my dad.”

### **‘This is my craft’**

For most players, special teams is a means to an end: It’s a way to get on the field as a young player, with the hope of getting more snaps at your preferred position later in the season.

Though he practiced as a defensive back and receiver in his first years with the Patriots, Matthew Slater, now 6 feet and 198 pounds, at some point realized that special teams was his position, and he set his mind to excelling at his position.

“I can’t tell you how much I love this game of football,” he said. “This game has been really good to me and my family, and once I got on the field and was able to play, I really saw that hey, this is fun. I like doing this.

“I’m very competitive by nature. I want to be great at whatever it is I’m doing, it doesn’t matter if we’re playing tic-tac-toe.

“In college, when I would see guys not take special teams seriously, I would feel like they were slighting the game, like they weren’t respecting the game.

“This is a huge part of the game. It’s not a job, it’s my craft, and I want to be a master at my craft. It’s not just me coming in punching a clock, going from 9 to 5 and doing the bare minimum.

“This is my craft, I want to perfect it.”

Working on his own, working with O’Brien, Slater improved. He draws double-teams when he’s on the field, opponents doing whatever they can to keep him from making a tackle on punt coverage or kickoff coverage.

More times than not, he’s still the first player to get to the returner.

He has refined his craft to the point that he is considered by some the best special teams player in the NFL; last month, he was named to the Pro Bowl for the second straight year.

“There’s something that sets the elite apart from everybody else, at any position, and to me it’s really a desire and a passion that you have for what you do,” O’Brien said. “Not only understanding it and wanting to be good at it but wanting to be the best at what you do. And the positions he plays are the hard ones, so that’s a credit to Matt.”

“When I talk to my peers, other coaches from different teams across the league, and they come up and say, ‘Did you have Matthew Slater at UCLA?’ I’m excited to talk about him,” Dorrell said.

“I was very proud of what he did at UCLA but I’m even more proud of how he’s established himself with such a great reputation, and also to be recognized as really the best special teams player in the league, that says a lot.

“He’s a self-made man and he did a lot of that on his own because of how hard he works.”

For the father, who didn’t think his son was cut out for the game, who for a long time didn’t appreciate the work done by special teams players, seeing his son’s success is humbling.

“I always knew [special teams] was an important aspect of winning, it was just, in my heart of hearts, I didn’t value it as much as some of the other positions,” Jackie said. “It’s been humbling to watch my son go that route.

"This is the opportunity that he was given to get on the field at UCLA, this is the opportunity he was given to get in a training camp in the National Football League, it's the opportunity he's taken advantage of to make one of the best teams in the country, and it's the opportunity he's taken advantage of to distinguish himself as one of the best players in the best league in the world."

### **Proud of the burden**

When Matthew Slater steps onto the football field, it is with the last name of a Pro Football Hall of Fame player on his back.

He is glad he isn't an offensive lineman, with the burden of playing the same role his father did, with the expectations of playing it at the same level. There was pressure enough when he was younger to be like his father.

But Jackie raised him to be his own man, and on the football field he certainly is.

"It's hard because, no matter what I do, I'll always be the son of Jackie Slater," said Matthew. "But you know what, I'm OK with that. I'm OK with being the son of Jackie Slater because I am the son of Jackie Slater.

"But what I have to remember is I can't be him, I won't be him, I just have to be Matthew. He told me that at a young age, and even though at times I may struggle with that, I just have to be me and try to represent the name as well as I can."

On and off the field, he does.

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## OL Nate Solder

# The Boston Globe

### **Work ethic of Patriots' Nate Solder started at home**

By Julian Benbow  
JULY 25, 2012

LEADVILLE, Colo. — Look at Ed Solder's hands and you can see two decades of labor. They may have gotten into a fight or two with a hammer. The hammers may have won. The hands may have tried to strangle a screwdriver here and there. The screwdrivers obviously were resistant. Solder's hands are hardened in a way that he couldn't be more proud of.

There are dried flecks of blue paint on the outside of one of his hands, near his pinkie, a sign of the work being done around mid-July, the installation of insulation from the outside of the 10-room Victorian home, and the repainting of side panels.

The house, a soft blue with louder pink trim, is a few streets over from the main road in Leadville. It seems even more hidden with scaffolding and plywood scattered around.

Solder didn't imagine the work would take longer than a few days.

When he and his wife, Peri, decided to turn their home into a bed and breakfast, there were reasons beyond business.

Nate Solder was pointed to New England after a draft day call from the Patriots.

Peri had waited tables, that's how she and Ed met, but she also had worked in real estate. Ed had served in the Navy. After that, he worked in the post office for nine years. They married, started a family, and a life. But with each passing day at the post office, he was looking for more.

The Naval Academy had taught him that his ambitions were within his grasp, even when he didn't think so. He and Peri made their Mountain Hideaway Bed and Breakfast their goal.

"I did that out of pure desire," Ed said. "I did it out of love. It was a place I can go and get answers when I really needed them. Sometimes I'd be sitting down crying, looking at a mess, and I worked out of it, bit by bit. The shapes changed, colors changed, pieces changed, but I became a carpenter.

"We did everything together," Peri said. "It was always a group effort and it was a payoff."

Before the Patriots took Ed and Peri's son with the 17th overall pick in last year's draft, before he was a strong if svelte rookie with a neck-cramping upside, before he faced the subtle pressures of filling the role of the retired Matt Light as protector of franchise quarterback Tom Brady, Nate Solder learned what work meant at that bed and breakfast.

He saw his parents pour their heart and soul into it, reaping the benefits of watching their sons (John and Nate) grow up there and seeing all the faces come in and out. Nate would do odd jobs — painting, moving furniture — from the time he was a kid to the time he was in high school.

But he always was able to see what it did for his parents.

"It was kind of a leap of faith," Nate said. "My parents have always been extremely hard workers. That's kind of taught me what hard work gets you. They fought for it, they continue to fight for it, and I think that's what I learned from them growing up."

#### **A unique place**

Leadville is about 100 miles southwest of Denver, the 2½-hour drive weaving you in and out of the mountains, taking you through the continental divide. Its elevation (10,200 feet, proudly displayed on a stone marker) is almost four times its population (just over 2,600), the highest city in North America.

"This is not a big town," Ed said. "This is not a wealthy town. This is a working man's town. There's not too many people that swing the big stick around here."

It's 34 miles from Buena Vista (pronounced "Byoona" by the locals), where Nate Solder went to high school. It's 121 miles from Boulder, where Solder spent four years at the University of Colorado. Moreover, it's 106 miles from Columbine, 38 miles from Vale, 114 miles from Aurora, 127 miles from the wildfires that scorched Colorado Springs for weeks, and just 10 miles from the Treasure fires that burned during Independence Day weekend.

"It's nearly impossible to describe it," Nate said. "I think everyone that I tell about where I'm from has some sort of skewed perspective or doesn't really understand. I think it's a really unique place. It doesn't relate to a lot of people. When I tell people, I usually say I'm from a small town in the mountains, but I don't think most people know what that means. But I guess I like that it's a little different and hard to describe."

There's a humility and simplicity that he hangs onto.

"It's your roots," Solder said. "You came from there, those people saw you grow up. They're all real proud of you for who you are just as much as they are for what you're accomplishing. In a small community like Buena Vista and Leadville, they really know who I am, and that means a lot to me."

### **Confidence boost**

There were only seven years when the Solders didn't run the bed and breakfast, and that was when they moved to Buena Vista. They had to.

Nate, in fifth grade at the time, had been typecast as a troublemaker at his elementary school (the last straw was when a playground dustup with a kid who kept kicking him led to a one-week suspension).

"He was pretty emotionally distraught," Peri said. "I said to him, 'I don't know what you're doing on Monday, but you're not going back.' "

Peri went on a mission to get Nate into a different school, in a different setting.

He ended up being around people who boosted his confidence, math teacher and football coach Bob Marken among them.

Before Marken retired last year, he had been in the school system 33 years and had seen all types of kids. He didn't know much about Nate's past but he could understand it.

"I could see that," Marken said. "He could easily be hurt by words people say, because he's a very sincere, caring, sensitive young man. Still is."

Marken had a way of getting the most out of Solder in the classroom and on the field. When Solder got to his class in the eighth grade, Marken made him sign a contract for his math class.

"He was one of those teachers that really changed my whole academic future," Nate said. "He really challenged me when I was in his class. He really pushed me to be the best that I could be. He made things really hard, but after being so hard you started being able to do it and you started to feel that confidence."

It worked the same way on the football field. If Solder had it his way, he'd be Randy Johnson, the pitcher who was too tall and too imposing to get a hit off. But he recognized his skills in basketball, because he starred on his high school team in Buena Vista, and when it came to colleges, Dartmouth was immediately interested.

But with his skill on the gridiron, Marken told Solder that if he wanted to, he could play football at the college level.

"I thought I was giving him a vision of that for himself, because I thought he always thought of himself as average, just like all the other kids," Marken said. "He didn't look at himself as, 'I'm bigger, faster, stronger than this kid.' He never did. I don't think that he saw that he was that way. So I tried to always give him that vision."

"I just kept trying to keep the vision open that he could play college football, and tried to keep him in contact with people."

There were always points when Nate would have to be convinced that he could reach beyond his own ambitions. He had to be convinced that he could play football at CU, then be convinced again that if he switched from tight end to tackle he could make a way for himself to the NFL. When he became a consensus All-American, first-team all-Big 12, and Big 12 Offensive Lineman of the Year, he finally could see it.

"He grew right out of that and came right into his own self," Ed said.

### **Draft a process**

About five or six NFL teams contacted Marken before the draft, doing their due diligence. The only team that sent someone out in person, initially, was the Cowboys.

"I was kind of shocked," Marken said.

Everyone else usually would send questionnaires and follow up with a phone call. It was always about character.

"They can tell whether someone can play or not way better than I can. But they're just trying to turn all the stones over and make sure there are no character issues," said Marken.

Going over all that stuff for Solder, Marken said, was cake.

"It was so fun for me," Marken said. "We spent about 10 minutes answering those questions. Then we just sat and talked about football."

Solder had made a name for himself in the predraft process. A clip of one of his workouts actually went viral.

He was working out for the Broncos with director of player personnel Matt Russell, whose name rings out in Colorado.

"His name's on the stadium at CU," Solder said. "He was a Lombardi Trophy finalist. He was very well known in the CU community."

He and Nate had met a few times. Nate knew he was a scout.

"I definitely knew him," Solder said.

But during the drill, Russell ended up being a tackling dummy. Nate had to run down a set of cones and then explode on a pad Russell was holding. Nate floored Russell. The pad went flying. Russell went rolling. The few people in attendance lit up.

"I thought it was perfect," Solder said. "A scout would never say it, but when they see you put someone on their back, it always kind of sticks in their brain a little bit. I wasn't trying to hurt him or anything. But I liked it. I liked that contact. I thought it was funny. I got a kick out of it I guess."

The video's been viewed more than 110,000 times. Neither one of them can get away from it.

Nate chuckled some, and said, "I hear about it every once in a while from him."

Connection madeThe draft process was a taxing one, the lowest point easily being when Solder had to squeeze himself into the middle seat on a plane on the way to a workout with the Redskins.

Originally, in the time leading up to the draft, he had two dates set up in New England. One was with the Patriots. The other was with a girl in New Haven. After that he would be going to Dallas.

He met the girl, but never the Patriots. The day before he was supposed to fly to Boston, the Patriots called and canceled. He flew to New Haven anyway.

"There was nothing else he could do," Peri said.

Days before the draft, he got a call from the Patriots. Offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia said he wanted to visit him in Boulder.

"I didn't know much about the Patriots," Nate said. "I didn't know much about Coach Scarnecchia."

They went through some drills. Solder learned as much about Scarnecchia as Scarnecchia did about him.

"I liked him because he was real down to earth," Solder said. "The image you get of the Patriots from Colorado was very successful, very untouchable. So once I found out about Coach Scarnecchia and saw that he was a blue-collar, hard-working, middle-American kind of guy, I kind of connected with that."

By the time draft day came, Solder had no desire to run through any of the hoopla. After the college season was over, Nate and his family went to New York for the academic Heisman, then they flew to Orlando for the Outland Trophy presentation. Then to Connecticut for the All-American ceremony at Yale.

"We literally were flying everywhere for a while there," Peri said.

They would have had to hop another flight to New York for the draft, but they had no interest in the suits, the cameras, the spectacle, and at that point clearly the travel (if only to avoid the problem of Nate ending up in another middle seat).

So they invited eight family members and eight of Nate's college friends to the bed and breakfast and they waited on the call.

"That was one of the best things we did the whole way through," Ed said.

Learning experience he had to admit it, Nate said his head swiveled more during the lockout-stunted preseason than during his first NFL game.

"The interesting thing about the way they run things in New England, my head was spinning more in practice, during that camp, during that week before the first game, during the preseason games," he said. "They really put it on you in terms of the amount of information you need to know. The speed and the accuracy with which you need to play."

When Solder made his NFL debut — a season-opening "Monday Night Football" game against the Dolphins in Miami where the humidity was like nothing he had ever seen and he was matched up against Cameron Wake — he didn't necessarily know what to expect.

His friend and former basketball coach Scott Crites was at the Broncos game, the second game of a doubleheader that night, keeping an eye on Nate and the Patriots on the in-stadium TV sets.

What he remembers most is analyst and former coach Jon Gruden locking in on Solder and Wake in the third quarter: "Let's check this guy Nate Solder."

"Give this guy credit, he's going to be a good one."

Ed and Peri were at Dolphin Stadium, and after it was over, after the Patriots ran Miami over, 38-24, and Solder had survived his NFL baptism, they went to find their son and congratulate him.

Nate told Ed, "Dad, did you see me puke? That was the hardest game I ever played in my life."

It was the first in a run of six straight starts at right tackle. Throughout the season, he had ups (he knocked Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis on his back in the AFC Championship game) and downs (Von Miller jackhammered Brady on Nate's watch).

"There are a lot of things I know, there's a lot more that I don't know," Nate said. "But I think that as you kind of get a hold on things, you've got to keep perspective that there's a lot of good players that you go against, so no matter how good you get or how much you think you know, you always work hard and prepare and really improve, because if you don't there's always going to be someone better."

Since that day, everything's moved like a time-lapse photo for the 6-foot-8-inch, 320-pound Solder. Now, in taking over for Light at left tackle, he has an opportunity he never would have seen or even reached for years ago.

He said, "I think if you go toward the things that are a little bit intimidating or a little bit scary or things you don't think you can do initially and you're persistent and you don't give up and you continue to work at it and continue to increase

the effort you put into it, the competency, the precision, the level you do it as you go on, you start to do things you never imagined you could.”

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## **DT Isaac Sopoaga**



### **Isaac Sopoaga carries weight**

#### **Patriots DT a Samoan strongman**

By Mark Daniels

November 11, 2013

FOXBORO — You have to become creative if you want to get in shape in American Samoa.

Patriots defensive tackle Isaac Sopoaga wanted it.

Growing up in the village of Fagasa, a small fishing community in Pago Pago, there were no free weights. So in order to lift, the first thing he did was collect coconuts. Depending on the weather, there were two ways he'd perform the task. The first way was to climb up a tree — all 300-plus pounds of him — and pull off the pieces of fruit by hand.

"It's just like seeing 'The Jungle Book,' " Sopoaga said. "I was like (Mowgli in) 'The Jungle Book' going up. I climbed the coconut tree with bare hand and bare foot. You just got to use a lot of your palm and in your feet to lock yourself into the coconut tree to climb up."

The second way to get the coconuts, if it was raining and climbing was out of the question, was to hurl rocks toward the tropical sky in an attempt to knock down the coconuts one by one. It wasn't easy. Some of the trees stood over 75 feet tall.

Sopoaga typically gathered around 120-160 pieces before he moved on to the next phase. He would then weave two baskets made out of the trees' feather-like leaves. When he was finished, he loaded the coconuts into the baskets and attached them on opposite sides of a small tree that he knocked down.

And then, he would work out.

"We have no weights back home, so I would weave baskets out of coconut palm tree and average like 60 or 80 in each bag. I would get a little tree and carry it," Sopoaga said.

The training methods were unique on the island of Tutuila, but it's part of the journey that led this righteous Samoan all over the globe and into the NFL today with the Patriots.

#### **Quite a find**

June Jones has been traveling to American Samoa for the past 15 years. While coaching at the University of Hawaii, he recruited some of his best athletes from the islands —Sopoaga included.

Jones will never forget the day he first saw Sopoaga. He was raw, but Jones, now at SMU, immediately saw the potential.

The coach was sitting in the passenger seat of a car driven by assistant coach Rich Miano. He remembers the bumps in the gravel road as they drove through Pago Pago. And that's when he saw him.

Standing 6-foot-2 and over 300 pounds, Sopoaga was playing volleyball on a makeshift rocky court with no shoes or shirt on. As the coaches drove by, the teenage boy launched himself in the air and delivered a thunderous spike.

"I watched him jump up and spike the ball and I asked Rich Miano to stop and said, 'Wait a minute. Let's go back there. Did you see that guy jump and spike that ball?' " Jones said. "I was just amazed at his athleticism. I told him I would give him a football scholarship if he wanted to come play football."

Sopoaga left the island in 1999 to come to the U.S. after only playing two years of organized football at Samoana High School.

## **Welcome to America**

While the goal was to play for Jones at Hawaii, Sopoaga needed to complete two years at College of the Canyons, a community college in Santa Clarita, Calif., to gain admittance. He didn't fully grasp English — although he now speaks four languages — or football, but that didn't show.

Sopoaga totaled 18 sacks his freshman year and set a California Community College record the next season with 31.

"I was just good heart, good lungs, good conditioning," Sopoaga said.

When he went to Hawaii, Sopoaga learned about fundamentals, schemes and formations for the first time.

"Basically, you can hardly get a word out of Isaac when you're talking to him on the field except, 'Yes, coach.' It's very refreshing to know that there are kids like that," Jones said. "I think it goes to the culture. It goes to the discipline of how they grew up and not having anything. They're wearing helmets in Pago Pago that I wore in 1970. Shoulder pads the same way. Kids don't have shoes. It's quite an amazing story."

Sopoaga never forgets his roots, which is evident by the tribal tattoos on each biceps that represent his village and his family. He still credits his heart, lungs and conditioning for where he is today.

Over the past eight NFL seasons with the San Francisco 49ers, he worked out like he was back on the island. Sopoaga did cardio work two times a day — four miles in the morning and four more after practice.

"You can be fast. You can be strong, but if you don't have good lungs to catch your breath every other play, you don't succeed," Sopoaga said.

## **Here to help**

The Patriots acquired Sopoaga in a trade last month from Philadelphia, which had signed him as a free agent in the offseason. With the losses of Vince Wilfork and Tommy Kelly, this proud Samoan is needed at defensive tackle.

Jones expects him to fit right in with the Pats.

"He's as true an athlete as you'll ever have," Jones said. "Isaac will die for the Patriots. That's the kind of player he is. He's going to do everything he can to be the best he can be."

Whether it's climbing coconut trees or playing football, Sopoaga always has been that way.

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## OL Will Svitek

### **The Providence Journal**

#### **Svitek escaped from Communism, now looking to crack Patriots roster**

By Paul Kenyon

July 31, 2013

FOXBORO — There could be times this season when the Patriots will have two big Europeans playing offensive tackle.

The Pats fully expect to have a German at right tackle. That is fifth-year man Sebastian Vollmer, who was born and spent his childhood in Dusseldorf, Germany. Vollmer has settled in nicely ever since his rookie season with only several injury problems slowing him down.

At times during the first week of training camp, the left tackle has been newcomer Will Svitek, who was born in Prague, in what was then Czechoslovakia. While the 6-foot-8, 320-pound Vollmer came to this country via a conventional route — he was recruited to play football after excelling in the game as a youngster in his home country — Svitek has taken a much more unusual road to Foxboro.

As he describes it, it all began with a trip much like the one featured by the von Trapp Family in, “The Sound of Music.” He was 2 years old at the time.

“I was born in 1982 ... I had three older brothers and my parents kind of decided that they didn’t want their four children to grow up in a Communist regime,” Svitek said. “They wanted us to realize our fullest potential. So basically it was kind of like my dad’s dream to escape out of Czechoslovakia.

“We hiked over the mountains over to Austria, where we stayed in a refugee camp for about eight months until we got legalized to come to the United States. My dad’s vision was to achieve the American Dream and come here and fulfill his fullest potential.”

“I was the youngest of four boys,” he continued, “so my dad and my brothers took turns carrying me. I was little. I was a little 2-year-old. It’s hard to imagine now, but my younger brothers were older. They told my brothers we on a military hike to keep them quiet. It was like a game, but you couldn’t talk.”

Once they received permission to come to the United States, the family settled in California and very much lived out their American Dream. For Will Svitek, it helped that he is a strong student.

“I had an amazing opportunity to go to Stanford and I’m playing here in the NFL, so it’s a dream come true. You wouldn’t have those opportunities anywhere else. So I’m grateful for the sacrifices my dad made,” he said.

“I think they [Svitek’s parents] instilled in me to do everything well,” he says in the Patriots’ media guide for 2013. “I am a competitive person on the field and in the classroom, and I don’t think you can just turn that switch off.”

Among other work, Svitek has attended all four NFL Business Management & Entrepreneurial programs, at the Harvard Business School, Penn’s Wharton School of Business, the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern, and the Stanford Business School. Svitek speaks about how fortunate he feels.

“Obviously, my parents taught me a lot about work ethic and dedication, not taking things for granted,” he said. “I always think back to that. I’m grateful for the opportunities I have here. I always want to make them proud and fulfill my fullest potential, because that’s the kind of sacrifices they made.”

Svitek, who has traveled extensively around the world during NFL offseasons, has returned to his home country, now the Czech Republic, three times. His parents, Milan and Eva, have accompanied him.

“They lived in Czechoslovakia for 40 years. They were the best tour guides you can imagine,” he said. His trips also have included taking part in programs sponsored by the NFL in which players visit the Middle East to meet with American troops.

Svitek’s football career has been unusual. He played defensive end for Stanford and had 60 tackles, 4 1/2 for loss, two sacks, one forced fumble and one interception. He was drafted in the sixth round by the Chiefs in 2005. It was



there that he was converted to offensive tackle. He obviously has the athleticism to handle it. While at Stanford he was a two-time national decathlon champion.

"There definitely were some growing pains," he said. "It's hard enough to make the transition [to the NFL], let alone from the defensive line to the offensive line. It's a learning process. I'm still learning here in year nine."

Svitek says Patriots line coach Dante Scarnecchia is teaching him new techniques that he had not previously been exposed to.

He spent three years with the Chiefs and four with the Falcons, where he started 10 games in 2011. In between, he played for a year in the European League. His career looked to be in jeopardy when he suffered an injury to his upper right arm in training camp with the Falcons last August and was relegated to injured reserve. The Patriots signed him to a free agent contract in March. He now looks to be the leading candidate to earn the job as the Pats third tackle.

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## CB Aqib Talib



### **Football journey: Aqib Talib**

By Mike Reiss

January 11, 2014

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- New England Patriots cornerback Aqib Talib has turned in a stellar 2013 season with a heavy heart. One of the biggest role models in his life, his father Theodore, died the morning of Sept. 12.

That night, in a 13-10 victory over the New York Jets, Talib played one of the best games of his six-year NFL career.

"He was out there with me," Talib said of the game in which he had two interceptions and a forced fumble. "That's my No. 1 role model."

Theodore Talib had been ailing with lung disease (sarcoidosis) for the past three years. When Aqib was drafted by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the first round of the 2008 draft, he had Theodore, who had been living in Trenton, N.J., move in with him.

In one respect, it gave father and son important time together. But it was also tough for the son to see the man he admired most in failing health.

Talib, who grew up in the projects of Cleveland, explained that the words "family first" tattooed near his right hand are there for his dad.

"He did the best job you can do in terms of taking care of your family. He and my mom [Okolo] were separated since I was born, and he still took care of her. He just showed me how to be a dad, a family man, how to handle your business as a man."

Some of Talib's business that has found its way into the headlines since he entered the NFL is not the flattering type. He's had run-ins with the law that are well documented.

There have been no such issues since he was traded to the Patriots in November of 2012 and now Talib, after declining several requests over the last year, shares his "football journey":

**When he first started playing football:** "I first started playing organized football in eighth grade. I moved to Texas in '99 and that was my first time putting on shoulder pads and a helmet."

**Why he moved to Texas:** "I had lived in Cleveland and Trenton, New Jersey. My dad was in Trenton, so I used to be in school in Cleveland and in Trenton for the summer. And then for the second half -- in fourth, fifth, sixth grade -- it was Trenton for school and Cleveland for the summer. So I was kind of back and forth. Then, after seventh grade, that summer, my mom moved from Cleveland to Texas. My brother was in 11th grade and he had heard about all that Texas [high school] football. He had dreams of going to the NFL too, so he was like, 'I want to play my last two years in Texas.'"

**His first taste of organized football:** "We had played in Cleveland on the street, but it wasn't the thing to do, putting on pads. We played basketball and baseball. There just wasn't anyone playing [organized] football."

**Favorite teams and players growing up:** "Definitely the Cowboys, man. I was really a Michael Irvin fan. And Deion Sanders. That was America's Team."

**Top memories of playing football at Richardson Berkner High School:** "In 11th grade, I think we went 7-3 and tied for third [place] but didn't make the playoffs. In 12th grade, we went 8-2, made the playoffs, and that was the first time the team went to the playoffs in 30 or 40 years, or something like that. That's probably the best memory, making that playoff."

**Enrolling at University of Kansas:** "[Head coach] Mark Mangino showed me the most interest out of anybody who was recruiting me. He came down, ate my mother's breakfast, and then put it in a way, 'We're Kansas; we might not

be Texas -- but you're in the Big 12 and you get to play against Texas, you get to play against Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, Nebraska, all those guys, and show what you got.' He kind of sold it."

**Top memories of playing football at Kansas:** "Definitely that Orange Bowl year. We got to 11-0 before we lost to Missouri in the rivalry game. Then we won the Orange Bowl game and I was the Orange Bowl MVP."

**Deciding to enter the draft after his junior season:** "A lot of people were talking about it after my sophomore year and [Coach] Mangino was like 'If you play one more year here, and leave after your junior year, you'll be my first first-rounder.' We had kind of planned it. He put me on offense, let me score some touchdowns, returns. After the Orange Bowl, I was really going after that."

**Selected in the first round of the 2008 draft by the Buccaneers (20th overall):** "You kind of followed the draft boards while you were in college and I kind of had an idea that if I went to the combine and ran fast, I had a chance of going in the first round. So I went there and ran 4.44 and had a good idea I was going first round. There were a lot of pre-draft interviews and a lot of those coaches told me 'If you're at this spot, we're going to take you.' So it was just a matter of where I was going to go."

**Summing up his four-plus years with the Buccaneers:** "I loved my team there, man. It was a real close group of guys and I had three years under Coach Raheem Morris and he's still one of my best friends to this day. It was a great experience when I was there, a great facility, and great weather. I bought my first house out there. I wouldn't change anything."

**Getting traded to the Patriots in November of 2012:** "I was surprised at first, because me and [Coach Greg] Schiano, I used to meet with him all the time. I was one of the leaders on the team. I thought we were on good terms. He kind of told me what the situation was, about the owners, whatever the situation was. I got traded and where else better to get traded than here? I was excited, man. It was like, 'Damn, I got traded?' But then my brother was like, 'You're going to the Patriots. You're going to the playoffs every year.' It was a lot of excitement -- I didn't want to get traded to anywhere but here."

**Entering free agency this past offseason after his half-season with the Patriots:** "I had a half-year to see how this organization was run. It's like an A1 business, from the coaches to the locker room. The players accepted me so fast. They're a close group of guys and it was kind of like our locker room in Tampa. I didn't want to go to a whole another locker room and meet more guys. You can't pass up an opportunity like this, to work for a company like this. I had no intentions on going anywhere else."

**After signing a one-year deal, preparing to enter free agency again this upcoming offseason:** "Just let it play out; I kind of don't worry about it. We still have work to do here. Right now, I'm a Patriot and I go one day at a time."

**His two biggest role models:** "My dad had four kids and always kept a decent job, whether we were in the projects [or not]. He took care of his kids to the max and acted like everything was perfect. We knew it wasn't. We lived in the projects. He just did a great job as far as taking care of his kids, his whole family -- he has nine brothers and sisters. They'd call him for money like he was rich, but he was living in the projects. Then my brother, man. My brother [whom Talib calls 'Q'] kind of followed in his footsteps; he's all about his business. He showed me the ropes on how you get to the league. I didn't know about getting scholarships, going to the combine, keeping a certain GPA, but my brother was the brains of the operation. I'd say my dad and my brother, they kept me on the right foot. They are good men."

**What he loves about football:** "The competition. I love a guy lining up across from me and thinking he's going to beat me and me knowing that I'm not going to let that happen. That's the best thing about football -- there are 60-something guys going up against 60-something guys and no matter what we're going our hardest, trying to win. It's that competitive nature. In the locker room, you'll see us playing basketball with the trash can and it's competitive with that too. That's the main thing I love -- the competition."

**Summing up his football journey:** "It's like a movie, man. Somebody could write a book on it. From where we came from in Cleveland, that neighborhood, it was terrible. There are probably all abandoned houses there. It kind of still seems unreal to me."

**The pride he takes in having come from such a tough background:** "I don't take one minute for granted. I pray every morning. I pray every night. I thank God every morning and thank God every night for blessing me with what He blessed me with."

# The Boston Globe

## Aqib Talib has come of age in Patriots' secondary

By Shalise Manza Young, Globe Staff  
September 29, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — From March 1, 2008, the day that homegrown All-Pro Asante Samuel signed a six-year free agent deal with Philadelphia, until Nov. 1, 2012, the day they acquired Aqib Talib in a trade with the Buccaneers, the Patriots spent six draft picks and millions of free agent dollars trying to find a No. 1 cornerback.

There were several duds in the bunch, but there were some times over that four-plus-year span that it looked as if New England had found a suitable replacement: Leigh Bodden's 2009 season was strong, and Devin McCourty was a Pro Bowler at the position as a rookie in 2010.

Neither, however, played at the level Talib is playing at right now for the Patriots.

The 6-foot-1-inch, 205-pound Talib has brought a measure of stability and confidence to the secondary that has been lacking for a few seasons, as players were cycled in and out of that unit and it continued to give up big plays at a sometimes-alarming rate.

Last week, Talib was matched up against Tampa Bay's top receiver, Vincent Jackson, before Jackson left the game in the third quarter with a rib injury. Jackson was targeted six times and came away with three catches; one of the balls intended for the receiver ended up in Talib's hands instead, when he made a great play on a sideline pass at the end of the first half.

It was his third interception of the young season.

On Sunday night, Talib will get another tall challenge in the form of the Falcons' Julio Jones. Jones is in the discussion as the best receiver in the NFL, and through three games he is tied for the league lead in catches (27) and leads in receiving yards (373).

Talib may get some help with Jones, but for the most part, he'll likely shadow the 2011 first-round pick wherever he goes.

In the locker room this week, Talib, who does not lack for bravado on the field, was modest when asked if he thinks he can handle Jones by himself.

"Hey man . . . I hope I can. If I have to. I don't know what the plan is, you know, whatever the plan is, that's the plan. So, it's a task," Talib said.

Atlanta head coach Mike Smith has seen enough of Talib to know that he's not going to be a pushover lined up against Jones.

"He is a very physical, athletic corner that has the capability if they want to match him up with the No. 1 receiver," Smith said. "We're very familiar with him from having played against him while he was in Tampa, so we know that he is an outstanding player. We anticipate we'll get his best shot this week. He is a good football player, their best cover guy by far."

When New England gave Tampa Bay a fourth-round pick in exchange for Talib, who was then in the final year of his rookie contract, the University of Kansas product was a definite gamble.

The talent was there, but his attitude and off-field issues were a concern: Talib had gotten into a fight at his rookie symposium weekend with another Tampa Bay draftee; swung his helmet at a Buccaneers teammate during offseason workouts in 2009, missing his intended target and hitting a fellow cornerback; had to be restrained from going after an official after a 2010 game; was arrested twice; and received a four-game suspension from the NFL in 2012 for violating the policy on performance-enhancing substances.

But the structure the Patriots offer and the accountability Bill Belichick demands seem to have had a positive impact on Talib.

"You can tell the structure has helped him; that's maturity as well," an AFC scout said. "I'd say he plays more disciplined now [compared to when he was with the Buccaneers], and it's a correlation between the structure of the organization and what Bill demands out of his players and the discipline he instills. You have to do what you're supposed to do for fear of being reprimanded."

Discipline was not something Talib got a lot of in Tampa Bay. When he was drafted in 2008, his defensive backs coach was Raheem Morris. In 2009, Morris was elevated to head coach.

Time and again, Morris made excuses for Talib and his behavior. After the Buccaneers were blown out by the Patriots in London in 2009, Talib was one of a few players who ignored curfew, and when Morris confronted them after they finally returned to the team hotel, Talib exploded, reportedly directing a string of obscenities at the coach.

He was not punished by the team.

Talib acknowledged that the expectations in New England have helped him "a bunch."

"You don't have no choice but to be here on time, know what you're doing, because that's what everybody does here," he said. "Nobody is ever late, everybody always knows their assignments."

"In some other places you may have a little leeway, come late once in a while and it's acceptable, [but] it's just not acceptable here. You've got to get with the program or you'll probably be gone."

Though he played in just six games with New England last year, the Patriots re-signed Talib to a one-year contract for \$5 million. It wasn't a great free agent market for cornerbacks in particular this year, and a strong season means Talib will get another chance at a potential big payday next March.

He got off to a good start in the spring, becoming a strong presence during the Patriots' offseason workout program, and he was later named one of the team's offseason award winners.

It's continued through training camp and into the regular season. Even defensive coordinator Matt Patricia, generally loathe to give a positive assessment of one of his players when talking to media, said earlier this month that he was "very, very happy" with Talib's work and work ethic, calling him "a good example on the field for those guys who are coming into the program."

Given his history in Florida, Tampa Bay reporters on the other end of the conference call must have been taken aback last week when Belichick called Talib a good leader for the Patriots and "a great addition to our team."

But Talib believes his experiences with the Buccaneers happened for a reason, and helped make him a better player.

"It made me see one side, you see the other side, so I think it made me better," he said.

McCourty, now playing at safety, didn't hesitate when asked if Talib is the best corner he's played with, and acknowledged that Talib's play enables him to do some different things at his position as well.

When the offense lines up, McCourty will look at the route he believes Talib's receiver is going to run, and knows whether his teammate will need help. If Talib doesn't, McCourty can provide help elsewhere.

"How he went out there last week and covered Vincent Jackson while he was in there, it just brings some certainty, makes us have a little different game plan," McCourty said. "That aspect of him being able to lock up on guys and do a very good job at it, any defense, you love to have a guy like that."

"The attitude he brings and how he approaches the game have been great."

## WR Kenbrell Thompson

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots' Kenbrell Thompson overcame troubled past**

By Shira Springer  
September 15, 2013

Judge Dennis Murphy keeps an autographed photo of Kenbrell Thompson on his desk. The football glamour shot shows Thompson in his El Camino College uniform. He appears a proud team captain for the Torrance, Calif., school, a confident JUCO All-American who finished his sophomore season with 1,020 receiving yards.

Thompson looks nothing like the troubled teenager who appeared before the Florida Circuit Court judge on drug charges three years earlier.

On Feb. 28, 2007, Miami police pulled over the 18-year-old Thompson for reckless driving. As the arrest report details, he "removed from his right rear pocket a clear ziplock bag and dropped it on the ground." Inside the bag, officers found 18 multicolored packets containing "suspected powder cocaine" and "suspected rock cocaine." In a separate knotted bag, there were "forty-four pieces of suspected rock cocaine." Thompson faced jail time for cocaine possession with intent to sell.

Back then, long before he joined the Patriots as an undrafted free agent, trouble with the law was the biggest constant in Thompson's life. Between the ages of 15 and 18, he was arrested seven times.

Thompson received two years probation for the cocaine-related charges. As part of his probation terms, he spent time in a military-style boot-camp program that involved a brief jail stay. Not long after sentencing, Murphy approved special probation conditions that allowed Thompson to travel outside Florida and play for El Camino.

'I can only hope that it won't go to his head, that he won't do something stupid. I don't know what, if any, contact he kept with the homeboys. Hopefully, he kept it to a minimum or, at least, in proper perspective.' —Dennis Murphy, Florida Circuit Court judge, on Kenbrell Thompson

"The coke sale case could have been the nail in the coffin, but it turned out to be the kick in the pants that he needed," said Murphy. "I'm a firm believer in giving youth a chance to try and turn it around."

When the 6-foot-1-inch, 193-pound Thompson dropped off the autographed photo more than three years ago, he told Murphy about his triumphs at El Camino and his hopes for the future at the University of Cincinnati. He confessed to the judge, "I'd like to make a go at football." By the time Thompson started Patriots training camp this year, he had plenty of practice making the most of unexpected opportunities.

Now, he is starting at wide receiver, catching passes from Tom Brady, and continuing an improbable turnaround.

"It's humbling," said Thompson. "It's my dream and I'm living in the moment. I'm trying not to look in my rearview mirror. I never doubted myself and the whole sport of football. I don't only love football, but I feel like I need football in my life. That's how I approach it."

So far, Thompson, 25, is a success story, proving that second — and third and fourth — chances work. Since leaving Miami in pursuit of a football career, he has stayed out of trouble and kept his record clean. But there are no guarantees; plenty of professional athletes who appear to have turned their lives around fall back into bad habits when big contracts come.

"I can only hope that it won't go to his head," said Murphy, "that he won't do something stupid. I don't know what, if any, contact he kept with the homeboys. Hopefully, he kept it to a minimum or, at least, in proper perspective."

"I can't say, 'Watch out, Kenbrell.' Kids either grow up and get it or they don't. I think he gets it."

### **Tough place to grow up**

Weighing whether Thompsons deserved another chance in 2007, Murphy reviewed his prior offenses. Murphy saw a kid who lived with his mother and younger brother Kendal in Liberty City, 5½ square miles in northwest Miami that make up one of the most crime-ridden neighborhoods in the country. He saw a rap sheet that ranged from misdemeanors like trespassing to felonies like armed robbery. And he saw a golden opportunity waiting in California.

"For kids like him who come from the inner city, quite often the best thing for them is to get out of Dodge," said Murphy.

Thompkins grew up in Liberty City when the John Doe Gang ruled the area and built a powder and crack cocaine empire through murderous means. Drugs, violent crime, and poverty surrounded Thompsons throughout his childhood and teenage years.

"Liberty City is an area where anything can happen," said Thompsons. "It's all in the way that you embrace it. It's great in a way and it's brutal in a way. It's great because my family is there. It's brutal because you can be in the wrong part of Miami in Liberty City."

Thompkins embraced its proud football tradition and its dangerous streets.

In high school, he played for Florida powerhouse Miami Northwestern. He was a natural leader on a team loaded with future big-time college players and NFL prospects. He made an impact with his speed, toughness, and ultra-competitive play, calling out teammates for poor practice habits.

"He could have been a top-flight defensive back as well as a top-flight receiver," said his high school coach, Roland Smith.

His former high school English teacher and defensive coach Luther Dollar added, "As far as football is concerned, Kenbrell could arguably be one of the most talented kids to ever come out of Miami Northwestern."

But Thompsons struggled to stay in school, out of trouble, and eligible for football. His coaches worried that Thompsons would squander his athletic talent and remain trapped in Liberty City, hustling for reasons that had nothing to do with football.

"There was a point when Kenbrell was out of reach because the other side was calling him a whole lot more," said Dollar. "If No. 5 wasn't on the field for the game, people would know that Kenbrell did something."

The wide receiver's lengthy arrest record represented a familiar story in Liberty City. He was a teenage boy who hung with a rough crowd, who found himself shouldering adult responsibilities in a single-parent home.

"He had to be the man of the house at an early age," said high school teammate and Patriots practice squad player Marcus Forston.

By Thompsons's senior year, multiple arrests and expulsions from Miami Northwestern threatened more than a promising football career.

"When he was at school, at practice, he was fine," said Smith. "I tried to tire him out at practice and tried to make sure he couldn't hang out with his friends in the neighborhood that were up to no good."

"I told him he had to pick his friends wisely, but he knew these guys for so long that he thought he had some loyalty to them."

Without the daily structure football provided, Thompsons fell into more serious trouble. During a two-month stretch in early 2007, he was arrested four times. The increasingly troubled teenager scared away most college recruiters. He eventually committed to Morgan State University, though he never enrolled in the Baltimore school because of academic eligibility issues.

With a college football future seemingly out of reach, his family proved more influential than his neighborhood friends.

"One day we talked about our futures," said his cousin and Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver Antonio Brown. "I'd gone to prep school and got my life together. His little brother Kendal had just got a scholarship to the University of Miami. It helped seeing others who he loved have success around him. He understood what he was capable of. All those things played a factor and motivated him."

From there, Judge Murphy and El Camino College offered a fresh start. Thompkins's success at El Camino earned interest from major football programs across the country. Florida, LSU, Alabama, Arizona, Kansas State, and Tennessee all reportedly made offers.

Thompkins signed with Tennessee, then reentered the recruiting process when coach Lane Kiffin departed for Southern Cal. Despite interest from UCLA, Cal, and Oklahoma, Thompkins again faced an uncertain college football future because of his Liberty City past.

### **Connecting on campus**

Brown doesn't remember how many times he phoned former University of Cincinnati coach Butch Jones. But the main message never changed.

"I'm willing to put my reputation on the line for my cousin Kenbrell," Brown told Jones. "I need you to help him out. He just needs an opportunity. He won't let you down."

As far as Jones was concerned, Brown made an ideal character reference.

"Antonio is like a son to me," said Jones, who coached Brown at Central Michigan. "Those words coming from Antonio were very, very loud and resonated with me. We brought Kenbrell in on a visit. I saw a young man who was very driven and very determined."

"I probably didn't know 100 percent of his past, but growing up in a household of law enforcement my entire life, I take great pride in reading human behavior. Every question I asked, he was up-front. He didn't hide his past."

"I think his past still drives him to this day. He'll never forget where he came from and that will always be a source of motivation."

When Thompkins arrived on campus in spring of 2010, Jones instituted a zero-tolerance policy for the JUCO star. Jones, whose father worked as a police chief and whose uncle was with the Michigan State Police, expected Thompkins to be on time, go to class, and generally "live the right way."

Thompkins did all that and more, quickly impressing Jones with his explosiveness, intelligence, physical play, and toughness. The new wide receiver easily retained all the information the Cincinnati coaching staff threw his way, took great pride in his route running, and studied film of NFL wideouts.

"Butch Jones held me accountable," said Thompkins. "He said that opportunities are short-lived, and that stuck with me. I made sure that I took advantage of every opportunity that I did have."

When Tennessee refused to release Thompkins from his letter-of-intent, the wide receiver learned just how short-lived opportunities can be. Ruled ineligible for a year, he played on the scout team for Cincinnati. He focused on his studies and said he earned a 3.9 GPA his first semester. In December 2012, he graduated with a degree in criminal justice, overlooking the irony of his major.

"I didn't know too much about criminal justice," said Thompkins. "As I took the courses over the years, I found it very interesting."

To fulfill his degree requirements, Thompkins found himself on the side of law enforcement, riding with campus police for a total of 112 hours and earning the respect of the officers he joined. It was a long way from the Liberty City days when police once charged him with resisting arrest.

"He was very likable," said University of Cincinnati police officer Lance Long, who coordinates the student ride-along program. "He didn't take any shortcuts."

The same could be said about his time with the Bearcats.

Granted an extra year of NCAA eligibility, Thompkins played two years for Cincinnati, though injuries and inconsistent quarterbacking led to less-than-impressive numbers. In 2011, the junior caught 44 passes for 536 yards and two touchdowns. He had 34 receptions for 541 yards and another pair of touchdowns the next year.

With those stats, a mediocre NFL combine performance, and his troubled past, Thompkins went undrafted.



"I told Kenbrell, 'All you want is an opportunity,' " said Jones. "It's very fitting that he was an undrafted free agent because he's had to work hard and earn everything he's received in his life."

And Jones made sure his close friend Nick Caserio, the Patriots director of player personnel, knew how hard Thompkins would work. In early May, Thompkins signed a three-year, nearly \$1.5 million contract with the Patriots.

### **A son in the picture**

To prepare for the 2013 NFL preseason, Thompkins spent nearly every summer morning on a track. He ran 200-meter repeats, covering 2 miles in full-out sprints. Afternoon sessions included cone and footwork drills, as well as strength and conditioning exercises. Brown joined Thompkins, pushing his rookie cousin and passing along advice.

"I told him to remember that feeling he has now, how hungry and passionate and willing to prove himself he is so he could build off that every year," said Brown. "This league is not about just right now, but it's about longevity."

After a shaky start in the season opener against the Buffalo Bills, Thompkins caught two passes for 47 yards in sloppy conditions against the New York Jets. He remains focused on improving.

"I wake up and think about football," said Thompkins. "I fall asleep and think about it."

Away from his Patriots responsibilities, he plays football with his 2-year-old son, Kenbrell Thompkins II. It's the rare kind of topic that lightens the wide receiver's serious demeanor.

"You can't get a football out of his hands right now," said Thompkins. "He may be a quarterback. He's got a great arm."

Thompkins purposely did not make his son a "junior."

"There are a lot of juniors, and I wanted him to be special," said Thompkins. "I wanted something different for him."

Considering his past, it's clear Thompkins is talking about much more than a name.

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## DL Joe Vellano

# The Boston Globe

### **Undrafted lineman Joe Vellano is undeterred by new task**

By Shalise Manza Young, Globe Staff  
October 4, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — During a visit to Patriots training camp, as Tom Brady was engulfed by dozens of media members and other players were filing slowly back into Gillette Stadium after another long practice, Paul Vellano Sr. noticed his son still at the back of a field, getting some one-on-one time with Vince Wilfork.

Joe Vellano was an undrafted rookie from Maryland, another young guy working to earn a spot on the Patriots' roster, like dozens of other players the veteran Wilfork had seen over his 10 years. But Wilfork spent more than 20 minutes with Vellano working on technique, and even as the two walked off the field, Paul could see Wilfork's hands moving, still explaining something to his young teammate.

Paul was struck by the scene, seeing Wilfork reaching back and extending a hand to Joe, and took it as a hopeful sign that his son might have a chance of sticking with New England.

That scene played out less than two months ago.

Joe Vellano wasn't supposed to be spending time in NFL locker rooms — not after being passed over in the draft.

Not only did Joe Vellano earn a roster spot with the Patriots, he was on the field from the first game of the season, and now finds himself thrust into the spotlight as one of the players charged with filling the sizable on-field void left from Wilfork's season-ending Achilles' injury in Atlanta.

"Oh boy. When the Senior Bowl invites, combine invites didn't come, he got distraught — 'I didn't even get a shot,' he said."

The enormity of the task is not lost on Joe, whom his father still calls Joey.

"He said to me, 'I'm stepping in for a 10-year All-Pro guy, not just a great player, a great person, the community loves him . . . My God, I have to step in for him,' " Paul Sr. said on Thursday.

Joe, whose respect for Wilfork was evident as he talked to reporters this week, will respond with more of the same hard work and preparation that has gotten him to this point.

He grew up going to football games at the University of Maryland, where his father was a team captain and All-American. Though Paul loved the sport and the lessons it taught him, both in winning and losing, he did not push football on his sons, Paul Jr. and Joe, but they were drawn to it nonetheless.

Paul Sr. recalls the boys leaving pieces of paper around the house filled with X's and O's as they drew up plays; the father remembers hearing about when Joe was in his early days at Maryland, and hopped a fence in the middle of the night to work alone on the field, attacking the sled and doing drills, trying whatever he could to improve and get coach Ralph Friedgen's attention. (Paul Jr. played at Rhode Island and in Italy for the Parma Panthers.)

Despite becoming an All-American with the Terrapins and playing at all spots on the defensive line, including nose tackle, Joe received little pre-draft fanfare, though he did take part in the East-West Shrine game.

He wasn't among the names called on draft weekend, despite his family's hopes that a positive on-campus workout with Patriots coach Bill Belichick and other members of the New England staff would lead to them using one of their late-round picks on him.

"Oh boy," Paul Sr. sighed when asked about Joe going undrafted. "When the Senior Bowl invites, combine invites didn't come, he got distraught — 'I didn't even get a shot,' he said."

Joe spent the winter in Florida, training with other players, getting ready for his Pro Day and the draft. He was disappointed not to be drafted, but “he kept his head up,” Paul Sr. said. “I give him a lot of credit for not letting that get under his skin. He does work hard, he does prepare himself.”

Of course the Patriots did pick Vellano, eventually, as a free agent.

Though listed at 6 feet 2 inches, 300 pounds, Joe is closer to 6 feet, a little undersized compared with most NFL defensive tackles. He has overcome that by dedicating himself to film work, looking for any edge he can, to know what to expect from the player he’s lined up opposite, to predict what might be coming.

“If you know what play you’re going to get, it takes the thinking out of it and you can play to that block; if you know what’s coming at you, it makes it a lot easier,” Joe said. “You have to be a technician in there, you have to have your awareness up higher, hear calls, stuff like that. It’s a lot to go through and it takes a long time to get good at.”

Belichick had positive words about Vellano this week, noting the extra effort he puts in.

“Joe is a hard-working kid. He has good instincts, he kind of has a nose for the ball and a good feel for what’s going on,” Belichick said.

“He had an opportunity to get some playing time as we went through preseason and he took advantage of those opportunities, made a few plays, had some production, and it probably led to a little bit more opportunity.

“I think that there are a lot of things that he’s improved in, in terms of technique and recognition and reaction. He’s got a long way to go, but he’s definitely making progress.

“He’s usually the first one on and the last one off the field, or close to it. He puts in a lot of extra time, tries to get better at the things he needs to work on, and that’s helped him.”

Though making the 53-man roster as an undrafted rookie and earning 25-30 snaps a game are evidence that his work is paying off, Vellano got more tangible proof on Sunday, when he sacked the Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan for a 13-yard loss in the third quarter.

The laid-back Albany, N.Y., area native didn’t have a celebration ready for the big moment, which caught him some ribbing from teammates in the film room a day later.

At home, however, Paul Sr., his mom Joanie, and Paul Jr. were celebrating for him.

“I saw him do the swim move and I said, ‘Oh my God, he’s got him, he’s got him!’ ” Paul Sr. said. “We were high-fiving. It was real exciting to watch that, to see him make a big play and see them replay it [on the broadcast].”

Joe had a connection to Boston long before he signed with the Patriots: His great-grandparents lived on Margaret Street in the North End when they immigrated to the United States in the early 1900s, before moving to Albany, where the family business was founded. Vellano Corp. is still going strong today, supplying industrial piping for underground water, sewer, and drainage systems.

When Joe calls home, he asks his father about how things are going with the company, though Paul Sr. would much rather talk about what’s going on in his son’s routine.

“He’s unpretentious, he likes his movies — the ‘Godfather’ movies, the ‘Rocky’ movies, him and his brother are always watching those, always quoting from them. And ‘Seinfeld’ quotes.

“He enjoys family and he loves the opportunities when he’s able to come home and spend time at Lake George with the family and his friends. He likes simple things.”

Joe spent a couple of weeks on Lake George, a beautiful lake at the base of the Adirondack Mountains and just 40 minutes from his house, before training camp began, at his favorite spot, Sandy Bay, boating and swimming and throwing the football in knee-deep water with his brother and friends.

Not many days after he returned to Foxborough for his first training camp, he found himself being tutored by Wilfork, long after the day’s practice had ended, working one-on-one with the man he now must help replace.

## **RB Shane Vereen**

# The Boston Globe

## **Patriots' Shane Vereen now a pass-catching threat**

**He's more than just a ballcarrier**

By Michael Whitmer, Globe Staff

December 15, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — Henry Vereen has come up with a unique way to describe the position his son, Shane, plays for the Patriots. It's not limited to running back, because Vereen has done so much more than carry the ball, especially the past month.

"I call him a running back with benefits, because when he gets the ball in the open, he can do some things, he's a great open-field runner," Henry Vereen said this week by phone from California. "What running back wouldn't want the ball in the open field with so many of the defensive guys already behind him?"

Vereen's emergence as a pass-catching threat has been clearly evident since he's returned after missing eight games with a broken wrist. In the Patriots' last four games, Vereen has 33 receptions, capped by last Sunday's 12-catch performance in a 27-26 comeback win over Cleveland. That career day catching the football — Vereen's 153 receiving yards marked a personal best and established a franchise record for a running back, and he was targeted by Tom Brady a whopping 17 times — illustrates how valuable the Patriots view the third-year back from Berkeley.

With tight end Rob Gronkowski lost for the season, the recent trend of getting Vereen the ball through the air could easily continue — starting with Sunday's game in steamy Miami — and become even more important as the Patriots head toward the postseason.

"It all depends on the offense, I would say. This offense calls for me to catch the ball a little bit more out of the backfield, so that's what I'm willing to do," Vereen said. "The way our offense is, the way offenses are starting to change now, they're calling for running backs to be able to do more."

Becoming a reliable receiving threat also speaks to Vereen's versatility, and that runs in the family. Henry Vereen was a standout running back in high school, but moved to wideout when he arrived at UNLV, where he played from 1975-78. All he did for the Rebels was rack up 4,280 all-purpose yards, still the second-most in school history. He also owns the longest reception at UNLV, an 87-yarder.

Tempting as it might be, Henry Vereen said he's resisted the urge to flood his son with all of the pass-catching knowledge he's accumulated. More than likely, it's been passed along, piece by piece, over the years.

"I might try to give him a few tips here and there, but it's a whole different game," said Henry Vereen, who was drafted by the Buccaneers. "Shane was always driven to be good at whatever he was trying to do."

This season, that's been catching the football. Among running backs in the NFL with at least 35 rushing attempts, Vereen is one of only two that has more receptions than carries. Vereen has 38 carries and 40 receptions this season, but he's played only five games, so he's averaging eight catches per game, which leads the team. Darren Sproles of the Saints has 58 catches and 42 carries.

Throwing the ball to running backs isn't new; with 767, Marshall Faulk is the all-time NFL leader for receptions by a running back, and he last played in 2005. Combine the right team and the right offense with the right player, and you'll see ball carriers sprinkled in among tight ends and wideouts on the league's total receptions list. Former Patriot Danny Woodhead has 66 catches for the Chargers, the most this season for a running back, while Chicago's Matt Forte (65), Pierre Thomas (64) of the Saints, and Kansas City's Jamaal Charles (57) all have more than 50.

Vereen had no receptions as a rookie in 2011, when injuries limited him to just five games, and only eight catches last season. In his three seasons at Cal, Vereen had 27, 25, and 22 receptions.

So where, exactly, has this surge come from? Ability, opportunity, determination, and preparation.

"Shane works extremely hard. He's really intelligent and studies diligently each week to know the opponent and to know what his role in the game plan is," said offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels. "He's a guy that allows us to do

some different things with him, but I go back to his preparation and his ability to handle that, because if you can't handle those different things, it's hard to even get lined up to attempt to do them."

Despite those pedestrian pass-catching numbers at Cal — where he once logged 42 rushing attempts in a game — his running backs coach saw enough smarts and skill that pass plays were eventually created specifically for Vereen.

"I have tapes that I show my guys here of Shane running go-routes and scoring touchdowns. We did all those things with Shane, he excited me with his ability to catch the ball," said Ron Gould, who recruited Vereen to Cal, was his running backs coach there, and is now the head coach at UC-Davis. "When you look at his skill set, he's a good enough athlete to catch the ball, and his football IQ is off the charts. I'm not surprised the Patriots are using him this way."

Giving an example of Vereen's football acumen — he graduated from Cal in 3½ years — Gould said certain pass plays required the running back to make a split-second decision, with five options available, depending on what the defense does. Pass protect in case of a blitz, then different routes against different coverages and defensive decisions. Gould said it takes two special players to read that situation correctly: the running back and the quarterback.

"Brady's understanding is second to none. For Shane to have 12 catches [in a game], it takes a special quarterback to anticipate and be on the same page, but it also takes a special back to know his reads and be definitive. Because if he's not, it creates more issues," Gould said. "With Shane's ability to be very definitive, Tom can now anticipate, and that's when a guy like Brady is at his best."

Vereen has been at his best, too, and the Patriots have needed it. They'll likely need it again with Gronkowski unavailable. Of course, defenses that have tried to limit what Gronkowski can do can easily switch their focus to Vereen.

"Do defenses adjust? Certainly they can. I'm sure every defensive coach has calls in his arsenal that could try to discourage you from trying to get the ball to a certain player," McDaniels said. "In Shane's case, I mean, we can hand the ball to Shane."

Right. Vereen, remember, is still a running back. With benefits.



## Values instilled in Vereen were key

By Mark Daniels  
December 2, 2012

It would've been easy for Henry Vereen to push his dreams upon his kids —and steer them toward a career in football.

It would've been easy to make his two sons, Shane and Brock, run through drills over and over again until they couldn't stand the sight of the pigskin.

But, in his upbringing, there wasn't much that came easy for Henry Vereen, and he wanted to assure that wasn't true for his family. So, instead of pushing athletics, he and his wife Venita stressed academics to their sons.

"All of my life experience went toward that," the elder Vereen told the Herald in a phone interview last week. "That's kind of where I think their focus should be — more on their books. That's forever. Football is only for a short period of time."

So it was that in the minutes leading up to his Pop Warner football practices, Shane Vereen could be seen on the sidelines doing his homework. The same held true for younger brother Brock, now a junior defensive back at Minnesota.

"I can think of multiple times when we had homework (to do) we weren't even allowed to go to practice," Brock said.

Though the two boys always gravitated toward sports, the parents pushed their children toward the books. Henry worked too hard and went through too trying of times to not set the right priorities for his children.

### **The hard road**

Born in Biloxi, Miss., Henry Vereen grew up with six brothers and two sisters. In the early 1960s his parents moved the family to Las Vegas, where he eventually became the first of his family to attend college.

He and his future wife were athletes at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Venita played tennis and Henry was a standout wide receiver and kick returner for UNLV. He still holds the school record for the most return yards in a season (824) and a career (2,265).

After being drafted by Tampa Bay in the ninth round of the 1979 NFL draft, Henry Vereen eventually played in the Canadian Football League. But coming from a family that didn't have a lot of money, he aimed to prepare for a future after his football career was over.

"I knew I wanted better for myself," said Henry Vereen, a video technician. "I was just a hard worker. Whatever I did, I just tried to be the best at it that I could."

Shane Vereen calls his dad a self-made man, and points to his influence as a key to his success.

"It wasn't easy at all, but the fact that he was able to make something of himself and be very successful and a great father. It's been huge," the second-year Patriots [team stats] running back said. "You can't even put it into words how much he's helped me out throughout my years of playing."

Added Brock Vereen: "Just talking to my uncles and all that stuff, there's so much that he's been through and for him to be where he is today — successful with a family and everything — it makes you proud."

### **Priorities in order**

Henry Vereen always saw the potential in Shane. When Shane was a child, he would emulate nearly every sport he saw on television.

Still, the only direction his parents pointed to was school. Shane Vereen, thus, finished high school with a 4.0 grade point average and got his degree at the University of California in three-and-a-half years.

"It just put things in priority. If I wasn't doing well in school, I wasn't going to be able to play football," Shane Vereen said.

That intellectual route has translated to the football field. Last week, offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels credited the running back for playing smart.

"That really gives him an opportunity to get in there against some of the more difficult defensive teams that force us to handle the pressures and the blitz pickup," McDaniels said.

After fighting injuries his rookie year, Shane Vereen has started to settle in. Last week, against the Jets, he rushed for 42 yards and had an electric 83-yard touchdown reception.

It's been fun to watch for the proud father.

"I feel so happy for him because I know how bad he wants it. I know what he went through to get it," Henry Vereen said. "I'm really, really proud but I think I'm prouder of him graduating early and with good grades."

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## OL Ryan Wendell



### **Football journey: Ryan Wendell**

By Mike Reiss

November, 26, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – When Fresno State offensive lineman Ryan Wendell wasn't selected in the 2008 NFL Draft, he could have signed with a few different NFL teams.

He chose the Patriots, in part because he received a telephone call from Bill Belichick.

"When he calls you right after the draft, you can't say no to that," Wendell recalled, noting that no other head coaches had done so. "That was pretty neat. Just being a college kid, and having Bill Belichick call you and take some of the time out of his day, it makes you feel like they're not just trying to fill up a camp spot."

Wendell also liked that fellow Fresno State alums Logan Mankins, James Sanders and Stephen Spach were on the roster, and that Fresno head coach Pat Hill had been an assistant on Belichick's Cleveland Browns staff in the early 1990s.

"I knew it would be a good place to come and at least I'd get a fair shake here," he said.

Wendell spent most of his first two seasons on the practice squad before earning a more permanent spot on the roster in 2010. He's been a top backup this year, and in Monday night's win over the Chiefs, he replaced injured center Dan Connolly in the second quarter.

Now the 6-foot-2, 295-pound Wendell is primed to play more Sunday in Philadelphia.

Wendell, 25, shared his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com this week:

When he first started playing football: "I started playing in high school, my freshman year. My mom wouldn't let me play before that. I was heavy, and because of that, I would have had to play with the older kids. So I played soccer. Then, when I got to high school, it was football and wrestling."

What positions he played: "I was always on the offensive and defensive line. In high school, you play both ways."

**Top memories of Diamond Bar (Calif.) High School, where his jersey is retired:** "My freshman year, getting pulled up to varsity, that was pretty awesome. The whole experience is great, playing offense, defense, and on every special teams unit. I wish we went further in the playoffs. We got knocked out both my junior and senior year. Mark Sanchez beat us; he was at Mission Viejo and they had an amazing team. They knocked us out both my junior and senior year."

**Why he attended Fresno State:** "Fresno was the first Division I school to offer me. After meeting [coach] Pat Hill, you couldn't not want to play for the guy. I decided early, during my senior season. I didn't wait until it was over because I didn't like playing that whole recruiting game. They offered me early, I liked them, and as soon as I knew I was comfortable with Pat, I went on my trip [and committed]. I really liked it."

**Top memories at Fresno State:** "Similar to high school, going in and starting as a freshman was great. I got to play a lot of football, a lot of games. Playing next to Logan [Mankins] was great. I played left guard, he played left tackle, and that made it a lot easier having him next to me. Fresno has only beaten Boise one time, so my sophomore year when we beat them, that was pretty awesome. Beating Virginia in a Bowl game my freshman year, then my last year, beating Georgia Tech in a Bowl game was good. I can still hold it over Gary [Guyton's] head."

**Expectations in the 2008 NFL Draft:** "I knew I was an undersized guy from a smaller school and knew I probably wasn't going to get drafted. There was an outside chance on the last day, in the later rounds, so I was just excited to see what teams were picking what guys. I was just hoping I could go somewhere as an undrafted free agent and try to make a team."

**Growing as a player with the Patriots:** “I’m happy about it. I think I’ve benefitted from it. I think we have great coaches here and we have really good players helping the guys around them. I think this is the kind of place where if you work hard, and try to do the right thing, your career will last. Having Dante Scarnecchia as a coach, I’ve gotten a lot better. Watching the other players in front of me the last couple of years has been great. It’s a great system to come in to.”

**Passing on opportunities to join other teams’ roster when he was on the Pats practice squad:** “It’s the Patriots, an organization that wins. I felt like my best opportunity was here. It seems like to me, being here, they develop players very well. Being a bottom-rung guy, which I was coming in, it’s nice to be in a place where they are developing you and trying to get you better.”

**Favorite teams growing up:** “I’m from outside of L.A., so we didn’t have a team. I watched more college football.”

**Favorite players growing up:** “I loved Bruce Matthews. He was the reason I wanted to be an offensive lineman. Watching him play all the spots on the line, even back to the days with the Oilers when they became the Titans, that was my guy.”

**How he overcomes being a smaller player among his peers:** “The same way you do [laughing]. I think you have to play to your strengths. Fundamentally, your size, it’s all about leverage, proper position, technique, that kind of stuff. I can’t do anything to get taller or have longer arms, so I focus on the things I can work on, which is my technique and assignments.”

**Summing up his football journey:** “I’ve just tried to enjoy each step of the way. High school football was all I ever dreamed of, and all I ever wanted, and then someone said ‘Come play college football.’ I did that, and that was all I ever dreamed of and wanted at that time. When that ended, I was so fortunate and blessed with the opportunity to come here and be on the practice squad. I loved it. Each time you get a little taste of something more, you want a little more, but I know this is all a bonus, so I try to enjoy it.”

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## TE D.J. Williams



### **Above all, D.J. Williams' life on rise**

#### **TE shares family's story of escaping abuse**

By Jeff Howe

December 12, 2013

FOXBORO — Patriots tight end D.J. Williams can't always escape the flashes. He could walk down the street, see a face that resembles his father's and feel a chill down his spine, seemingly out of nowhere.

Williams' father, David, nearly tore the family apart with violent rages fueled by drugs and alcohol. That was before D.J., his two older sisters and their mother, Vicky, fled their home in Carrollton, Texas, to start over. But even that, sometimes, isn't enough to shake the horrific memories of the beatings, the crying and, worst of all, the fear.

"I can replay it over all the time. I usually don't think about it," said Williams, re-signed Monday by the Pats after Rob Gronkowski was placed on injured reserve. "Not to make you feel bad, but now that you said it, I can just, 'Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.' I can remember everything. I'm used to it now. I'm not bitter about it or anything, but it's tough and it could be traumatizing for a lot of people."

Williams' mother and her three children packed up a few suitcases shortly after his 11th birthday in September 1999 and moved to a shelter. The family was advised to move farther away from the Texas location when his father was on the lam following a crime spree that eventually yielded a 26-year prison sentence, according to Williams.

"He got in trouble for getting into it with something, ended up shooting somebody, didn't kill him, so he had a warrant out for his arrest for attempted murder, and he was hiding out for a couple days," Williams said. "The cops found out where he was hiding — high-speed chase, didn't stop, so I think they had to throw out the spikes to stop the car. He got out of the car, started shooting, then they shot him down on the interstate. It was intense."

So, Vicky Williams had an idea. She rolled out a map in front of D.J. and asked him to point to his new home, and he stumbled onto Little Rock, Ark. The foursome made the trek to Little Rock and lived in another shelter, a room was shared with another family, until Vicky was able to secure a more stable situation.

To their credit, Vicky and her three children have become public models of the way to survive and flourish after being victims of domestic violence. Vicky works for Women & Children First, an organization that helps people get back on their feet after enduring similar traumas.

This week, she is helping Women & Children First prepare for its big Christmas event.

D.J. Williams is proud to boast of his mother's work, and he doesn't want to shy away from the family's story because he strongly advocates for other victims to speak up and reach out for help. Now, instead of friends calling for autograph requests, they ask for his mother's number to assist a friend or family member.

And Williams has become an eternal optimist as a result. He used to be the quiet kid in the corner, but he has since grown comfortable enough to crack jokes, as he did yesterday while comparing the Patriots playbook to learning a new language such as Spanish in order to pick up an attractive girl.

The third-year pro out of the University of Arkansas has been released three times this season — by the Green Bay Packers, Jacksonville Jaguars and the Patriots — but he turned that around and said the plus is he has become great at packing a suitcase.

Williams, the 2010 Mackey Award winner as the college game's top tight end, caught 152 passes for 1,855 yards and 10 touchdowns in four years at Arkansas. As an athletic receiving tight end, he could potentially carve out a role in Gronkowski's absence.

Williams won the 2010 Spirit Award, which is given to the nation's most inspirational college player, and the honor serves as a reflection of his personal journey.

Someday, Williams said he'll put forth the effort to speak to his father, who remains in a Texas prison but is eligible for parole this year. He said the time hasn't been right yet, though his sisters remain in contact with their father.

Oddly enough, David Williams appeared in a video interview at the Spirit Award banquet, and that was the first time D.J. had seen or heard his father's voice since the family fled the abuse. It was an eerie moment, but just another reminder of how far D.J. has since come in life.

Down the road, he would like to open a foundation for anyone in need, for domestic violence reasons or otherwise. For now, Williams wants to keep thriving, in life and on the field.

"The situation with my family," Williams said, "I could have been like, 'Well, my dad was like this. It's all right if I fall off, or I have an excuse to quit anything. I can just blame it on this.'"

"But that's not the decision or the road I wanted to go down. The cool thing that I understood is it's my decision where I end up. That's what I try to stress to other people in those situations. Don't let it be an excuse to hold them back."

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## DB Tavon Wilson

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots' Tavon Wilson used football as an escape**

By Shalise Manza Young

October 14, 2012

FOXBOROUGH — Darlene Williams had just buried her daughter. Tavon Wilson was coming to grips with losing his mother.

That Saturday, just home from the funeral for Robin Williams, who had drowned at a pool party, Darlene went to her grandson's room to check on him.

His Pop Warner football team had a big game that afternoon. The boy, only 12, looked at his grandma and said he wanted to play. Going to the field was his way to cope.

"I said, 'Well, let's gear up and get going,' " Williams recalled Friday from her Washington, D.C., home. " 'Get your butt going, let's move. I'm ready to go with you, let's go.' "

So Wilson, his grandmother — who now would be raising him and his sister full-time — and his aunt and cousins went to the game, just as they had done on other Saturdays, supporting the boy and his decision.

'Football has always been something that got me away from my problems and my worries in my life.'

His coach, understandably, was shocked to see Wilson, but Williams said he wanted to play. He was going to play.

Really, more than anything, he needed to play.

That's how Wilson dealt with his mother's death. Williams tried to get him to see a psychologist, someone who could help, but he wouldn't go. Instead he went to the fields.

Now, his mother's name is on his arm, her face etched over his heart. She was never far from his thoughts as he journeyed from Pop Warner to H.D. Woodson High School to Illinois to second-round pick of the Patriots in April. She still is never far from his thoughts.

And he still uses the game as an escape.

"Football has always been something that got me away from my problems and my worries in my life, so that's what I used it for," Wilson said.

His means of getting away has become a job. A three-year starter at cornerback and safety for the Illini, he quickly has become a versatile contributor for the Patriots, part of the rebuilding of the defense into a younger, quicker unit.

When he was taken in the second round, 48th overall, some draft experts were shocked that the 6-foot, 210-pound defensive back had been selected so high; to them, Wilson was a fifth- or sixth-round pick at best.

But one man knew better.

Freddie Simmons introduced Wilson to football and was his first coach. He also was his grandfather, Williams's husband, and a father figure in his life, as his own father had been killed when he was a baby. Simmons wanted Wilson to know the game, the mental aspects as well as the physical.

If grandma tried to point out one or two mistakes in a game, Wilson didn't pay her much mind. But if grandpa called with advice . . .

" 'OK, OK, granddad, OK,' " Williams quotes her grandson's response, chuckling.

As a means of explaining why he listened to Simmons but not her, Wilson would tell his grandmother that his grandfather knew what he was talking about.

He listened to Williams for nearly everything else. If he wanted to play football, she required that his grades be kept up. She admits that perhaps she was overprotective — she had three biological children but raised Tavon and his sister and has cared for several others — but also let them discover things on their own.

She tells the story of when Wilson was 14 or 15 and he and his friends were headed to a popular go-go spot in D.C. She couldn't sleep, and heard him come running in the house. There had been an incident with shots fired, and while no one he was with was hurt, it was enough to scare Wilson.

He had never been a problem child, but after that night, Wilson vowed he would not make his grandmother worry about him being out late or with the wrong crowd.

The only issues, Williams jokes, involved girls who had their eyes on the star football player.

### **Joy on draft night**

At Illinois, which he chose over a few other schools, including Boston College, Wilson became a steady contributor, moving to safety for his junior season when the Illini needed someone at the position. In his final season, he started 12 games at cornerback and the other back at safety.

He harbored the dream of playing in the NFL, but he had been taught to put the best interests of the team ahead of his own. In doing so, he made himself into a player the Patriots wanted.

"I never really focused on it," he said. "You just go out there, try to help your teammates the best way you could in high school and college. That's something I always focused on was helping my team reach their goal."

When draft weekend came, Wilson told his grandfather to be home on Saturday, when the fourth through seventh rounds are held, since that is when he thought he'd be picked.

But on Friday night, Simmons retired to the basement, as was his custom, and began calling all of his friends. He was sure that his grandson would be drafted in the second round — he just knew it. His play, his diversity in the defensive backfield . . . Simmons believed that made Wilson an attractive prospect.

Upstairs, the grandson busied himself sending text messages as he sat with his grandmother, and then looked at her.

"Grandma, I just missed a phone call."

Before Williams could finish reminding him that he'd be able to answer the phone if he stopped sending so many texts, her phone began to ring. It was the Patriots.

His grandfather was right.

The family hollered to Simmons, and as he trudged up the stairs, all of the friends that he had called started showing up at the door, along with Wilson's former coaches and other friends and family members.

"He was happy," Williams said of her husband. "He was so, so happy."

### **Staying in school**

When Wilson returned from his initial trip to New England in the days right after the draft, he had a Patriots hat and T-shirt for Simmons.

On May 14, a little more than two weeks after his grandson became an NFL player, Simmons died. There was no football game that weekend for Wilson to find solace in.

Wilson is soft-spoken, the dreadlocks he wore in college gone in favor of a close-cut taper, a thin mustache and goatee neatly trimmed. Proving that on-field lessons aren't the only thing he has picked up quickly, he says he's taking things week-by-week, enjoying the challenges, and is excited for the rest of the season.

Williams reveals that her grandson considered leaving Illinois a year early for the draft, but she has insisted on two things for her children and grandchildren: that they put God first in their life and education second.

She wanted to try to persuade him to stay, but instead decided to take a harder stance after talking with her own grandmother, Eddye, Wilson's great-great-grandmother.

"She loved her 'Tay-Tay,' " Williams said. "She told me, 'There ain't no trying [to get Wilson to stay in school] — you're going to tell him. Because if it's for him, he'll get there.' "

Wilson stayed and was drafted, and Williams got the diploma she so desired for her first grandchild to earn.

Eddye Williams didn't hold her tongue for anyone, even her beloved Tay-Tay. Wilson said that helped him in recent years, as he went through high school and college.

When you live for as long as she did, there's a lot of wisdom to pass on. Eddye died less than a month ago, well past her 112th birthday. For some time, she was believed to be the oldest resident of Washington D.C.

She lived a good long life, Wilson said, so he tries not to be too upset.

He was going to the field for practice not long after the interview with a reporter, another day of football to soothe anything that troubles him.

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