

**2011
NEW
ENGLAND
PATRIOTS**



**FEATURE
CLIPS**

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Chairman and CEO Robert Kraft



Patriots' Kraft carries heavy heart this season

By Mike Silver
August 22, 2011

Long before Robert Kraft bought the New England Patriots, when his sole ownership stake was a pair of season tickets in Section 217, Row 25 at Schaefer Stadium, his wife, Myra, used to cherish autumn Sundays.

"Myra never went to a game till we bought the team," Kraft recalled earlier this month, his eyes twinkling at the recollection. "She used to go to the artsy movies I would never go to, or do The New York Times crossword puzzle. Sundays when the Patriots were home, that was her day of peace."

All of that changed in 1994, when the Kraft family purchased a flailing franchise and created a standard of excellence that reshaped the Patriots into one of professional football's model organizations. Though presiding over the Pats was Robert's domain, he consulted with Myra, whom he married a year before she graduated from Brandeis University in 1964, on all major decisions.

That was the case this spring and summer before the owners and players ended a contentious labor stare down and agreed on a new, 10-year collective bargaining agreement that Robert played an instrumental role in forging. And though Myra was terminally ill – she died after a year-and-a-half battle with cancer on July 20, just days before the deal was reached in principle – she nonetheless encouraged her husband to leave her bedside to participate in the negotiating process.

"There were many times when we had meetings and I told her I didn't want to go, but she said, 'No, that's important to America,'" Kraft said during a long, emotional conversation in his Gillette Stadium office hours before the Patriots' Aug. 11 preseason opener against the Jacksonville Jaguars. "And she felt I could bring value to the table – not that she was objective."

On a much far significant level, I can relate. Having grown close to Kraft during the last 17 years, I try not to let my personal feelings enter into the equation when I do my annual owner rankings. Yet the fact remains that Kraft has been at the top of the list since 2006, and my admiration for his leadership and integrity has persisted through good times and choppy ones.

In the aftermath of Myra's passing – and in acknowledgment of this very unusual offseason – I'm going to suspend the rankings for 2011 and instead write about an owner who pushed for labor peace amid tumultuous personal circumstances and earned the sympathy and admiration of allies and adversaries alike. As Indianapolis Colts president Bill Polian wrote to Kraft in a letter I saw atop his office desk that also offered condolences to a longtime rival: "This CBA, and the great future it provides to the NFL, would not, could not have been done without you. Everyone in the league owes you a debt of gratitude."

Right now, even as he quietly derives satisfaction from the end of the lockout, Kraft is grieving. He's coming to grips with a void that even a fourth Super Bowl championship this February wouldn't come close to filling, and I don't expect him to get over his loss anytime soon, if ever.

"I'm messed up," Kraft said, wiping away tears, a few minutes after I entered his office. "Really messed up. I just can't believe I won't have my sweetheart here with me ever again."

Kraft is fond of telling the story of his first date with Myra, when she was 19 and he was 20: "We went out for a steak. She proposed to me." Yet as assertive and strong-willed as Mrs. Kraft was, she also, as the Boston Herald's front-page headline proclaimed on the day after her death, had a heart of gold.

A tireless philanthropist, Myra has been rightfully memorialized as a "great, great woman," and those closest to her marveled at her capacity for empathy. In March, while she and Robert were on their annual trip to Israel, escorting a group of 80 American Christians and Jews on a tour of the country designed to promote

religious tolerance and cultural cooperation, she suspected she had suffered a relapse of the cancer that had been discovered and treated the previous year.

“She knew something wasn’t right,” Robert recalled. “But she was determined to finish the trip. She ran the whole thing, and we went all over the country. Then she came back and had an operation. The head of partners of Brigham and Women’s Mass General Hospital happened to be on the trip with us, and he later told me he couldn’t believe that she was able to endure the pain.”

It was during that trip that, back in Washington, talks between the owners and NFLPA imploded and each side took dramatic action: the union decertified, and Patriots quarterback Tom Brady (notes) and nine co-plaintiffs filed an antitrust lawsuit against the league; the owners locked out the players and, among other things, canceled their health insurance.

For awhile, the atmosphere was frosty. Then, in early June, Kraft and a handful of owners flew to suburban Chicago and participated in the first of a series of “secret” settlement talks with a small group of player representatives.

Eventually, progress was made, and the foundation for a mutually satisfactory settling of the two sides’ differences was formed. Not coincidentally, beginning with a group dinner after a day of negotiations at the Aspen Wye River Conference Center in Maryland (site of the 1995 peace talks brokered by President Clinton between Israel and the Palestine Authority that led to a historic accord), things began to thaw on a personal level, and Kraft’s ability to relate to principals on the opposite side of the table was a welcome development.

“To assume that this was ever personal in the sense of there being animosity between the two sides, that would be a mistake,” NFLPA executive director DeMaurice Smith said last week. “But at the same time, to assume that it was never personal – especially with respect to Robert – that would also be a mistake. Early on, it became clear what he was going through. And we really connected.”

Four years ago, Smith’s wife, Karen, was diagnosed with breast cancer. She has since been given a clean bill of health, but as the union leader and the Patriots’ owner began to bond, the feelings of fear and dread were readily accessed.

“While I can’t claim to know anything about what he’s going through, in some respects it does bring back the things we went through in my family,” Smith says of Kraft. “There’s a touchstone of commonality. It triggers all of those emotions of love, partnership, your kids, what you do at work and how it fits with what is truly important to you ... all of those things start to bubble back.

“The decision that he was going to have a significant presence through the negotiations – just making the decision alone, while those things are going on in your house, to me is the most significant thing. Because no one would have blamed him for sliding out. And I’m not sure I could’ve made that decision that he did.”

Kraft said he was prepared to forego the labor process entirely, but for his wife’s encouragement. He flew home most nights to return to her side, often fielding phone calls from Smith, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell or other key figures in the settlement talks.

At times during the talks, Kraft concedes, he questioned his participation.

“There were plenty of moments where I thought, ‘Why am I here?’ ” Kraft says. “I’m thinking of my sweetheart, and I wanted to be with her every minute. Really, the only time I wasn’t with her was at these meetings, and when we’d get off in minutiae or [talking about] things I thought were irrelevant – they might not have been, but to me they were – I was thinking, ‘What am I doing here?’

‘Maybe I shouldn’t say that, but I was.’

Says Smith: “For him to want to commit that amount of time to this under those circumstances, at the end of the day it became clear to me that part of it was just how much love he had for Myra, and the strength of their relationship – to make sure the game and the business that they loved continued.”

Kraft wasn’t merely pleading the owners’ case during those discussions. He helped come up with several innovative suggestions that reconciled his side’s desire to reward owners for making capital investments and

taking entrepreneurial risks with an acknowledgment that players have limited career spans and a need to maximize short-term revenues.

The result was a deal which, Kraft says, “brought balance. We did a good deal for both sides, and having a 10-year deal allows us in this economic climate to really grow the game. De Smith and the players were smart enough to realize that with this in place we can go out together and go after entertainment dollar. If we grow this sport, they’re going to make out great, and so are we as owners. And Roger [Goodell] was just phenomenal in understanding the different agendas.”

Whereas Smith and others on the players’ side were often skeptical of the owners’ motives, they viewed Kraft’s insistence upon doing a deal fair to both sides to be genuine, which is one reason they repeatedly requested his presence. (The other owners who were mainstays during the latter stages of negotiations included the Giants’ John Mara, the Panthers’ Jerry Richardson, the Chargers’ Dean Spanos and the Chiefs’ Clark Hunt.)

“He’s been an owner for a long time, and he’s been involved in a lot of different aspects of the league,” Brady says of Kraft. “He’s a very reasonable person, and he approaches these things very intelligently. It’s not emotional.

“He has always told me he wants players to be very happy, and I believe he sincerely wanted to make a deal that worked for everyone. That’s why he was so invaluable at the negotiating table. No ego. No rhetoric. Just, how do we take the greatest, most popular sport there is and make it even bigger?”

The Krafts’ eldest son, Jonathan, the Patriots’ president, said his father was determined to get an agreement done in time to save the 2011 season.

“Throughout the process one of the things Robert would say to me over and over again was, ‘We can’t let the last 5-10 percent on a business deal impact the realities of millions of people for whom going to the games on weekends is their life,’ ” Jonathan Kraft says. “He really wasn’t thinking about us and our business end and what it would mean if it wasn’t solved.

“The deal was talked about in terms of how the fans of the game, nationally and of the Patriots, would be affected. And my mother, I believe, understood that as well. For my mother, my father doing something that was so psychologically important to many Americans who maybe don’t have control of every facet of their lives was worthy of his attention. And I think that’s what drove my father and gave him the strength to leave her bedside.”

If demonstrating empathy toward others was a way of life for Myra, it’s fair to say she would have been at least slightly pleased by the degree to which that quality manifested itself at the bargaining table.

“Empathy might be one of the most underappreciated strengths in today’s world,” Smith says. “I don’t think many people in the political or business realms spend a lot of time cultivating and recognizing the strength of empathy. Nobody does. They think for some strange reason it’s a weakness, but it’s not.

“Robert was creative in coming up with ideas to resolve our differences. Obviously, he is an extremely savvy businessperson, and obviously he’s going to always represent his side’s interests, and I’m going to represent ours. But there are ways you can have discussions where you’re trying to find solutions – and that was the core framework of our working relationship. And the core part of our friendship is recognizing just how difficult this is when you’re losing your soul mate.”

The outpouring of support and compassion Kraft has received since Myra’s death has caught him off guard. “She doesn’t know how much she touched people,” he said, pointing to two overflowing boxes of letters next to his desk chair. “There are about 5,000 letters per box, and more boxes at home, and most of them I haven’t been able to open yet.

“I do it at night, and then I have trouble sleeping. But I’ve vowed to read every one. I’ve vowed to read everything. She was the No. 1 topic worldwide on Twitter for three or four hours – I want to read it all.”

From celebrities (Matt Lauer, Larry Bird) to moguls (Rupert Murdoch) to dignitaries (Israeli president Shimon Peres wrote a letter which read, in part, “Myra was larger than life and deeply respected by all she touched”), the tributes have been touching. Pointing to an orchid across his office, Kraft said, “That’s from

Elton [John]. They were very close. I'm not supposed to know, but he's got a construction crew coming to my house to put in a whole garden in her memory."

The day after Myra's death, when Kraft sat shiva with his family (including sons Danny, Josh and David; Jonathan flew to Atlanta to represent the club at an NFL owner meeting ratifying the tentative labor agreement), waves of current and former Patriots players arrived unannounced. Among the guests were wideout Randy Moss(notes), who was shipped out of town last October in an abrupt trade; Drew Bledsoe, Brady's predecessor at quarterback, who flew in from Washington; and Raiders defensive lineman Richard Seymour(notes), traded by the Pats shortly before the start of the '09 season.

One of the most emotional public reactions came from Colts center and NFLPA executive committee member Jeff Saturday(notes), a mainstay at the bargaining table, who embraced Kraft at the news conference announcing the new CBA five days after Myra's death and said: "A special thanks to Myra Kraft, who even in her weakest moment, allowed Mr. Kraft to come and fight this out. Without him, this deal does not get done. ... [He] helped us save football."

Between his new-found friendship with Saturday and his appreciation for Polian's letter, Kraft will have a very hard time working up much enmity for the team in Indianapolis anytime soon.

"That's our archenemy," Kraft said. "I don't know how I can like Peyton [Manning]'s center, but I do. And [now] I like Peyton because of him."

Meanwhile, Manning's chief rival for Player of the Era honors understands what his boss is going through and is driven to make him proud during this difficult time. The Patriots have dedicated their season to Myra's memory and will wear a decal honoring her on their jerseys.

"It's a special year for him," Brady says. "We know that. Every time we run out with those patches on our jersey, that's who we represent, and we'll be thinking of him. Every game will be emotional in that sense, just cause of what it means for him. We always want to represent him well and do our best for him, and especially now.

"He's a wonderful person, and I think family has always been what's most important to him. He gives his life to his family, through and through. And because of that, everyone who knows him understands the loss he's had to endure."

Before I left Kraft's office, he summoned Jonathan to the room, and they discussed how best to honor Myra for that night's game: leave her seat empty, or have one of Robert's eight grandchildren in the chair? They went with the latter option, reasoning that Myra would have wanted it that way.

A few minutes later, Kraft showed me a large, framed photograph of Myra taken on the Gillette Stadium sideline from a few seasons ago. A Patriots fan had presented it to Robert a few hours earlier after having driven to the stadium from Pennsylvania for that purpose. Wearing a stylish, red, custom-designed jacket, Myra looked radiant and happy to be there – a far cry from those absent autumn Sundays of long ago.

"If I look at that picture, I'll break down," Robert said, choking up. "I can't believe that I won't see her again."

And while he knows that nothing that happens this season or beyond can change that circumstance, he's happy that football has returned, and he knows his sweetheart would be, too.

"The love and support of my family and friends has been over the top, and thank God football's back, because there's something every day to keep me occupied," Kraft said. "I'll tell you something: If we would have missed games, we would've done irreparable harm and we would have hurt both owners and players. Especially in these tough economic times, this game has become such an important part of Americana – and my blessed wife understood that."

For that reason, there can still be a measure of peace on Sundays for the partner she left behind.

The Boston Globe

Kraft, his heart heavy, lifts NFL

Patriots owner helped bring accord during his wife's final days

By Greg A. Bedard

July 26, 2011

The National Football League is back in action. And Patriots owner Robert Kraft is getting much of the credit.

Not only did Kraft help owners and players end a 135-day lockout and agree to a 10-year deal, but he did so while tending to his wife, Myra, who died Wednesday of cancer.

The role Kraft played in the negotiations was not lost on anyone at yesterday's press conference announcing the deal. Nor was the memory of his wife.

"A special thanks to Myra Kraft, who even in her weakest moment allowed Mr. Kraft to come and fight this out and without him, this deal does not get done," said Jeff Saturday, a representative of the NFL Players Association and a center for one of the Patriots' biggest rivals, the Indianapolis Colts.

He added that Kraft is "a man who helped us save football and we're so gracious for that, we're gracious for his family and for the opportunity he presented to get this deal done. So thank you very much - we really appreciate it."

Saturday and Kraft then embraced, in what will be the enduring image of this often contentious labor battle.

Kraft was at the press conference at the invitation of NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and Players Association executive director DeMaurice Smith. It was Kraft's first public appearance since the memorial service for his wife.

That Kraft was on a scheduled break for shiva, the seven-day mourning period in the Jewish faith, was evident. He was unshaven and, in the practice of keri'ah, wore a torn black tie under his suit.

Those familiar with the negotiations lauded Kraft for his behind-the-scenes help in producing the breakthrough.

He helped create the smaller group of negotiators - without lawyers - that made progress on difficult issues. Kraft, who dearly missed having "his guys" in his locker room, told stories of his players and coaches over private dinners to help put the players' minds at ease. He gave Smith a ride on his private jet en route to a round of talks, helping the two forge a bond. And Kraft wasn't afraid to tell his fellow owners when they were wrong on an issue to help push things forward.

"We needed him in this process because when he gets up in the room, people listen to him," said New York Giants owner John Mara, another key negotiator on the owners' side. "When he got up and spoke during any of our negotiating sessions, the players paid attention and respected what he had to say. He had a tremendous influence over this whole process. I don't really think we would have been standing out in front of the union headquarters announcing this deal if he had not been involved."

Mara and Foxworth said they were amazed at Kraft's ability to stay focused on the talks while his wife was ill.

"He told me today, 'This is the way she would have wanted it,' " Mara said. "He got very emotional today before we went over to the union's headquarters to announce this deal. I think he got a little bit emotional there. This has been a tough ordeal for him and they just have so much respect and admiration for the way he conducted himself. I'll tell you what, I think that Patriots fans are lucky to have him as the owner."

Baltimore Ravens cornerback Domonique Foxworth, who along with Saturday was present at every negotiating session, said that without Kraft's help, "I think it's a distinct possibility that we wouldn't be talking about a new labor deal . . . I'd say that he was the single biggest player on their side. Without him, someone else would have needed to step up and I don't know that someone would have."

Kraft continued to play a key role after his wife died. On Saturday, while family and friends filled his home, Kraft excused himself to join a conference call with the key labor players.

"He was almost happy to have the call and have something to do during this," Mara said. "It really said a lot about him as an owner, as somebody who cares about this sport."

There were the times during federal mediation sessions in March when Kraft's impatience with lawyers for both sides brought outbursts.

"I think that probably turned some people off and made it more difficult to negotiate at first," Foxworth said. "But it also singled him out in our mind as somebody that wanted to get a deal done. So we kind of picked him out as a guy that we needed to talk to because we needed to get a deal done."

If the players had any doubt Kraft was fair, that ended when they reached an agreement on the rookie salary system. Kraft excused himself to return to Myra, and when the other players and owners reconvened, those representing the NFL scoffed at the system.

"All the owners were like, 'Nope, we're not going there. No way he said that,' " Foxworth said. "And it completely halted all of the progress."

After a phone conversation with the owners got nowhere, Kraft boarded his plane the next morning and flew back to make his case. "Everyone's tune was different," Foxworth said. "I don't know what he did or said or how he explained it to them, but he made it so it made sense. He rescued it this morning."

Foxworth entered the talks with a very different view of Kraft. Foxworth saw an interview where Kraft said - and Foxworth said it is burned in his mind - that the owners bear all the risk in the NFL.

"Obviously that doesn't sit well with us because we are risking our health and all of those things," Foxworth said. "I remember coming into it thinking he would kind of be a hardliner. And he wasn't."

"Now that I've gotten to know him, that's not who he is. At no point did he wish to give us the short end of the stick. Where he came from all of the time was a genuine place of wanting to get this done and wanting it to be reasonably fair for both sides. That's what we have today, thanks to him."



Football's true Patriot

Robert Kraft has turned New England into a football juggernaut. Now all he has to do is save the NFL.

By William D. Cohan, contributor

Neither fate nor the collective bargaining gods could have timed it better. Three days before the start of the NFL season this year, on a sunny Thursday morning at 6:34, Patriots star quarterback Tom Brady was cruising in his black Audi down Gloucester Avenue in Boston's Back Bay when he slammed into a minivan that had run a red light coming down Commonwealth Avenue.

Brady tried to swerve, but the front end of the Audi smashed into the side of the minivan. "I was scared out of my mind," Brady later said. Glass shattered everywhere, a woman walking her dog nearby fell over backward, and the passenger of the minivan was seriously injured; the police had to use the Jaws of Life to extract him. Brady walked away unscathed -- he practiced with the team later that day -- but not before giving the Patriots' owner, Robert Kraft, the scare of his life. "We have a lot to be thankful for," Kraft told ESPN after the accident. "It was really a miracle."

The very next day, miracle in hand, Brady went to Kraft's office and signed a new, four-year, \$72 million contract that would keep him with the Patriots until 2014 and would make him the highest-paid player in NFL history. The contract extension had been the subject of intense public scrutiny for months, with Brady heading into the final season of his six-year deal unsigned. While they had been working toward a deal, the accident, both parties say, was the tipping point that forced action. "It put in perspective everything we're

doing," Kraft said. "We're very, very lucky." (As he later told Fortune, "We have a special relationship. He's like a real son.")

It was a particularly tricky situation for Kraft, the billionaire owner of the Boston-based, privately held Kraft Group, a conglomerate with paper-packaging, real estate development, commodities trading, and private equity investments. As one of the highest-profile owners in the league, he has a key role in the NFL's tense standoff with the players' union over compensation, which could force a lockout of next year's season if a deal isn't reached. "Brady is a unique asset," Kraft said a few weeks after the momentous day. "I think we did it in a responsible way. What we did was right for the team and right for the league."

Robert Kraft certainly knows what's right for the Patriots. In the 16 years since he has owned the team, he has taken one of the sorriest franchises in the NFL and transformed it into one of the most feared, admired, and profitable. Although he paid a record \$172 million in 1994 for the team, most estimates of the Pats' value these days are around \$1.4 billion. Along the way, he and the Patriots, under head coach Bill Belichick, have won three Super Bowls and more games in the past 10 years -- 126 -- than any other NFL team in any decade. The Patriots also won 21 games in a row in 2003 and 2004, the longest consecutive winning streak in NFL history, inclusive of playoff games. (To be sure, the Pats haven't exactly been shy about any of this, proclaiming the 2000s the team's "Decade of Dominance.")

Kraft's remarkable successes with both the Patriots and with his industrial businesses have given him tremendous sway both with other NFL owners and with league executives. In just the past few years his profile in the league has risen markedly. He serves on the NFL owners' executive committee and four other committees, more than any other owner. As co-chair of the league's powerful broadcasting committee, he takes an active role in negotiating the lucrative contracts that allow CBS, Fox, Comcast, ABC, and ESPN to televise NFL games. In 2006, Kraft's support for Roger Goodell was influential in getting the new commissioner selected. "I view Bob like I do Lamar Hunt, one of the founders of the league," says Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys. "I don't know that we have anybody that today has made that kind of contribution to the NFL franchise." In other words, in a league known for its swagger, no one has more clout these days than Bob Kraft.

Now, with the labor standoff, Kraft's role is heightened anew. At issue is how much of the league's revenue -- currently around 60% -- the players will get in the future. The debate is complex, tense, and raw, with years of history on both sides -- and given Kraft's stature in the league, no deal is going to get done without his blessing.

Kraft feels certain the league and the union will sign an agreement in time to prevent a lockout. "We're going to get a deal," he told Fortune during a recent conversation in his spacious office in Gillette Stadium, where he sits surrounded by Patriots memorabilia. "I think a number of us will want to do whatever we've got to do to do it." Kraft's words have considerable weight. When he publicly expressed optimism after the league's recent owners' meeting in Chicago and said he thought a deal would be likely, it made headlines.

He also predicts the NFL season will be extended to 18 games a year, rather than the 16 currently played. While that will increase the already extreme wear and tear on the players -- an issue now in the spotlight after a series of injuries and vicious hits in recent weeks -- more games played means more revenue for the teams that can then be shared with the players. "That's the key to the deal," Kraft says. "If you don't grow the pie, you can't pay your bills." But in Chicago, Kraft also struck a somewhat ominous tone and urged the players union to agree to a deal sooner rather than later. "It'll be less of a deal the more time that goes by," he said. "If we go down the road of a lockout and losing games, we all lose." Jerry Jones agrees, marking a united front between the league's two most powerful owners. "We all want to get a deal done before the start of the next year," Jones told Fortune. "That is the will of all of the owners." (Neither the Players' Association nor its attorneys responded to requests for a comment about Kraft or the labor negotiations.)

Labor deals aside, no other owner extends himself on behalf of the league more than Kraft. During the recent renegotiation of the NFL's lucrative TV contracts, Kraft flew the NFL's top executives -- Goodell, CFO Anthony Noto, and Steve Bornstein, CEO of cable's NFL Network -- back and forth across the country on his Gulfstream IV so they could attend the meetings together and talk strategy on the way. "Robert was side by side with Roger, myself, and Steve and the media team in strategically thinking about these deals," says Noto, who recently left the NFL to return to Goldman Sachs (GS). "It's a lot of work and effort for him, a huge investment of his personal and professional currency in traveling across the country and personally calling on the Les Moonveses, the Rupert Murdochs, the Mel Karmazins of the world." In 2008, Kraft -- along with Jerry Jones -- went with NFL executives to Philadelphia to try to resolve an ongoing dispute with Comcast (CMCSA) about how many of the cable company's subscribers should have access to the NFL Network.

"Why does Robert Kraft get on the Acela train, go down to Philadelphia, and personally invest the time to solve complex differences of opinion?" Noto asks. "Because he cares about the league first and last. He does not get any more than any other club for the investment of his time. He gets 1/32 of that deal" -- referring to the league's model in which the 32 owners split revenue equally -- "not 2/32 or 16/32. It's 1/32." Kraft is modest when it comes to this kind of praise. "We're all fractious," he says of his fellow owners. "But we're only as good as our weakest partners. That's not a trite saying. I want everyone to do well. If the NFL does well, the New England Patriots are going to do well."

Others outside of football lavish similar praise on Kraft. Brian Moynihan, CEO of Bank of America (BAC), has known him for many years. (Kraft Group is a client of the bank.) "He understands the power of brand and the power of bringing good business discipline to everything he's done," Moynihan says.

Not that Kraft ignores his team's own interests. In 2002, at a cost of \$325 million, he opened CMGI Field, which soon became Gillette Stadium and ushered in the NFL's era of grand sports palaces (prior to Gillette, the Pats played in Foxboro Stadium, infamous for its lack of proper food joints and seats that froze in winter). In 2007, Kraft opened Patriot Place, a \$350 million shopping and entertainment complex adjacent to Gillette Stadium with 1.3 million square feet of retail space. Later he added a movie theater and a luxury hotel; this month country singer Toby Keith will open a restaurant there. In 2008, CBS (CBS) and the Kraft Group opened CBS Scene at Patriot Place, a unique, three-story sports bar and lounge with broadcast facilities. "It seemed like a great idea to extend our brand," Moonves says.

Two things stand out about Robert Kraft: He does not come by his passion for football naturally, and he is a preternaturally gifted risk taker. Although he was a sports enthusiast and a fair athlete growing up in suburban Boston, he wasn't allowed to participate in organized sports. The games were played on Saturday, when the orthodox Krafts were at synagogue, and the practices were during the week, when Kraft was at Hebrew school. His father, a dressmaker, wanted Kraft to be a rabbi.

Kraft went to Columbia on a scholarship and finally played on the lightweight football team. (In 2007 the Krafts gave \$5 million to Columbia to support intramural athletics; the university named its football field after him. There are also the Kraft Family Stadium and a number of other parks in Jerusalem.) He went on to Harvard Business School, and, after he married his wife, Myra, her father, Jacob Hiatt, gave Kraft his start in business. Hiatt, a successful entrepreneur in Worcester, Mass., was the principal owner of what became Rand-Whitney, which made paper packaging for food, toys, and cosmetics. Kraft joined the business and, using borrowed money, ultimately bought out Hiatt's stake.

A passionate Boston sports fan, in the late '70s Kraft launched what would become a decades-long, highly unorthodox pursuit of the ownership of the Patriots. In 1985 he bought an option on 300 acres of land surrounding Sullivan Stadium by paying a group of Boston businessmen \$1 million a year for 10 years for the right to buy the acreage for \$18 million. That gave him a decade to figure out how to get both the stadium and the team. In 1986 the Sullivans put the Patriots up for sale but without the stadium, so Kraft passed on the deal. The Pats went instead to the late Remington razors owner Victor Kiam for \$87 million. But when the Sullivans ran into further financial difficulties two years later, Kraft and a partner beat the Kiams' bid and bought the stadium out of bankruptcy for \$25 million in a deal that required the Patriots to stay there until 2001. In the meantime, with an option on the land and the stadium, Kraft was getting \$2 million a year in revenue from parking and concessions.

In 1992, he had yet another chance to buy the team when Kiam ran into financial trouble. But Kraft passed again, and the fate of the team ended up being controlled by one of Kiam's creditors, James Busch Orthwein, an advertising executive and the great-grandson of the founder of Anheuser-Busch (BUD); Orthwein said he would either sell the team or move it to St. Louis.

But to do so, Orthwein had to deal with Kraft. To get out of the stadium lease in Foxborough, Orthwein offered Kraft \$75 million, but Kraft turned him down -- and offered to buy the Patriots for \$172 million. Before sealing the deal, he called Massachusetts Gov. William Weld and won his promise to help Kraft build a new stadium. "We could not compete and win in that old stadium," Kraft says. "Guys used to go in the ladies' room and urinate in the sink while women were there. It was not a family atmosphere."

It would be another eight years before Kraft would get the stadium he wanted, and many eggs -- and promises -- were broken along the way. In 1999 he backed out of a plan to move the Patriots to Hartford at the 11th hour, turning down more than \$1.2 billion in state funding and guaranteed cash flows in the process. But he used the threat of moving the team to get the Massachusetts legislature to provide \$75

million in infrastructure money (which he is paying back) -- and to get the NFL to make \$150 million in low-interest loans available to him to build Gillette Stadium. (Kraft and the NFL paid \$2.4 million to the state of Connecticut to cover costs and bruised egos.) In the end, Kraft likes to point out, the Kraft Group oversaw the construction of the stadium and financed it privately. "This is the only stadium in America that is 100% private," he says.

Successful moguls often leave a trail of wounded combatants in their wake, and Kraft has his own lengthy list beyond just the spurned citizens of Connecticut. There's Stephen Karp, the Boston real estate developer who reportedly remains bitter toward Kraft after selling Kraft his portion of Sullivan Stadium six years after they bought it together. There's Boston restaurateur Charles Sarkis, who lost a lawsuit with Kraft over his failure to pay Kraft rent on the land next to Foxboro Stadium where Sarkis had a racetrack. Boston investor David Mugar is still peeved at Kraft for exercising his option in 1991, as a minority investor, to sell his stake in a Boston TV station that Mugar controlled. Kraft made a bundle, but Mugar lost control of the station. In Montville, Conn., the people don't care for him because after Kraft bought the Robertson Paper Box Co. in the mid-1980s, he made promises about creating jobs that won him concessions from the town to help him build a new plant -- then sold two older plants and caused job losses anyway.

But everyone makes enemies in business. In fact there are probably more people upset by Kraft's personnel moves on the football field. The list of Patriots players aggrieved by Kraft's perceived slights has been amply documented by the sports media and includes Mike Vrabel, Lawyer Malloy, Ty Law, Asante Samuel, Richard Seymour, and many others. But to Kraft, swapping football players is no different from intelligently pruning a portfolio of stocks. "When we started to cook is when I understood that this team should be run like we run our other businesses, with the same core values," Kraft says. "You have to make tough decisions. But managing personnel in this business is like having a portfolio of 53 stocks." Earlier this summer, after the Patriots and its Pro Bowl guard Logan Mankins could not reach an agreement on terms of a new contract, things turned acrimonious when, after Mankins made a comment questioning Kraft's integrity, he apologized privately to Kraft but refused to apologize publicly.

And then there is the unsentimental trade last month of wide receiver Randy Moss back to the Minnesota Vikings. Shortly after Moss was recruited, Kraft gave him a stern lecture in his office about not misbehaving in any way that would embarrass the Kraft family. If Moss did, Kraft told him, he would be released immediately. Moss came around to Kraft's side of the desk and hugged him. "Mr. Kraft, I want to be part of your family," Moss said. But in the few weeks before the trade, Moss had started complaining publicly about not getting the football enough, about wanting more money, and about wanting to be traded. And then he was gone.

Kraft made two brilliant personnel decisions in 2000: hiring Belichick as the Patriots' head coach and de facto general manager and drafting Brady in the sixth round that year. Nobody else in the league wanted either. "Anyone could have hired him," Kraft says of Belichick. The same could be said for Brady. Why, after Belichick's struggles in Cleveland and being so closely associated with the difficult Bill Parcells, did Kraft pick him up? "My gut," Kraft says without pause. "That's how the best things in my life have happened."

No doubt he will rely on his gut again to help him finesse the labor negotiations, the most difficult impasse the NFL has faced in recent history. No owner has more at stake in the talks than Kraft. The last decade has increased the Patriots' value exponentially, along with Kraft's net worth. And if pro football games aren't being played in Foxborough, the big parking lot outside Kraft's office will be empty, and fewer people will be shopping at Patriot Place.

Kraft has a Zen approach to it all, befitting the rabbi his father wanted him to be. "I've got no complaints," he says. "I'm not holier than thou. I've got plenty of faults. But building bridges and doing the right thing is what I try to do. I have to pinch myself every day when I drive here." Spoken like a true Patriot.

Head Coach Bill Belichick

The Boston Globe

Star billing

New NFL Films production plays off Belichick's intensity, but also shows softer side of a football lifer

By Chad Finn
September 8, 2011

It would be neither fair nor accurate to suggest that NFL Films is the propaganda arm of the NFL. Sure, the league and its personalities are traditionally portrayed in a glorious, sepia-toned light, and there's a better chance of Bill Belichick showing up on the sideline Monday night in Miami wearing a Jets hoodie than there is of NFL Films producing programs titled "Helmet to Helmet: The Long History of Concussions" or "Roger Goodell's Most Arbitrary Suspensions."

But as Belichick has been known to say, it is what it is, and for 50 years NFL Films has been exactly this: An iconic, beloved, and extremely effective promotional tool for what is good and fun and entertaining about the NFL. It's not journalism, and it's not supposed to be. It's entertainment, and it's often extraordinary.

So it came as little surprise last week when the surprise announcement of NFL Films's latest project was greeted with great anticipation, particularly among Patriots loyalists. "Bill Belichick: A Football Life," a two-part, two-hour behind-the-scenes look at the Patriots' 2009 season, debuts Sept. 15 at 9 p.m. on the NFL Network, with the second airing Sept. 22 at 10 p.m. The network made the premiere episode available in advance, and it can be confirmed: The anticipation is rewarded. In its usual way, NFL Films has gotten Belichick right. The first episode begins with these words: "If you think you know Bill Belichick, think again." What immediately follows is a prolonged scene of the Belichick we certainly don't know, relaxed and barefoot and fishing on his boat off the Nantucket coast. For someone often perceived as dour, he offers more than a few upbeat platitudes. "Perfect, huh? . . . "Yeah, there's some serenity. Don't worry about third-and-long out here," he said.

But soon enough - the next day, in fact - he's back in his familiar territory for the first day of training camp, and that's when "A Football Life" shifts to more football than life. It's the beginning of the Patriots' 50th season, Belichick's 35th as an NFL coach. It also marks quarterback Tom Brady's return from a knee injury that ended his 2008 season in Week 1. Compelling story lines were not lacking.

A skeptic may wonder about Belichick's motives for allowing such access. One reason is obvious: his well-documented affinity for the sport and its history. Producer Ken Rodgers told USA Today the Patriots couldn't have been more accommodating and requested just two phrases to be cut, both play-calling terminology. There is enough insight and candor to believe in the genuineness of Belichick's intentions. NFL Films not only documents legacies, but in some instances has created them. Perhaps there's an element of shrewdness in Belichick allowing himself to become the first person miked by NFL Films for an NFL season. But the motives are pure enough, and his is a legacy worth documenting.

The film does emphasize what seems to be an uncanny knack for prescience. He foreshadows one reason for this team's eventual downfall during a coaches' meeting before an early-season game. "If you take [Randy] Moss away on deep part of the field and get down low on [Wes] Welker, we're done. We're done. We can't run the ball. We can't throw it to anybody else. We're done." He notes during a casual conversation that he thinks the Jets will play hard for their blustery new coach, Rex Ryan. And it cannot be coincidence that he's shown chatting amicably with then-Bengals receiver Chad Ochocinco before a preseason game. "We're double-covering you," Belichick says, "so you can take the rest of the night off."

For football junkies, the biggest thrills and chills come when his coaching acumen is on full display, whether it's with his son Brian, who has the same duties one imagines Belichick's father Steve, a widely respected coach in his day, gave his son when he was tagging along on the sidelines, or when he's rapid-fire quizzing his team on specific game situations. There's also repeated confirmation of his oft-rumored dry sense of humor, whether he's good-naturedly talking trash to his offensive line ("I'd love to play against you guys. Just one play") or using far more vulgar and specific terms to tell then-Ravens receiver Derrick Mason he probably shouldn't be talking so much when his team is losing.

It's downright fascinating to watch and listen in as Belichick praises an opponent while simultaneously plotting to turn the player's strength into weakness. Belichick's longstanding appreciation for Ravens safety Ed Reed is confirmed during a meeting in which he's going over Ravens personnel with Brady.

"Ed Reed's Ed Reed," Belichick says with more than a hint of admiration. "He covers up for a lot of stuff. Everything that he does, he does at an exceptional level."

Those moments when he's engulfed in football minutiae with Brady stand out. When Belichick and Brady converse during a meeting, there's a casualness to it, as if it's peer to peer rather than coach to player. In fact, it's Brady who devises the way to exploit Reed's aggressiveness, a complex-to-the-armchair-quarterback scheme that Belichick acknowledges with, "Good idea. Good idea."

A couple of action scenes later, there's Randy Moss scoring in single coverage after Brady reads Reed's blitz perfectly.

But the most honest reasons for Belichick's willingness to give NFL Films access are evident not in New England but New York. During a Week 2 visit to Giants Stadium to play the Jets, Belichick gives the three-person crew that followed him a tour of the stadium where he made his coaching name as the Giants' defensive coordinator in the '80s. It was his last visit to Giants Stadium as a coach - it was demolished after the season - and the revisiting of his roots puts him in an anecdotal mood. He looks at linebacker Lawrence Taylor's locker and chuckles as he recalls when a fellow coach's daughter found \$75,000 in uncashed checks in the reckless superstar's box of mail. He points out where each coach used to sit. He talks about beating Bill Parcells at racquetball "probably more than he beat me. And of course, as soon as it was over, he'd light into like four cigarettes." You could swear you heard him chortle.

The realization of what football and his place in the game means to Belichick is most evident in one of those candid moments in the bowels of Giants Stadium.

"It's a small room," he says, his voice cracking. "As I stand here . . . it's surprising how small it is.

"Damn, I spent a lot of hours in that room. I loved it here. I loved it here."

At that moment, he is sentimental and nostalgic and borderline maudlin, and to see the stoic coach that way is both jarringly unfamiliar and endearing. But the first episode also reminds us of what we already knew about Bill Belichick: He's an extraordinarily prepared coach with a knack for making smart football decisions.

Allowing NFL Films to document his legacy absolutely ranks as one of them.

The Providence Journal

Because he's the best, in Belichick we all trust

By Bill Reynolds

Thursday, August 25, 2011

He has become the NFL coach of his generation.

No matter that he hasn't won a Super Bowl since the 2004 season. No matter that his Patriots have been upset at home in the playoffs the last two seasons, losing to both the Ravens and the Jets. No matter that he was scarred in 2007 with the Spygate mess, the whiff of scandal. No matter that you can make a case that he's no longer as dominant as he once was, at least in the postseason anyway.

He is still the undisputed coach of his generation, the man who is considered the smartest, most cerebral coach in the game, the one with the best schemes, the better mousetrap.

Maybe more important, he is the most respected.

That's no small praise, not in a cutthroat business in which reputations come and go like windblown punts, a fickle business in which coaches always are suspect, blamed for everything from missed field goals to defensive breakdowns to any kind of loss.

It's also not without a certain trace of irony.

In a profession in which many coaches are masters at self-promotion, Belichick all but runs from any of it. He often treats the media as if it's just another opponent. His postgame press conferences have almost become legendary, a case study of clichés and bad body language, as if he were in some dentist's chair. In a time of media consultants and spin, a time of image and branding, Belichick is the antithesis of all this.

He is not some ex-player, someone who once walked the walk of the players and gets a degree of respect for that. He wasn't even some player in some big-time college football factory, playing instead at Division III Wesleyan, far away from the bright lights.

In a sense, he's the geek who has won the support of the jocks, the brainiac in the ultimate physical game.

Overstated? No doubt.

But not without a certain truth.

So how has he made it all work?

His knowledge.

He discovered early in his NFL career, back in the mid '70s when he was paid \$25 a week to be a glorified gofer, his entre into the NFL, that players would listen to you if they thought you could help them.

"He knew that in film there was power," David Halberstam wrote in his book on Belichick, called "The Education of a Coach." "And he was the one working the film and he was good at it."

So he came to know that, ultimately, nothing else mattered. Not where you went to school. Not what kind of a player you'd been yourself. The only thing that mattered was that if players thought you could help them. The only thing that mattered was knowledge.

That's always been his chips in this high-stakes game, his knowledge. The sense that no one knows more football, no one knows how to put a team together better, no one knows more about how to win in the NFL, than Belichick, this man who first learned the game at his father's knee and has carried it with him like a talisman ever since. True or not, that's the perception, and we see it all the time in many ways.

It's Tom Brady constantly saying that the Patriots trust Belichick.

It's the ex-players such as Rodney Harrison and Tedy Bruschi forever saying how much they respected Belichick, the constant testimonials.

Maybe more important, it's all the so-called troubled guys who come in here and end up spouting the partly line, everyone from Corey Dillon to Randy Moss.

It's even Chad Ochocino, one of those guys with a reputation of being virtually uncoachable, who said back in his 2009 book how much he respected Belichick, how much he would like to play for him.

It's that rarely is ever said a bad word about him by a player, no insignificant thing.

And even if every once in a while someone doesn't buy into the mystique — for example, Adalius Thomas a couple of years back — over the years the malcontents have become little more than occasional voices in the wilderness, ultimately inconsequential.

Now on the eve of another NFL season, this man who has three Super Bowl trophies on his resume and another that was lost on a miracle drive by the Giants in 2008. Here he is with the best quarterback in the NFL and another team that's picked to be as good as any team in the NFL, another team to add to his legacy.

Because that's what it's all come down to for Belichick now.

He doesn't need the money. He doesn't need the fame. Not now. He is 59 now and it's really all been accomplished, every coaching dream he could have possibly had as a young guy starting out in the game, a career that's one day going to be immortalized in the Hall of Fame regardless of what happens in the future.

So why does he keep doing it?

Simple. He is a football coach.

The best there is.

DE Mark Anderson

The Boston Globe

Quietly making a lot of noise

Anderson fronts Patriots' pass rush

By Michael Whitmer

December 24, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - It's the kind of question being asked among Patriots fans in sports bars and dark taverns, probably with a beer or a buck on the line.

Since defensive end Andre Carter is now out with a season-ending injury, which Patriot suiting up against the Dolphins today at Gillette Stadium has the most sacks this year?

If you answered Mark Anderson, drink up or cash in.

Anderson, who has appeared in every game this year, has nine sacks, more than his past three seasons combined, which he spent with the Bears and Texans. He's brought down the quarterback at least once in seven of the Patriots' 14 games, starting with a sack in the opening win at Miami, and culminating in the two he had last Sunday against Tim Tebow and the Broncos.

He also forced and recovered a fumble in the 41-23 victory at Denver, which might go down as his Patriots' coming-out party.

"I don't know if I'd call it that," Anderson said. "I think I've been playing pretty good throughout the season, holding my own."

Don't feel bad if you weren't aware that Anderson - he wears No. 95, for those who still don't know - was having such a solid season. He's been getting that a lot.

"Even before the Denver game I had friends calling me, saying, 'Man, you've already got seven sacks? You've had a quiet seven sacks.' That's how it goes sometimes," Anderson said. "I've had a quiet year. That's how I like it to be. I like to fly under the radar."

That might be tougher for Anderson to accomplish now with Carter out the rest of the season. Signed four days apart in August, Anderson and Carter took a back seat to more decorated signees Albert Haynesworth and Chad Ochocinco when camp started. Haynesworth lasted eight games before being released. Ochocinco has just 14 catches.

Carter (10) and Anderson, though, have combined for 19 of the Patriots' 33 sacks.

"Mark means a lot to our defense," defensive end Shaun Ellis said. "He's one of those high-energy, go-get-'em type of guys that every defense needs. I'm happy for him and proud of him. He's played a lot of football. He's been a good fit for us right away."

Anderson was a fifth-round pick by the Bears in 2006, and had 12 sacks as a rookie, which remains his season high. He also appeared in the Super Bowl his first season in Chicago, when the Bears lost to Indianapolis.

Fourteen months ago, five games into his fifth season, the Bears released Anderson, and a day later he signed with the Texans. After his standout rookie season, his production slipped: 9 1/2 sacks in his last 50 games with the Bears, four sacks in 11 games in Houston.

The Patriots made it three homes in less than 12 months for the 28-year-old Anderson when he signed Aug. 5.

"I set goals. I'll tell you what they were after the season," he said with a laugh. "I'll say this: I expected to come in and make an impact in some kind of way. I think I'm on pace to make an impact, but my whole thing was to show everybody that I've still got it, that I can still play this game."

He's been able to do that, even before last Sunday's two-sack effort, which included a fumble forced and recovered.

"I think Mark has had a pretty solid year. He's shown that he can play," coach Bill Belichick said. "He's been a pretty consistent player for us this year, in our preseason games, practices, regular-season games. He's been productive.

"He primarily plays on the outside at the end of the line, which is what he did in college [at Alabama], what he did in Chicago - although Chicago did play him inside some - and at Houston. Good athlete, works hard on the field. He's out there every day. Works hard, keeps getting better. It's a good formula."

Anderson (6 feet 4 inches, 255 pounds) gives the Patriots a decent edge rusher, either as a defensive end when they've been in a 4-3 base, or as an outside linebacker in a 3-4 scheme, which is what the Patriots went to after Carter left the field last Sunday on a cart.

Being versatile means more opportunities for Anderson, who likes to describe himself as "laid-back off the field, and a lot of intensity and energy on it." Being productive means more snaps.

"The only thing that was new was the outside linebacker position," Anderson said, "but I did a little bit of that in Houston, we had a few packages where I was standing up rushing the passer. I think it kind of prepped me for New England."

From a numbers standpoint, he's been better this season than almost everyone assumed he'd be. But this year's body of work has mostly been put together without the glare of the spotlight, and some of the sacks have come with the game's outcome already decided. Now that Carter is unavailable, the focus might shift a bit Anderson's way.

"If I'm in the spotlight it's not a big deal to me," Anderson said. "We're going to miss Andre, but everybody will have to step up and play their role. I knew I could do some things once I knew what my role was going to be."



Football journey: Mark Anderson

By Mike Reiss

November, 12, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – Mark Anderson occupies Tully Banta-Cain's old locker and jersey number (95), and he's also taken over his old role.

Anderson is the Patriots' nickel rusher, primarily coming onto the field on third down and obvious passing situations. He's played in all eight games this season, totaling 157 of a possible 564 snaps (including penalties). He is tied for the team lead with 4.5 sacks, three of which have come at the end of games when the Patriots had the outcome in hand.

In sharing his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com this week, Anderson noted how a 12-sack rookie season with the Bears created a higher level of expectation that was an additional "opponent" to tackle.

When he first started playing football: "In the third grade. I played flag football for three years. I wanted to play tackle, all my friends were, but my dad wouldn't let me. I didn't start playing tackle football until middle school."

Why he started playing football: "I loved basketball. That was my No. 1, and football was more something to do in the offseason."

Role models in his career: "My family – my brother, my dad. Also, different players around the league, like Adewale Ogunleye, I still talk to him. Osi [Umenyiora], I work out with him all the time."

What he loves about football: “I just love everything about it. I just like being in the locker room, around different guys, different personalities, just having fun.”

Top football memories at Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa: “There was one game where I had 19 tackles. Another game I had blocked two punts. I have a lot of good memories. My last year, we lost in the semis and I got kicked out of the game for fighting [laughing]. My friends back home still blame me for not winning [the championship].”

Why he decided to attend University of Alabama: “Coach [Dennis] Franchione, his staff, they were recruiting me pretty hard. I liked their whole staff. I thought about going to TCU, because that’s where they were at the time, and when they got the job at Alabama, I was like, ‘That’s a major powerhouse.’ I thought it would help me to get to this level. I also liked that it was far away [from home]. It was a new start.”

Top memories of Alabama: “I remember the Florida game my last year. The whole last year, we had a great defense – DeMeco Ryans, Roman Harper, Charlie Peprah, Anthony Madison, Freddie Roach -- and all our hard work paid off that last year. Florida was ranked high and it was a good game for us. The crowd was crazy, I had a sack and a couple pressures. That was great.”

Fifth-round pick of the Bears in 2006; summing up his Chicago tenure: “It was bittersweet. It started out well and after that, it was a learning experience, especially from the media. It was mainly good -- going to a Super Bowl your first year, you can’t beat that -- but I was always trying to get back to that 12-sack performance [as a rookie].”

The weight of expectations of a 12-sack season as a rookie: “It was a blessing but it does bring along a lot of different ... having that type of impact a lot of stuff comes with that. [Media] was on me because the bar was set so high. Maybe if I came in, as a rookie, and had four sacks and gradually increased each year ... when you start off so high, you’re trying to beat that each time.”

Cut by the Bears in October of 2010 and landing with the Texans the next day: “That was another good experience for me. I was in a new position; that’s when I started standing up, coming off the edge, doing different stuff as a linebacker-type guy. I loved that team, a lot of hungry, young guys who wanted to win. We just couldn’t click and gel at the time, but now, it looks like they’re doing real well.”

Life as a Patriot after signing a one-year deal in August of 2011: “I feel like it’s business now. I had been through a lot of ups and downs and now my whole mentality is to enjoy every moment you get to play, just try to make the best of it, even if it’s just 10 snaps. I’ll do whatever I can to help the team. That’s my whole mentality being in New England. The tradition here is crazy and to be a part of it in any way, I’m just doing my job.”

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.

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.

Check out our complete coverage of the Patriots' divisional playoff matchup with the Broncos.
Patriots Center » Blog »

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.

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.

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 to 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.

The Boston Globe

Arrington enjoying the ride

Patriots cornerback thankful for opportunity

By Monique Walker

December 24, 2010

FOXBOROUGH— Cornerback Kyle Arrington placed his organizer on the chair in front of his locker. He adjusted his fleece jacket and then stiffened his posture as the crowd of cameras and reporters surged toward him on Wednesday.

He gave his thoughts on Sunday's opponents, the Bills. Shared a little humor about offensive lineman Dan Connolly being selected AFC special teams player of the week. And explained how he and his Patriots teammates stay focused during the holidays.

This time last year, the 24-year-old Arrington was hidden among the many contributors on special teams. When he came out of the shower after games, he often had to wait for the crowd of media talking to safety Brandon Meriweather to disperse before he could get to his belongings. Now he is the guy with the microphones and recorders in his face.

Arrington stepped into a starting role in Week 3 when Darius Butler was benched after struggling in the first two games. The situation remains new to Arrington, but he isn't overwhelmed by the changes.

"I try to do my best to just live in the moment," Arrington said. "It has been a wild ride so far. It's been a learning experience on and off the field. Even with the media and stuff like that, I'm not used to it. I'm still learning."

Arrington, in his second NFL season, views just being on the 53-man roster as a blessing. In 2008, Arrington signed with the Eagles as a rookie free agent out of Hofstra, but didn't make it beyond their practice squad. He ended up with the Buccaneers' practice squad in 2009, and was promoted to the roster for one game before he was waived.

This time, the Patriots picked up Arrington. He was on the practice squad, eventually added to the roster, and played in eight games, primarily on special teams. He was second on the team with 17 special teams tackles. When Arrington thinks back on 2009, he remembers the impact the long season can have on a player.

"Mind you, I only played special teams and that was half of the season, and I was still pretty beat up physically," Arrington said. "I was thinking, 'Wow, I don't know how these offensive and defensive guys do it.' Now I'm in this situation and the thing about it is, I was one of the guys who just comes to practice, comes to the game, and then goes home.

"I wasn't really worried about taking care of my body physically. This year, with the more responsibility I have, I had to put in the extra hour in the training room just trying to stay right physically."

Linebacker Rob Ninkovich can relate to Arrington. Ninkovich also was primarily a special teams contributor last season, and toward the end of the year saw more snaps on defense. This year, Ninkovich has worked his way into a regular role.

"I've been ready not to just be a special teams guy for a long time now," Ninkovich said. "All I needed was an opportunity like Kyle and a lot of these guys just to go make plays. So far I've tried to make the best of my opportunities, and I want to continue to do that."

Arrington, like Ninkovich, hasn't given up his special teams duties, he's only added to them. Last Sunday against the Packers, Arrington had a 36-yard interception return for a touchdown early in the second half

that helped the Patriots to a 31-27 victory. It was Arrington's first interception and pick-6 of his career. Earlier this season, he returned a blocked field goal 35 yards for a touchdown against the Dolphins.

"I've believed, even on special teams, [Bill Belichick's] philosophy is whoever is doing their job and playing well and practicing well, they're going to play," Arrington said. "That's what he believes in and that's what the team believes in and we take it from there."

The Patriots are getting plenty of value out of Arrington. Belichick even used him as a pass rusher against the Colts. He has 62 tackles this season, 15 on special teams.

"Kyle's a guy that works hard," Belichick said. "He did a good job for us last year. On special teams, he led the team in tackles. He was very productive, had a good training camp. He's got good speed. He's tough, he tackles well. He's aggressive. When he's had an opportunity, he's done a good job at taking advantage of it."

The ride isn't one Arrington wants to see end any time soon, but he understands how quickly it all can change.

"I used to be on the other end of things and now it's crazy," Arrington said. "I'm definitely blessed and fortunate."

DL Ron Brace

The Boston Globe

Time on waiting list didn't sit well with Brace

By Michael Vega
October 22, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - For six weeks, Ron Brace would report to work at Gillette Stadium, attend meetings with the rest of the Patriots defensive linemen, and sit in the back of a darkened room as they watched film.

As he sat there studying the images on the screen, Brace prepared himself to play even though at the beginning of the season he had been placed on the reserve/physically unable to perform list, ineligible to play for the first six weeks.

"I'm watching film on everyone except myself," Brace said. "All that film you're watching, you know you're not going to be on any of it, but at the same time you've got to prepare like you are."

Such is life for those on the PUP list. Their designation places them in limbo. Sure, they remain members of the team, but PUP players cannot help but feel they are nonentities as they watch the rest of the team prepare for a game.

"They've been working on their own to be ready to practice when they're cleared to practice - running, lifting, changing directions, different strength, agility, and speed drills," said coach Bill Belichick, when asked what PUP players were allowed to do with the team.

"You're able to work out," Brace said. "It's just the physical part that you're excluded from, which is a really big part."

And therein lied the frustration for Brace, a 6-foot-3-inch, 330-pounder in his third season with the Patriots, after being drafted in the second round out of Boston College.

The nature of Brace's position calls for him to be a physical presence. But there were days when he felt he was nothing more than an apparition, as he went through the grind of his rehab work after undergoing surgery on the triceps tendon of his right elbow, an injury he suffered Dec. 26 at Buffalo.

"I just had to basically take it a day at a time and handle what I could and try to get better," said Brace, who recorded a career-high 28 tackles last season in 13 games, five starts. "It was real frustrating, being on the team but you're not on the team. It kept me down to earth and forced me to stay focused on my work in the weight room and training room.

"I just did whatever I could do to be ready once my six-week period was over."

Tuesday, Brace was activated along with fellow defensive lineman Brandon Deaderick and veteran running back Kevin Faulk. Brace found himself surrounded by reporters in the locker room, asking about what he went through during his protracted in-house exile.

"It was really tough to stay focused, trying to stay in that routine," Brace said. "You're so close to it, but yet you're so far from it at the same time. You're able to work out, but you're still not out there playing the games or practicing - the main part of the game."

Adding to that frustration was the fact the team seemed to place a greater emphasis on creating more pass rush from its front, acquiring free agents such as Shaun Ellis and Albert Haynesworth. Then there were the interceptions by nose tackle Vince Wilfork, which only added to Brace's sense of urgency to get back on the field.

"I saw [Jets quarterback Mark] Sanchez throw one right in his hands and I was like, 'I've got to get back because they're giving these away,' " said Brace, who has never recorded an interception during his pro or college career.

At BC, he teamed with B.J. Raji, now with the Green Bay Packers, to form a formidable defensive wall.

"His role in that defense was to either play on the guard - basically play on the guard one way or the other, either inside shoulder, heads up, or outside shoulder, or to drop into coverage," Belichick said. "They dropped him and Raji a lot. They played a lot of blitz zone and those guys were in coverage a decent amount of time. That's the scheme they played."

With the Patriots, though, Brace is not likely to be called upon to demonstrate his coverage skills. His immediate goal is to get in a game.

"Losing the whole camp, pieces of the season, I knew that practice was a big part of it," said Brace, who hired a personal trainer during the lockout. "We only get so many reps during practice and so many reps during the game, so each rep is valuable and I lost a lot of valuable reps, so I've got a lot to make up for."

"The rotation of the defensive line is really good. I've still got to find out where I'm going to fit in with the defensive line because I haven't had a snap since Dec. 26, so I've got a lot of learning to do about where I'm going to be and I've got a lot of questions [to answer] about myself."

QB Tom Brady

The Boston Globe

From faceless to franchise

By Dan Shaughnessy

December 30, 2010

It's like thumbing through your high school yearbook and discovering that the wallflower you ignored in US History turned out to be Angelina Jolie.

Tom Brady was here 10 years ago and we barely noticed.

In the old Foxboro Stadium locker room, the kid from San Mateo, Calif., via the University of Michigan had a stall along the row where Drew Bledsoe dressed. Brady regularly had to make room for reporters who wanted to speak with Bledsoe.

Drew was the Patriots' franchise quarterback. Drew was the three-time Pro Bowler who had led the Patriots to a Super Bowl in 1996. Drew was the guy with the 10-year, \$103 million contract extension.

Brady was . . . in the way.

I was there, but I don't remember Brady. (The soundtrack to this column is Joan Osborne's "[What If God Was] One Of Us?") Who bothers to pay attention to a sixth-round pick who never plays? Like most of the other reporters, I was working to get words from big Drew. Tom Brady wasn't even Brian Hoyer.

In 2000, the Patriots were staggering through a 5-11 season under first-year coach Bill Belichick. Not yet a hooded genius, Belichick in 2000 was a suspect Bob Kraft hire who had been run out of Cleveland, Grady Little-style.

With Bledsoe taking the snaps, those 2000 Patriots staggered through losses at New York, Miami, Indianapolis, and Cleveland. Belichick looked especially pasty and unsure of himself. Brady was listed as inactive for all but two games. He played only once, throwing three passes (completing one for 6 yards) at Detroit on Thanksgiving.

Today Brady is touted as one of the greatest quarterbacks in the history of football. He's the modern Joe Montana. He has a chance to win his fourth Super Bowl. He has thrown an NFL-record 319 consecutive passes without an interception. He has thrown a touchdown pass in all 15 games and at least two in each of the last eight games. He has thrown 24 TD passes since his last interception and he looks like a lock for a second MVP award. He's one of the most famous men in the world and looks like a guy who could be president someday.

So how did we miss him 10 years ago?

Easy. In 2000, Brady was New England's fourth-string quarterback, playing behind Bledsoe, Michael Bishop, and John Friesz. His rookie season was a virtual redshirt year. He got into the preseason games (22 of 33, one touchdown, no picks), but who's paying attention in August when it doesn't count?

Longtime publicist Stacey James remembers rookie Brady in 2000, and says, "He used to overhear me arranging to take Drew upstairs for press conferences. Tom would tease me and say, 'When's my press conference?' I told him to be careful what you wish for."

Globe multimedia producer Alan Miller was part of the Patriots "All-Access" crew in 2001, and remembers, "We profiled just about everybody that year, and by the end of the season, we were running out of guys, so we profiled Brady, about how he was drafted by the Montreal Expos and went to the same high school as Barry Bonds. He told us he loved watching 'All-Access.'"

The 2001 edition of the Patriots media guide features 26 pages on Bledsoe. He has the long hair and the extensive résumé. Brady's bio merits less than one page and he looks a little chunky in his photo.

Everyone knows what happened that year. Near the end of a Week 2 loss to the Jets in Foxborough, Bledsoe was almost killed on a hit by Jets linebacker Mo Lewis. Brady came off the bench and never looked back. He won the Super Bowl four months later.

We'll never know how long it would have taken Brady to demonstrate his greatness if Bledsoe hadn't been hurt.

We know only that Brady beat out Damon Huard for the No. 2 job during the 2001 preseason. He completed 31 of 54 passes and threw two touchdowns with no interceptions in four exhibition games. Brady opened the season as Bledsoe's backup.

"The broadcast production crew had a meeting with Belichick before the first 2001 preseason game," said Miller. "We asked him who would improve the most, and he cited Stephen Neal and Tom Brady.

"He went on and on about Brady and what a leader he was, and at the end of that meeting, I walked out and said to the others, 'Bledsoe's not long for this job.' "

In Charles P. Pierce's excellent book "Moving the Chains," former Patriots offensive coordinator Charlie Weis says, "Bill and I talked and I said maybe we ought to give Brady an opportunity to beat this guy [Bledsoe] out."

Easy to say now. But we'll never know.

While Bledsoe was still recovering from the Lewis hit, Brady threw his first touchdown pass (to Terry Glenn) in an overtime victory against the Chargers. A month later, Bledsoe was healthy enough to play but Belichick made the bold decision to stick with the kid. And now the Hall of Fame-bound coach and quarterback are primed for their fifth Super Bowl appearance as they take their place as the top coach-quarterback tandem in NFL history.

Ten years later, who can name the six quarterbacks drafted ahead of Brady?

They are Chad Pennington, Giovanni Carmazzi (drafted by Brady's beloved 49ers), Chris Redman, Tee Martin, Marc Bulger, and the immortal Spergon Wynn out of Southwest Texas State.

Maybe it's easier to name the players New England drafted ahead of Brady in 2000.

They are Adrian Klemm, J.R. Redmond, Greg Robinson-Randall, Dave Stachelski, Jeff Marriott, and Antwan Harris.

"I was the 199th player picked," Brady said before playing the 49ers in 2004. "I'll never forget those days."

The rest of us remember none of it. Those were the days when Tom Brady was invisible. Right in front of our eyes.

WR Deion Branch

The Boston Globe

Branch is still a nice catch

Veteran receiver relies on instincts

By Shalise Manza Young

January 14, 2012

FOXBOROUGH - Ask Bill Belichick, ask Tom Brady, ask anyone who has spent any time with Deion Branch what has made him so effective as a receiver with the Patriots, and one word comes up before any other: instinctive.

He isn't the first pass-catcher that's been said about, nor the first football player. But what exactly is instinctiveness?

In the case of Branch, it is this:

Game 7, Heinz Field, third quarter of a game New England ultimately would lose to the Steelers. In the first half, Branch noticed the home crowd stand up and yell and cheer a couple of times; when Branch looked behind him to see what was going on, he saw that Pittsburgh's defenders had Brady on the run.

After halftime, during New England's second possession of the third quarter . . . well, let Branch tell it:

"This is not a good teaching thing, this is just a feel thing - where I was at, I was wrong," he said, chuckling, his reaction enough to sway his shoulder-length dreads. "But we made a play. What happened, I had like a 'sting' route, it's like an 18-yard route, a curl.

"In the third quarter, that same look came up. I was running the route, and as I was running, I'm running up the field, keeping my head up the field, I can see the crowd standing up, so going off what happened earlier in the game, I broke my route and as I was breaking, [Brady] was rolling that way and he threw the ball to me.

"And that was that. I think I just reacted to what I was seeing."

Ten-yard completion. First down Patriots.

Stephen Gostkowski wound up missing a 42-yard field goal on the drive, but had Branch not done what he had done, would the Patriots have gotten in position to score?

Perched on a stack of plastic step-stools outside the Patriots' locker room, Branch said the play was nothing special.

But Wes Welker, who originally tells the tale, a first-team All-Pro who has redefined the slot receiver position, gets wide-eyed at the recollection of what his teammate did.

That is instinctiveness.

Branch always has been right where Brady needs him to be, basically since the day he arrived in Foxborough.

Brady recalled this week that after the 2002 rookie minicamp, Branch's first official days with the organization, then-offensive coordinator Charlie Weis told him, "You're going to love Deion Branch."

How right he was.

"From the moment that he got here, his quickness, how smooth he is in and out of breaks, I think it's a coach's dream to have players like that," Brady said. "And not only that, but he's smart and he's a great guy in the locker room. He's a great teammate."

The 65th overall pick in the '02 draft out of Louisville, Branch has become an anomaly for the Patriots: an early-round receiver who ended up paying big dividends. Since Branch, the Patriots have drafted Bethel Johnson, Chad Jackson, Brandon Tate, and Taylor Price all in the second or third round. None have worked out.

There are enough failures that when it's noted Branch has become the exception, Brady mused, "Yeah, I know. It would be nice if I could have another Deion Branch at some point. But it tells you he's a unique player."

He's unique enough that Belichick can't help himself when asked about Branch, going into great detail about what has set him apart.

"Deion is a very instinctive receiver. He was in college at Louisville, and then from Day 1 when he got here," Belichick said. "He's smart, he learns very quickly, and he just understands the receiver concepts and techniques. If you tell him what to do, but you don't really tell him what to do, if you just say, 'OK, do this; just run this route', he almost always does what the quarterback would expect him to do.

"He just has a good instinct and a good feel for what the right decision to make is based on what he's seeing and then so that he can help the quarterback, where he can be in the spot the quarterback wants him to be, when he wants him to be there. Timing is such a big part of the passing game. Deion has a great sense of that timing."

When he first came to the Patriots, Branch said, it took just a couple of days of practice before he noticed Brady, beginning his first full season as New England's starter, was looking his way quite a bit, that the quarterback already was developing a comfort level with the rookie.

And that only made Branch want to work harder for Brady.

His first season, he was third on the Patriots with 43 catches in 13 games, behind veterans Troy Brown and David Patten. In his second season, he pulled in 57 passes, leading the team.

In 2004, his third season, he had only 35 receptions, but Branch missed seven games in the regular season to injury. He was right as rain by the Super Bowl, however, recording 11 catches for 133 yards, tying a Super Bowl record and taking home the game's Most Valuable Player award. He dedicated it to all the young men in his hometown of Albany, Ga., who had big dreams like he did.

Less than two years later, he was gone.

With a year remaining on his rookie contract and having established himself as the team's top receiver, Branch approached the Patriots about redoing his deal. When they couldn't come to an agreement both sides liked, New England wound up trading Branch to Seattle for a first-round pick in the 2007 draft.

The day he was traded was one of the most difficult in recent memory in the Patriots' locker room. Richard Seymour barely held back tears as he talked about the departure of his friend. Brady clearly was not pleased with the development, and even less so once he saw the receiver group cobbled together in Branch's absence.

Hindsight being what it is, everyone involved - Branch, Patriots owner Robert Kraft, Belichick - since has expressed that they wished things had worked out differently, and that Branch had never had to leave New England.

There was never any bitterness, and that's why what happened on Oct. 12, 2010, was able to happen: After three-plus disappointing seasons for Branch with the Seahawks that included injury and instability, New England sent a fourth-round pick to Seattle and got Branch back.

It was like he'd never left.

"He retained a lot of information that we'd done, other things we tried to put him in situations where he was doing things that he did well, and he's that kind of player," Brady said.

Branch had nine receptions (more than he'd had in any of his games in Seattle) for 98 yards and a TD in his first game back. The Gillette Stadium crowd welcomed him back with open arms.

Welker, who arrived in 2007 with Randy Moss and Donte' Stallworth, a sort of makeup gift to Brady after he had to struggle through '06 without Branch and with Reche Caldwell, Doug Gabriel, Jabar Gaffney, and an aging Brown, marveled at the near-seamlessness of Branch's return.

"It was one of those deals where you didn't have to teach a guy the playbook or teach him what Tommy wanted," Welker said. "It was pretty crazy to see just how on the same page they are."

This season, although it appears time and a history of leg injuries have slowed Branch down, he still has 51 catches for 702 yards and five touchdowns. On the explosive Patriots, he's just the fourth-leading receiver; on two other teams, including the Patriots' opponent tonight, Denver, Branch's total would lead the squad.

He acknowledges he can't use his speed as much, but he is using something he feels is even better: his savvy.

"I'm not the same guy as I was my first, second, third year. But mentally I'm above that," Branch said. "As coaches always say, as guys get older they get wiser. And that's true. That one little play [against the Steelers] I explained, a younger guy probably wouldn't do that. A younger guy wouldn't have the knowledge to react that way.

"But overall, trust me, I know how to maneuver."

Reading the crowd to know his quarterback needs help and breaking his route to provide it? Branch still has all the right moves.



For Branch, so many reasons to smile

By Jackie MacMullan

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Nobody touched him.

Deion Branch dropped onto snowy Lambeau Field clutching his knee, choking to catch some air, after doing nothing but cutting in the sharp, precise manner that endeared him to every quarterback he's ever played with.

As he lay on his back on that bitterly cold Sunday in January 2008 with his stunned Seattle Seahawks teammates gathering around him, Branch surmised something was terribly amiss.

"I couldn't figure out why I couldn't breathe," he said.

Seahawks receiver Nate Burleson knew a torn ACL when he saw one and wondered how Branch, his closest friend on the team, would react to another injury, another setback, a pattern that had plagued him since he'd left New England at the height of his career two seasons before.

As Burleson leaned down to comfort him, Branch looked up at his teammate and said, "Thank you, Jesus."

Huh?

"No one ever thanks God when things go badly -- only when they're going good," Branch recounted recently. "I knew I was blessed to play this game. I had gone my entire life up until that point, since I was 7 years old, without a major injury. I had nothing to complain about."

"Only Deion," said Burleson, "could put a positive spin on blowing out his knee."

And you wonder why Bill Belichick is so glad to have Branch back in his locker room.

The Patriots' Prodigal Son, the Moss antidote, the diminutive receiver whose uncanny chemistry with quarterback Tom Brady was displayed again Thanksgiving Day, when he juked the Detroit Lions for a 79-

yard catch-and-run touchdown, has helped revive an offense that will need to be as crisp as Branch's passing routes Monday night when the Patriots take on the New York Jets in the biggest game of the season.

Opponents and teammates marvel at Branch's symmetry with Brady, as though it is the result of divine intervention or a secret football code. Yet the source of their compatibility is rooted in something far more mundane: years of preparation and repetition.

A former Seattle teammate said Deion Branch used to talk of his days in New England with "passion in his eyes."

Their most fruitful work was accomplished during the offseasons, on days no one was populating the stands at Gillette. The quarterback and the receiver would report to work early on those summer mornings. One week, they would perfect the slant, running it over and over, with Brady barking, "Let's run it against this coverage" and the receiver instructing him, "Throw it a little sooner this time." The next week they'd fine tune the post route, imploring their defensive teammates to stick around for one more hour, so they could try it two or three or 20 more times, until it was second nature.

"That's where the trust comes in," Branch said. "Where Tom could say, 'I know this guy is going to be there on the curl route against man coverage' and throw the ball with confidence.

"I tell these young [Patriots] receivers all the time: All those summer days at Gillette, that's where we won games."

Branch never wanted to leave New England or Tom Brady. Together, they were unbeatable. In 2004, Branch caught 10 passes for 143 yards and a touchdown against Carolina in the Super Bowl, with his 17-yard grab on the final drive setting up the game-winning field goal by Adam Vinatieri. One year later, he hauled in 11 receptions for 133 yards to lead the Patriots past Philadelphia in Super Bowl XXXIX, and was named Most Valuable Player of the game.

And then he was gone.

Time has minimized the rancor that preceded Branch's departure following a contract dispute. There was a holdout, a spot on the Did Not Report list, a \$600,000 fine, a grievance filed by Branch when the two parties agreed a trade would be best and New England initially balked on offers from New York and Seattle. Even the sunniest NFL player could not cast a positive light on how Branch's tenure in New England was terminated.

"It was bad," Branch confirmed. "It was sour how it ended, but I was never involved in any of it. My agent handled the negotiations. I prayed every night it would get done.

"But the business side of it kept getting in the way. There was no hatred. The conversations I had with Bill [Belichick] and Mr. [Robert] Kraft were decent, respectful. Coach Belichick told me, 'I wish we could get it done, but I understand your side.'

"That's why it was so easy for me to return. It never got personal."

Bitterness, Branch reasoned, was pointless. He was traded to Seattle and would make it work there. He was young, healthy, wealthy beyond his dreams. Adversity made you stronger, a lesson he'd already learned in a most horrible fashion.

He was only 21 years old when his sons were born prematurely. One, Deiontey, was small but healthy, squirming and squealing his way into the world. The other, Deiondre, was silent, listless. He contracted viral meningitis and the prognosis was poor.

"It was difficult," Branch said. "We were so young ..."

His son had suffered massive brain damage and if he survived, it would be without cognitive functions.

Football disappointments suddenly shrank in comparison. Deion's son gave him perspective. Life was a precious, fragile gift.

So he moved on to the Seahawks, his smile and his abilities intact. He loved his new coach, Mike Holmgren. He dutifully studied the West Coast offense, and the tendencies of his new quarterback, Matt Hasselback. He threw himself into his new environment, and in spite of his acrimonious exit from Foxborough, continued to speak of his former team in glowing terms.

"When he talked about New England, you could see the passion in his eyes," Bureson said. "The way he built it up, sometimes it felt like the Patriots were the huge college program and the rest of us [in the NFL] were a community college."

The chemistry between Tom Brady and Deion Branch wasn't something that occurred naturally. It was forged through repetition.

That did not prevent Branch from wanting to build the same memories in Seattle. He supplanted Bureson in the starting lineup but proved to be so helpful to the young receiver that Bureson couldn't stay mad.

"No matter how hard they worked us, how tired we were, Deion was the first one up in the morning, doing leg swings, brushing his teeth and singing," Bureson said. "His energy was contagious."

Branch caught 53 balls for 725 yards and four touchdowns in 14 games of the 2006 season, yet he couldn't replicate the chemistry he had with Brady with Hasselback.

"We were never quite on the same page," Branch conceded. "We had a lot of ups and downs. There were times when I thought the game plan was great. And then there were other times, not so much."

During the next three seasons, he fought through a foot injury, then a calf strain, then the torn ACL. He wasn't the only one hobbling. One season, Branch said, the team had at least a half-dozen offensive linemen on injured reserve. He played for three coaches in his final three seasons -- Holmgren, Jim Mora and, for a brief time, Pete Carroll.

"It just seemed like they couldn't agree on how to use me," Branch said.

"They wanted to change the routes he ran," Bureson said. "They tried to put him in a box. Deion is such a hard worker. He'll try anything you ask. But by the end [in Seattle], what they wanted changed every day."

Branch's preseason meetings last summer with Carroll were upbeat. The new coach seemed enthusiastic and told Branch he was part of the Seahawks' future.

"I don't know what happened," Branch said. "I had big goals for this season in Seattle. I thought we were on the same page until I started watching the transactions. Guys were let go. They didn't re-sign Nate. I started thinking, OK, what direction are we headed in here? It was a little surprising. A little disappointing."

The trade to New England was bittersweet. Branch was thrilled to return to the place where he was most successful, but he departed Seattle feeling as though he'd left a job undone.

His first game with Brady in more than four years yielded nine catches for 98 yards and a touchdown in an overtime win over Baltimore. The quarterback was giddy. The receiver was grateful. The rest of the football world was astonished at how seamlessly the two players reconnected.

"The trust Tom Brady has in him is remarkable," observed Patriots tight end Alge Crumpler.

Branch had been in town a only couple of weeks when he pulled young Brandon Tate aside in practice and told him, "When you see Tom scrambling, you've got to go deep. Don't mess around. Just take off. He'll find you."

Six days later, when the Minnesota Vikings flushed Brady out of the pocket, Tate heeded Branch's advice and sprinted down the field -- and hauled in a 65-yard touchdown pass.

"Sometimes the young guys are a little bit in awe of Tom," Branch said. "Tom imposes himself on them. He's tough -- a perfectionist. You have to expect that."

"I tell the guys, 'Just do what he asks. Run the route you are supposed to run. No mistakes, no shortcuts. Tom won't stand for that.'"

Burleson landed with the Detroit Lions. He wondered about his friend back in New England, where time has passed and things have changed.

"I thought there might be a bit of a letdown," Burleson said. "I mean, Deion had built up New England so much. But when I talked to him to see how it was going, he was so happy. He told me, 'Feels like I'm home.'"

His sons live in Louisville; Deiontey is with his mother, while Deiondre lives nearby in a 24-hour specialized facility. Branch was told his son would never walk, talk or utter a sound, yet Deiondre has learned to take small steps with a walker, and hums contentedly when his father comes to visit.

"My son is improving," Branch said, "but it's slow. Really slow."

The twins are 9 years old. Deiontey is playing sports, racing through the house, asking questions about his brother.

"He's old enough to understand now," Branch said. "Last summer, he told me, 'Daddy, I hope Deiondre can get out of his bed and walk someday.' I told him I hoped that too."

Foxborough is closer to Louisville than Seattle, another reason Branch is pleased to be back in New England. Having Brady throw footballs to him again has also been a welcome development.

Last week, Belichick was uncommonly effusive in his praise when asked about Branch's influence on his team.

"He's the best," Belichick declared. "You can't get better than that. He's totally about the team."

While the Seahawks re-tool under a new regime, the Patriots keep on winning with the same coach, same owner, same quarterback, and now, after all these years, the same receiver.

"I'm lucky," said Branch. "Truly blessed."

So are the Patriots.

S Sergio Brown

The Boston Globe

Influential figure

Patriots' Brown still looks to late father for guidance

By Julian Benbow

October 1, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - Growing up in Chicago, there was always someone telling Sergio Brown that his father was special.

"Everybody on the South Side of Chicago knew who Mario Brown was because of the person he was," Brown said.

Everyone knew he was an athlete. Recruited by Shelby Metcalf in 1971, Brown was the first black basketball player at Texas A&M. His crossover was his calling card.

A notorious talker, he knew how to work a room.

"He was the only person I knew that really got kicked out of a football game for being too loud," Brown said, laughing at the thought of it.

It was a Pop Warner game, and after getting the boot, he walked to one of the houses near the field and persuaded the owner to let him watch the game from the backyard.

He was a father not only to his own children but to the kids in their neighborhood who didn't have one. Each year iHoops First Team, a mentoring program between the NBA and NCAA, gives out an award in his honor.

"He was a really strong influence in the kids' lives," Brown said. "He was more of the community father for the kids that didn't have fathers."

When his father died of cancer in 2002, the void for Sergio Brown was immeasurable. He was a freshman in high school when his father died, but it lingered with him while he was at Notre Dame. Brown thinks about it now that he's in New England trying to solidify a spot as a safety with the Patriots.

"I look back on it a lot," Brown said. "Not having my father, it got kind of heavy. But you just keep pushing through."

"I had to grow up fast and take on being a man early. So that transition had to happen real fast with me stepping up to the plate."

Brown had every intention of following his father's lead. Basketball was his first love, and still is to an extent.

He went to Proviso East, the same high school as Michael Finley and Celtics coach Doc Rivers. He played on the same AAU team as Derrick Rose. But Brown dislocated his ankle his junior year. While he sat out the basketball season, he watched the college recruiting letters pour in for football. He put his hoop dreams to the side.

There's some irony, though, that he can't help but recognize now. When Brown was in the seventh grade, he played in a basketball tournament that Notre Dame hosted. At the time, Shannon Brown, now with the Lakers, had all the scouts' attention. But Mario Brown was going to make the most of the trip. He chatted up nearly everyone he saw.

"He talked to janitors, talking, talking, talking," Sergio Brown recalled. "He ended up talking his way all the way up to the head football coach's office."

That office belonged to Ty Willingham back then. Initially, Willingham gave him the stare you give strangers. "Who is this guy?"

But eventually Mario charmed him into loosening up. By the end of the conversation, Willingham gave Brown his card.

Before he left, Brown told Willingham, "My son's going to play football for Notre Dame."

Sergio got a scholarship to play for the Fighting Irish under Charlie Weis. Nothing about the experience was easy. He played mostly special teams his first two seasons. The team went from 10-3 his freshman year to 3-9 his sophomore year. The Irish hovered around .500 in Brown's last two seasons. He didn't have an interception in four years.

Off the field, moving from Chicago to South Bend, Ind., was a culture shock and he felt isolated. Without his father, he felt like he had no one to talk to. There were points when he wanted to transfer.

"It was tough," he said. "Going through college, not really having anybody to have my back and push for me going to a school where a lot of people had their fathers there. It was kind of a dark spot. You didn't have too many people that you had a lot of stuff in common with and not too many people to talk to."

But when he thought about that basketball tournament and the lengths his father went just to sit down with Willingham, just to crack open a window of opportunity, it helped.

"When I was having my rough patches at Notre Dame, really thinking about leaving, transferring, that was always in the back of my head," Brown said. "My father wanted me to come here, so just stick it out and everything will turn out for the better."

Brown wasn't drafted. When he weighed his free agent options, he leaned toward New England because after playing for Weis, the Patriots' system seemed familiar. Last season, he spent the first six weeks on the practice squad before being added to the 53-man roster in October. In the 11 games he played, he was more of a spare part. This season, he's part of the plan.

When the Patriots released Pro Bowl safety Brandon Meriweather before the start of the season, it was a sign they had more confidence in Brown. When Patrick Chung went down with a thumb injury, it opened the door for more playing time. Brown has started the past two games, making the most of the opportunity.

"I think it's just been the next step in the process for him," said cornerback Devin McCourty. "Last year, once he moved to the active squad, he was thrown right in against San Diego, and ever since he had a role.

"He's just been improving. He's been getting after it, getting better and just showing that he can play."

Brown said his confidence grows the more he's on the field.

"It helps because you get prepared more," Brown said. "You're not just ready in case something happens. You're more ready for playing a football game, you're getting reps and you're getting ready for a football game. So it helps you a lot from a preparation basis.

"It feels a little better but at the same time you're still fighting every week because you never know what can happen."

He works toward his goal with the memory of his father in mind.

"Doing a lot of the stuff that he would have wanted me to do or knowing that he's still looking down on me," Brown said. "It feels good to really be able to live a good life, carrying on with him not there."

OL Marcus Cannon



Football journey: Marcus Cannon

By Mike Reiss

December, 24, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Rookie offensive lineman Marcus Cannon might turn out to be one of the big steals of the 2011 NFL draft.

The Patriots selected him in the fifth round (138th overall), as he slipped lower because of a non-Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosis. Cannon has since completed treatments, and after starting the season on the reserve/non-football injury list, he was promoted to the roster Nov. 15.

The 6-foot-5, 358-pound blocker has dressed in the team's past five games, gradually earning more time on a week-to-week basis when the Patriots move starting right tackle Nate Solder to tight end and insert Cannon there.

"I think he's coming along well," coach Bill Belichick said this week. "He's out there every day, working hard, doing all the things that we do offensively and then he takes the scout team reps and is able to get work against our defense. That's good competition. He's coming along. He has a long way to go, but he's making progress."

While Belichick shared his thoughts on Cannon this week, Cannon himself took time to share his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com:

When he first started playing football: "I think I was around 8. We played soccer and basketball, and then we slipped football in there."

Why he went out for football: "All the other kids were doing it. We liked it. We always wanted to. One day we were sitting in the truck, in Roswell, New Mexico, on Union Street, and we said 'Dad, we want to play football.' And we went from there."

First positions: "I was a receiver and a little bit of defense. I moved to running back, then I got too heavy and was playing offensive and defensive line. When I really started playing offensive and defensive line, I was close to sixth or seventh grade."

Favorite teams growing up: "It was always the Cowboys. My dad was a big Cowboys fan."

Favorite players growing up: "I had Walter Payton's number for a long time. That's what I wore when I was a running back. He was my favorite player of all time. There wasn't anybody else."

Role models in his life: "I have two older brothers and my parents are still together, so it was always my older brothers. I always wanted to do what they did and tried to be as good as they were. They were hard on me, but they always had my back. I remember one time we got in trouble because I didn't like this one guy and I told my brother he swore at me, and my brother got in a fight with him. He got in trouble, and of course I got in trouble for lying. But that showed how he always stuck up for me."

Top memories at Odessa High School in Texas: "It would probably be beating Permian, our crosstown rival. It was the first two times we ever did that in 40 years. Another would be playing with my older brother, DJ. It was pretty fun playing with him."

Why he chose to attend Texas Christian: "It was mostly for the educational part, and that every year I knew I was going to get a ring. In high school, we didn't win any championships. It also had good coaching so it seemed like the right place for me. I looked at [Texas] Tech; I think that was the only other visit I went on."

Top memories at TCU: “Of course the Rose Bowl. The Fiesta Bowl. A lot of my memories are from practice or stuff that happened when we were together as a team. There was a lot of funny stuff. I’ll never forget my offensive line from there.”

Expectations entering the NFL draft before his non-Hodgkin’s diagnosis: “I just knew I was going to get drafted. I didn’t know if it was going to be first, second, third, but I knew I’d be in the NFL and that was the biggest thing. I just wanted to get here. Even if it was as a free agent, I wouldn’t have cared.”

Getting diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma: “It was still the same. I just wanted to play football, even more than before. I didn’t care where I went. I just wanted to play.”

Reaction to being selected by the Patriots in the fifth round: “It was awesome. I was really happy, and everything I had worked through, it was a blessing. I was blessed to go through everything I went through and then go to one of the best teams, with the best coaching staff, with the best quarterback.”

How he describes life as a Patriot: “It’s kind of the same in college in a way. Coach Patterson, he expected so much out of us. He expected us to act a certain way. It’s the same way here, there is a certain way you have to act. I kind of feel the same in that way. The coaching staff is awesome, really good. The atmosphere is good.”

Highlights of his rookie season: “There have been so many of them. As a rookie in the NFL, everything stands out. You’re meeting one of the greatest coaches for the first time. You come into the locker room and see all the faces you’re used to seeing on TV. Getting to play. There has been a lot.”

What he likes about football: “It’s getting a chance to show what you got. The challenge, that’s the biggest thing.”

Comparing football in college vs. the NFL: “Bigger, faster, stronger guys.”

Summing up his football journey: “Eventful. It’s a good journey and hopefully it’s not at the end. Even when I was young, I never thought I’d be in this place right now. It’s awesome. I’ve seen a lot of stuff, and done a lot of things, and it’s just awesome the way it’s been so far. I’m happy.”

The Boston Globe

Return man

Cancer doesn’t stop Patriots’ Cannon

By Julian Benbow

Globe Staff / October 29, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - There were small things that Marcus Cannon could appreciate: putting on a uniform for the first time since the Rose Bowl, laughing with other offensive linemen when Donald Thomas put a rubber tarantula in veteran Brian Waters’s helmet, finally taking the field with the team that took a chance on him.

Last April, Cannon was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, right in the thick of the draft process, putting his future on and off the field in limbo. The Patriots used their fifth-round pick on him, knowing the circumstances and betting he’d overcome them.

This week, Cannon practiced with the Patriots for the first time, and even though there are still questions - by removing him from the non-football injury list, the team has three weeks to decide whether to add him to the 53-man roster or place him on injured reserve - simply being a part of the team was a milestone.

“It was awesome, finally getting to play with the team,” Cannon said. “I’ve been interacting with the guys, and it’s finally nice to get on, move around a little bit, and have fun a little bit.”

After undergoing chemotherapy he is now in remission. He’s had the support of everyone in the organization as he’s worked his way back.

"Everybody in here is awesome," Cannon said. "Everybody in here has been real supportive. The offensive line's been helping me get into it. I love this team. Everybody's great, everybody's real supportive."

The toughest part of the recovery, he said, was getting on a plane every three weeks for treatment in Texas. But coach Bill Belichick admired the fact that Cannon did it with strength rather than despair.

"I think Marcus has handled it with great maturity," Belichick said of the 23-year-old. "He's a very focused individual that met the challenge head on and never looked for any sympathy or any 'woe is me' type of syndrome. He did what he had to do. He attacked it head on. And it looks like he's done very well with it. So I think he's earned a lot of respect and admiration from everyone in the organization, certainly myself."

The most difficult times for Cannon were when he was diagnosed and when he told his parents. But the treatment process, he said, went smoothly, allowing him to go about his work with some normalcy.

"I was really blessed not to have so many side effects of the chemo and I wasn't really down," Cannon said. "So I got to do a lot of stuff. Some stuff I couldn't do, but it was pretty good."

He's done as much training as has been allowed, conditioning, lifting weights, and running.

When he was at Texas Christian University, he played at 370 pounds. He weighed in at 358 pounds at the NFL Combine, the heaviest player the Patriots had ever drafted. He's down to 348.

"He's had some limitations, but he's done what he can do, I'll say that," Belichick said. "Whatever he has been cleared to do, he's done. Of course, this is the first week he could work out on the field and do anything. But as far as conditioning, running, lifting, and those kinds of things, the things he was able to do, he worked at and he did."

When Belichick was an assistant coach with the Giants, three players on the team battled cancer: Dan Lloyd, a special teams menace; John Tuggle, a running back who was taken with the last pick in the 1983 draft and worked to become the starting fullback; and Karl Nelson, an offensive tackle who was on the team that won Super Bowl XXI.

Tuggle played just one season and died in his sleep while undergoing treatment. Lloyd coped with the disease throughout his four-year career. Nelson missed the 1987 season battling Hodgkin's disease.

"Some guys did well, some guys were able to come back, some guys unfortunately weren't," Belichick said.

Patriots players are conscious of Cannon's fight, amazed by his resilience but also respectful of his privacy.

"There's a lot of support from the guys here," said Deion Branch. "It's a very touchy subject, sensitive topic.

"It just speaks volumes on the individual he is and the things he's been through in his lifetime. We're all very blessed individuals, but you can see he's a special case."

Waters added, "Marcus's situation, honestly, it's tough for guys like us to talk about because it's such a private situation. It's a personal situation, it's something that he has to deal with on a daily basis. I would never understand everything that he has to deal with.

"All I know is that I'm very grateful and appreciative of his hard work since he's been on the football field. And really, I'm just like everybody else, I can't wait to see what type of football player he turns out to be."

Cannon has received well wishes in the form of tweets, letters, and texts, including one from former Boston College linebacker and current Giant Mark Herzlich, who in 2009 was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer.

"God has a plan for everybody," Cannon said. "I just let him work his plan."

DE Andre Carter

The Boston Globe

Key player

Carter is as proficient at the piano as he is on the defensive line

By Stan Grossfeld
November 16, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - Patriots defensive end Andre Carter, dressed in black, quietly enters the movie theater lobby and sits behind a baby grand piano.

The day after he set the franchise record for sacks in a game (4 1/2) in a 37-16 rout of the Jets, Carter stretches his long, bony fingers, four of which have been dislocated during his 11-year NFL career. After a false start, he bangs out a soulful version of Miles Davis's classic composition, "So What?," without the benefit of sheet music.

Nobody in the Showcase Cinema de Lux at Patriot Place recognizes the talk of the town. Carter is not nearly as well-known as nose tackle Vince Wilfork and his wife, Bianca, who are at the theater taking in a matinee of "Jack and Jill" on an off day.

"I'm into jazz," says Carter, 32. "I love Miles Davis."

The Patriots' signing of Carter didn't receive the same fanfare as the arrivals of Chad Ochocinco or Carter's former Redskins teammate, Albert Haynesworth, but it has proven significant. Carter is tied for fourth in the NFL with nine sacks and has a total of 38 tackles. He never takes a play off.

As for his career day at MetLife Stadium, he says, "I'm still on Cloud 9," before quickly giving credit to his teammates for pressuring Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez.

"It was special because we put together four quarters. We just played hard, we played fast."

The 6-foot-4-inch, 255-pound Colorado native has been playing piano a decade longer than he has played football. His mother encouraged him to take piano lessons when he was 5 years old.

"My mom made sure I practiced so that I wouldn't make a fool out of myself when the piano teacher came on Saturday," he says. "I loved it and I got good at it."

Asked the difference between a pianist and a defensive lineman, Carter, whose second selection for the cinema crowd is Bruce Hornsby's "[That's Just] The Way It Is," says both require good hands.

"Piano is more at peace, D-lineman is more violent," he says. "If you don't have good hands, you won't get to the quarterback."

His father, Ruben Carter, was a defensive lineman for the fabled Orange Crush Bronco teams from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s. He wanted a kinder, gentler life for Andre.

"My dad didn't want me to play football because it was a violent sport," he says. "He wanted me to play tennis or basketball."

"I remember him coming home hurt. My mom wanted me to be a model. She'd say, 'Look at your figure, you've got a nice figure.' But that ain't going to happen, mom."

Carter was in the locker room and on the field as a kid, but he was quiet, almost too shy to shake John Elway's hand.

But in 10th grade, he finally signed up for his high school football team.

"My dad said, 'Are you sure? Are you sure? OK then, I'm going to get you right,' " says Carter. "Got some weights into the backyard and started pumping iron."

He also got his love for music from his father.

"My dad played guitar," says Carter. "He could also jam. We listened to Quincy Jones, Anita Baker, Stevie Wonder, and Ray Charles. John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Harry Belafonte.

"It was good music. I love Frank Sinatra, Elton John, especially on the piano."

Years ago, he bought a baby grand at a liquidation sale for his Southern California home.

"Music soothes the soul, it really does," he insists. "It defines emotion. You've got your songs when you're angry. You've got your songs when you're happy. You've got your songs when you're sad."

A call from Belichick

A first-round draft pick out of California in 2001 (No. 7 overall), Carter played for the San Francisco 49ers before signing a six-year, \$30 million contract with the Redskins in 2006. His 2009 season was a sad song. His production tumbled because the Redskins changed to a 3-4 defense, which required Carter to play outside linebacker. He hated being out of the three-point stance.

"It definitely humbled me," he says. "It definitely taught me more about myself, not just as a football player, but also as a man and as a father and husband.

"It was a tough pill to swallow and it was a pretty big pill, but I did it with class. I kept to myself, took the high road, did due diligence even though the position wasn't for me."

He says he got his release by "mutual agreement."

With an NFL lockout looming, he thought his career might be over.

"We were praying hard," he says. "We were prepared to walk away if I didn't get picked up. I just didn't want to finish like that."

But then he received a call from Bill Belichick.

"I was blunt, he was blunt," Carter says.

Belichick said he was looking for veteran leadership, a man who could play the run and the pass, a two-dimensional player.

"I said, 'Give me a plane ticket and let's talk about it,' " said Carter. "And from then on I've enjoyed every minute of it. "

This season, he has not missed a single practice, which earned him a special parking spot at Gillette Stadium. And in breaks from drills, he engages teammates in hand agility exercises, which helps him shed offensive linemen.

Post-football options

Carter says he enjoys New England but rarely goes out, preferring to stay home with his family.

He enjoys a good game of chess or just playing with his 4-year-old son, Quincy, or stepdaughter Aysha, 17.

Despite his love of music, you won't see him on the field wearing headphones during warmups, like many of his teammates.

"I used to listen to rap," he says. "Pumped-up stuff, but you know what? For me, as you get older, you don't need it."

Now, he meditates pregame.

He says he'd consider pursuing a musical career after his playing days, or maybe even become an analyst.

Asked about Haynesworth, who recently was cut by the Patriots, then picked up by Tampa Bay, Carter shrugged.

"In football, as in life, it's a gamble," he says. "You win some, you lose some.

"Did he try? I couldn't really evaluate him. Only he knows. There were times when he was effective and there were times when he didn't play - he was hurt and the next guy steps up.

"Whatever he does from this point on is on him. Great talent, big size, very explosive. Is he misunderstood? Yeah, absolutely. I couldn't even understand him."

Carter ignores criticism of the Patriots defense, which is ranked last in the NFL, especially the inexperienced secondary. And for the first time in his career, he's more vocal with teammates.

"I have all the trust in them," he says. "We've had a lot of changes in the back end because a lot of guys have been banged up. I told everybody: 'Come to work.'

"They're accountable. They study, study, study. Then if you play 100 miles per hour, when we look at the film, I won't be mad at you. We have the mentality that if one guy messes up, we all messed up."

Asked if Belichick yells, Carter smiles.

"I think all coaches yell," he says. "He's a coach.

"From the outside looking in, he's a mystery man, but at the end of the day, he's a coach who loves the game of football. He takes pride in his players, pride in his game, and constantly tries to push us to a higher level. Nobody knows the X's and O's better than him."

As for his future, Carter knows a musical career is a long shot.

"If I practice long enough and hard enough, I might come out with an album like [former Saints tackle] Kyle Turley or [former Yankees center fielder] Bernie Williams," he says.

"You wish you could play this game forever, it's such a great game. I'll play till God says, 'OK, son, get that Clydesdale and ride off into the sunset.' "

The Boston Globe

A fitting result for Carter

Risky move leads to reward: comfortable Patriots spot

By Shalise Manza Young

October 23, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - At 31 years old, with 10 NFL seasons behind him, coming off his worst statistical year in a half-decade, and with the league lockout looming, Andre Carter walked into the Washington Redskins office and asked to be released.

From the outside, the decision was risky.

But Carter had the support of his wife, Bethany, and the knowledge that he was too set in his ways to continue playing outside linebacker in the Redskins' new 3-4 system after spending his entire career as an undersized but effective defensive end.

Carter knew he had plenty of good snaps left in him, yet that didn't make it any less nerve-racking.

Of course it was scary, Carter said.

"And as you know, the league is based upon production," he said, "so I was really going on faith - faith in God and faith in my ability that I was going to get picked up.

"And of course it was scary, too, because of the whole lockout. I mean, as the lockout ended and teams were gathering their players together, there were a lot of guys that were my age that were vets that unfortunately didn't get picked up. That was a real risk. There was a time where you're kind of like, OK, I'm a little on the edge of my seat.

"I had a great wife that calmed my nerves and said, 'Whatever happens, everything happens for a reason, you've just got to be optimistic. And if by chance you don't play another down, you've had a great career.'

"And that's something that I had to look at for myself."

Carter was part of the defensive lineman-rich 2001 draft, chosen seventh out of Cal by the 49ers. There were seven defensive linemen selected among the top 13 picks, including Richard Seymour, by the Patriots. (Bill Belichick has a particular affinity for that class: of those linemen, five have passed through New England.)

Carter was an immediate starter in San Francisco, and parlayed his solid work there into a six-year contract with the Redskins before the 2006 season. He fit well with defensive coordinator Gregg Williams's scheme, collecting 10 1/2 sacks in his second year.

He continued to start until last year, when coach Mike Shanahan opted to switch to a 3-4. Carter didn't like the move, but by all accounts did everything he could to learn his new responsibilities as an outside linebacker.

"It was never a fit, from the jump," he said. "Just that transition from being an edge rusher, run-stopper, with my hand in the dirt, things of that nature, to covering tight ends and receivers and being in certain areas of coverage. I did it, but it wasn't for me.

"As a professional, I never complained. I did my due diligence, constantly asked questions, but at the end of the day, you just have to know what's best for you."

Time to move on

He asked to be cut, and the Redskins agreed. On his way out, Carter notes, he spoke with Shanahan and team owner Dan Snyder. There were no hard feelings; it was just time to move on.

When the lockout ended, Carter was one of dozens of veterans looking for a job. As he noted, some didn't get calls. His call came from Belichick.

"I'm like, really? Wow," Carter said with a chuckle. "I spoke to Coach Belichick and he said, 'We know what you can do and we'd like you to contribute.' From there on, I've just been very grateful."

His friend and former mentor at Cal, legendary coach Bill Dutton, told Carter not to hesitate to sign with New England.

"I gave him two thumbs up," said Dutton. "I was coaching for 60 years. I have the greatest respect for Coach Belichick and I think he's one of the top two or three coaches in the National Football League.

"That whole organization is designed to be a winner, and Andre fits that mold perfectly. He's a team guy, a committed guy, he is a winner.

"I said, 'My God, if you get that opportunity, go for it. You've got a chance to re-establish yourself as a defensive end.' That's what he is. That's what he was born to do."

Belichick knew Carter had football genes. In 1978, Belichick was on the Denver staff as a defensive and special teams assistant. One of the players he coached that season was defensive tackle Rubin Carter, Andre's father.

Since Carter joined the Patriots, Belichick has consistently raved about him - everything from Carter's intelligence and conditioning to his ability to not just rush the passer but also stop the run.

Though Carter's first big game appeared to be against the Cowboys last week - he sacked Tony Romo twice (something he was never able to do as a member of the Redskins despite facing the Cowboys twice a year) - he has played well since the season opener and is only getting better. That's reflected in his increased number of snaps.

"I think he's performed well all year, I really do," said Belichick. "I think he's performed well pretty much since the first training camp practice. He's a very consistent, high-effort player, strong, experienced, knows what he's doing, very professional. He's been really consistent.

"I think it's really inaccurate to think that all of a sudden it's been something great because he had two sacks, because that's the stat that it really seems all defensive linemen get measured by.

"I think it's very inaccurate. I think he's played consistently week in and week out."

Though Carter didn't enjoy his experience in the 3-4 with Washington, the lessons he learned there have come in handy in New England, where he occasionally has been asked to play off the line.

Pride and joy

Dutton is now retired, but he's still coaching Carter. He has watched his games closely, and sees the same intensity Carter displayed when they were together at Cal.

Carter never takes a play off, Dutton said, but the last time they spoke, Carter told his old coach that he still could turn up the intensity another notch.

As Dutton relays the story, you can hear the pride in his voice.

It's hard for Carter to disguise his happiness at the situation, and how things have worked out.

"I tell everybody, I'm very blessed with the opportunity to come out and play for such an elite organization," Carter said. "I really didn't know what to anticipate after I got released from the Washington Redskins even though it was a mutual thing.

"I just felt like knowing what I do and knowing the type of player I was, I needed the opportunity to go somewhere else and show my skills and just work with great men that love the game of football just as much as I do.

"So overall, it's been just such an amazing journey and I just constantly work on my craft, whether rushing the passer or stopping the run, and I just enjoy the men that I play with on the defensive line.

"I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world."

S Patrick Chung



Patrick Chung won't shy away

Parental guidance prepped Patriots safety for stardom

By Ian R. Rapoport

October 21, 2011

FOXBORO — There isn't a how-to guide on being a celebrity. There should be, considering the pitfalls and life-shaking changes the famous encounter, but there isn't.

It's trial and error and learning on the fly while striving to continue doing the job that brought one into public consciousness. All of which makes the education Patrick Chung received priceless.

Before he was a star safety for the Patriots [team stats] heading toward a breakout season, before he was a do-everything playmaker for the University of Oregon, Chung was born in Jamaica to reggae star Sophia George and her producer/manager/husband Ronald Chung. On their laps, Patrick heard stories of stardom and star-crossed situations, of fame and of infamy.

From California to Foxboro, those conversations continue on the phone. He has devoured every word.

"I said, 'Son, I can stretch my hand and let me reach you, because there is so much I can teach you,'" said his mother George-Chung, whose song "Girlie Girlie" was a No. 1 hit in Jamaica in 1985 and made it into the top 10 in the United Kingdom. "You always learn from people who have been there before you. One thing you never want to ever say is, 'I have arrived.' Be humble at all times. I teach him about my life experiences being in that 'celebrity status' for a while. He always listens."

Rising star

Chung has risen from Patriots 2009 second-round pick, to special-teams maven, to starter, to likely to star. On a suddenly surging defense heading into its bye, the 5-foot-11, 212-pound Energizer bunny has 37 tackles, an interception and a sack.

During camp, coach Bill Belichick noted "you really can't outwork Chung," and he meant it.

The same studious, diligent nature that led him to morph from child soccer player to Rancho Cucamonga (Calif.) High football star also led him to soak up the advice doled out by his parents on how to thrive amid backslaps, back-stabs and bright lights.

His parents, married for 26 years, warned him he won't please everyone. They spoke on how to deal with a performance that doesn't delight the crowd, and how to choose your friends and advisers. How to succeed, how to fail, and how to handle each in public.

Accordingly, Chung is polished and even-keeled, whether he's injured and missing the loss in Buffalo or making a game-turning, red-zone interception against the Raiders.

It all goes back to lesson time in the Chung household. Sophia and Ronald have traveled from Kingston to Japan, London and anywhere in between performing, picking up experiences along the way.

The lights have since dimmed. George-Chung set singing aside to raise a family that includes 28-year-old Patrice, who works in pharmaceuticals, and 19-year-old Petra, an Oregon student and aspiring journalist. George-Chung still writes songs, but mostly she just sings to her children in between life lessons.

"I got prepped for this," Chung said. "My parents, they've been through it, they've lived it. Giving me advice along the way. I should've listened 100 percent instead of 80 percent. But I did pretty good."

Chung will rarely admit to performing anything to the highest level. Of that Oakland interception, for instance: "Off to the next one," he said.

Chung described his mom as “a rock” and his father as the one who made him a man. Patrick intends to give them a reason to “brag about us kids,” and he already has.

Never was there a better example than on Jan. 17. One day after the Patriots’ shocking loss to the Jets in last season’s playoffs, Chung sat at his locker, sorting through old cleats and gloves. Quietly, he motioned reporters over to talk about the issue that dominated the airwaves.

Late in the first half, as personal protector, Chung called for a fake punt that failed, an ill-advised adjustment that derailed his team. He could have easily slinked off into the offseason, allowing the hurt to fade before responding in the spring that the issue was “in the past.”

Instead, he stared into the cameras and declared, “That’s on me.”

Out in California, a heart-sick mother looked on.

“I felt for him, because I know inside he was dying,” Chung-George said. “When I talked to him, I said, ‘You know what, son? I am very proud of you. You just have to take responsibility and just try to move on from there.’”

“The Jamaican elder says, ‘Breathe, stretch, shake and let it go,’” Chung-George said with her island-tinged accent. “You must always know bitter and sweet.”

Chung does. With an ever-ready smile and an easiness that brings teammates into his fold, Chung handles it all with equal aplomb.

Living on Jamaica until their son was nine, the Chung family moved to Florida, then a year later drove to California. The reason was simple — better opportunity for the children to attend college. The several-day drive made an impression, with Chung recalling how he asked, “let’s put wings on the car and let’s just fly there.” Life was changing, and he knew it.

When they landed in California, it presented Patrick with fresh obstacles.

Just 11 years old, he was the half-Jamaican, half-Chinese newcomer who looked different. With an accent that clashed with the surfer dudes, children would ask him if he could speak Chinese or Jamaican, despite the Jamaican Patois he lapses back into when he’s around family being mostly English.

Being the curiosity is what Chung says made him stronger. Now 24, he identifies himself with his entire catalogue of ethnicities.

“I’m Jamaican and I’m Chinese,” Chung said. “I’m not going to try to separate the two. That’s me.”

It also means he can offer light-hearted jokes about both cultures, saying his speed comes from his Jamaican roots while his ability to see things before they happen comes from his Asian background. A self-described “goofball” off the field, Chung’s diverse background helped turn him into an arms-outstretched, all-welcoming teammate who says he can “be cool with anybody.”

No surprise, his dad is the same way.

“That’s Patrick’s personality,” George-Chung said. “Try and make friends with everyone, try and make everyone feel welcome, and don’t think that you’re better than that guy across the street because you earn a little bit more money.”

When touted prospects came to Eugene, Ore., it was Chung who was assigned to tour the would-be college students around.

“He’s a guy that we would use in recruiting because he put a positive face on things,” recalled ex-Oregon coach Mike Bellotti, now an ESPN analyst. “Very comfortable in terms of representing the university on the field, off the field.”

It’s that way in New England, as Chung is starting to become one of the Patriots public faces.

A “relentless” child, George-Chung said, he swam, played soccer, and earned karate belts. Stubborn just like his mom, Chung once refused to come to dinner because he was dressed like RoboCop, and RoboCop didn't need food.

Love at first sight

He picked up football from scratch as a high school freshman, falling in love quickly. He proudly proclaimed to his parents that he yearned to hit, which anyone can see now. He admired the passion of former Eagles safety Brian Dawkins and tucked away his pride to embrace criticism from his coaches.

Playing time led to a scholarship at Oregon, despite being a year younger than most seniors.

Bellotti used to tell his defensive backs to have “quick feet and a short memory.” He didn't remember the two-time All-Pac 10 player having many bad plays, but on the rare occasions Chung did, there was that same deep breath and steely expression.

“I don't remember him dwelling on things, just being upbeat, positive,” Bellotti said. “Not the life of the party, but pretty close. . . . The beginning of junior year, he started making reads and recognizing how to train his eye to see what the coaches kept talking about. He became not only a great football player, but also an instinctive football player.”

The progression was similar in New England.

Belichick raised eyebrows this camp, cutting veteran James Sanders [stats] and two-time Pro Bowler Brandon Meriweather. That left the safety position to just Chung and unproven players James Ihedigbo, Sergio Brown and Josh Barrett. Despite an ever-changing starting unit and some growing pains, Chung has shepherded the group toward improvement with his smarts and his magnetism.

“He definitely does a good job of making guys know that we're a unit,” Barrett said.

On the field, Chung's passion comes through. He is always moving, always hitting, always filled with emotion. He unabashedly says, “I love football,” and that's not an act.

His mother views Patrick as “a guy with a big heart who likes to make everyone happy,” and the result is he outworks others in a battle for success to please his coaches, teammates and family. No one beats him during practice sprints.

Chung is fighting to make his family proud and to begin paying his parents back for the opportunity they gave him on the trek from Jamaica. Now established in New England, Chung wants more. He aims for a long career on the field and hopes to help children — “the funniest people on earth” — off it.

“If you start off on the right track when you're younger and you're raised the right way,” said Chung, who has a 1-year-old boy, Taj, and a fiancée, “it's a lot easier to get a good man or woman out of that when they grow up.”

He would know.

“His dad always says, ‘Pick sense out of the nonsense that I'm saying,’” George-Chung said. “He has listened. . . . I love watching him (on TV). Even though I watch him and think ‘Oh my goodness, he's going to get hit,’ it's such a joy watching him. I can't express how proud I am.”



Football journey: Patrick Chung

By Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Safety Patrick Chung was the Patriots' top draft choice in 2009, selected at the top of the second round (34th overall). The pick was acquired from the Kansas City Chiefs in exchange for quarterback Matt Cassel and outside linebacker Mike Vrabel.

Chung's spent most of his rookie season in a backup role, but he's broken out this season. No Patriots safety has played more, and he also had one of the great special teams performances in recent NFL history with a blocked punt and field goal against the Miami Dolphins.

"I'm the most laid-back person in the world," he says. "Totally opposite from the field. I save my energy for work, come home, watch film, chill out. That's just me."

The 23-year-old Chung, who was born in Kingston, Jamaica, shares his football journey with ESPNBoston.com:

When he first started playing football: "I didn't start playing tackle football until my freshman year of high school. I played flag football in eighth grade. Up to that point, I was all soccer. When I got to the States, I didn't really know what football was; I didn't understand it, I didn't know what a receiver was. They put me at receiver and safety and running back. I was 12 turning 13, and just went from there. I went to college at 16. I was young. Graduated at 21."

Why he didn't play football right away after moving to the States when he was 10: "I liked it and wanted to try it, but my mom wanted me to swim. My dad was like, 'Go ahead and try it.' I tried it and liked it. I kept going from there, I guess."

Top football memories at Rancho Cucamonga (Calif.) High School: "I played on the freshman team as a freshman. As a sophomore I was on junior varsity; at the end of sophomore year I went to varsity, the last two games. My freshman year, I had an 80-yard run. And my first kickoff return [for a touchdown]. I ran the kicker over. The kicker was bigger than me; I remember I was little."

Why he chose to attend Oregon: "Different color fields and jerseys. I committed before I even went on the trip. I just liked it. Of course, I didn't just jump into it. I thought about it, but that's where I wanted to go. I like Oregon. It's close to home. It got me."

Other college opportunities: "Wyoming was the first to offer me. Boise State. Utah. Colorado State. I want to say that was it."

Top memories of Oregon: "I have a lot of good memories. The best feeling, team-wise, was when we blocked a field goal against Oklahoma my red-shirt sophomore year. Crazy. It felt like the stadium blew up. That was cool."

NFL player he admired: "Brian Dawkins. That was my dude right there. I just liked how he played."

Entering the NFL as a second-round draft choice: "I cried like a baby. It was good. Nine, 10 years of work and one phone call. That's pretty much how I describe it. You're working for so long, your parents sacrificing, and then that phone call comes. It's craziness. Then you realize it's just another step. It's not like you made it. Now I have to show these guys what I can do, just like high school, just like Oregon. It just takes time. You have to be humble and keep working hard. Everything will be fine, no worries."

Summing up his first year-plus with the Patriots: "I love the organization, the team, the players. As far as me maturing and doing things football-wise, I'm OK. I have a long way to go. That's how I feel. I'm always trying to keep going instead of getting complacent."

Favorite NFL moment so far: "Playing in the snow. That was my first time playing in snow like that."

Toughest NFL moment so far: “Any loss is tough, but the toughest moment? Yet to come. Everything is good so far.”

Impressions of New England region: “I like it. I’ve been to all hot states, so I like the snow. Cold is very cold, but I like the snow. I’m like a change-up guy. I’ve been in heat -- I went from Jamaica to Florida to California to Oregon. I’ve learned to adapt. I like different. I don’t like being hot all the time. You need some rain and some good sleet [laughing], and in the snow you can have fun. It’s cool.”

On where his journey goes from here: “I don’t know yet. I have a lot more years hopefully. Life is a forever journey. I don’t know where it’s taking me. I just know I’m going to try to take the right paths.”

OL Dan Connolly



Center copin' just fine

Versatile Connolly no less than key cog

By Ron Borges

Sunday, October 30, 2011

FOXBORO — Dan Connolly knows what he is in the eyes of the NFL and doesn't try to fight it, which is maybe why he's triumphed over it.

The way they see him, he's not a right guard, a left guard or a center. To them he's a replacement part, a super sub, a utility man, polite ways of saying "less than."

Nobody grows up dreaming of being versatile so one could fixate on such a label and slowly begin to resent it, letting other's opinions eat away at your confidence and enthusiasm until they have eroded both and left you to less than what you might have been.

This is especially true if, like Connolly, you've started 22 of the 39 NFL games you've played in during a six-year career and held your own so well few people noticed you were there. But instead of resenting the way the league perceives him, Connolly periodically reminds himself of what Patriots [team stats] coach Bill Belichick told him when he first arrived after two less-than-productive years with the Jacksonville Jaguars [team stats].

"I was completely grateful just to be a part of the organization, but coach Belichick told us, 'You're not here by chance. We wanted you here,' " Connolly said. "I try to remember that."

That remembrance became easier three years ago after Connolly started four games at right guard in place of the injured Stephen Neal. A year later Connolly started 13 times, seven at left guard while Logan Mankins [stats] held out in a contract dispute, and upon Mankins' return, six at right guard when Neal went down again. This year he stepped in after center Dan Koppen was lost for the season on the opening weekend, moving seamlessly into service at a more demanding position.

"The center for the quarterback, obviously there's nobody we rely on more . . . not only for the execution of the snap but also the calls, the communication between quarterback and offensive line, and offensive line and the quarterback, because a lot of what we do depends on us all being on the same page," Tom Brady [stats] said.

"How quickly we can get the calls and relay them to one another and then in the same amount of time be able to snap the ball and get ready to play, it's hugely important to the execution of our offense.

"Fortunately, Danny has been here, and he's worked at center. He's really stepped into his role and was kind of called to duty when Dan went down. It's been a good spot for him. We all have a lot of confidence in him, and he's just gotten better.

"It's probably not as seamless for other teams. I think I've seen that a few times where center-quarterback exchanges (are a problem). It's frustrating. You lose one or two plays in a game and they're critical plays. You only get 60 or 70 plays in a game. You give away one without the defense really having to do anything, and it's tough. I think Dan's worked hard at it over the years. He's always put himself in position and he's taking advantage of this opportunity."

What Connolly has done best is go unnoticed, which is a lineman's goal. Some of the pressure for line calls has been taken from him to ease his transition, but he has been good enough that no one mentions his name. For a lineman, that's often as good as it gets.

"Offensive linemen never get credit. We're only given blame if things don't go well," Connolly said, "but I enjoy doing my job so others can be successful. It doesn't matter if anyone notices."

That has been pretty much the way things have gone. He's replaced Koppen without a sound, stepping in and doing what Belichick preaches: his job.

"I guess I don't look at it that way," Connolly said when asked if he's bothered by being a jack-of-all-trades. "These are my opportunities to be on the field. If I mope around about not being a starter, it's not going to do me any good.

"I prepare myself to go into any situation. I know things can happen, and if they do I have to be ready to step right in and do as good as I can."

That is what Connolly has been doing since he left high school in St. Louis and couldn't find a big-name college willing to welcome him. Ultimately, Southeast Missouri State afforded him the best chance to play and he became a fixture, making all-conference for four years. Then NFL scouts left him undrafted, which makes for a long row to hoe but fertile ground for someone who can accept his role but not let it diminish him.

"I've always been an underdog trying to impress the coaches," Connolly said. "That gives you a little bit of a chip on your shoulder. You feel you always have to prove yourself. I don't know if it's the small school thing or the undrafted thing. I feel it, but it doesn't bother me."

Instead he embraced it but never believed it. The Patriots are fortunate he did both.

The Boston Globe

Connolly gets his fill

Connolly's been a busy lineman

By Michael Vega

October 12, 2010

FOXBOROUGH — Patrick Connolly, then the acclaimed chef de cuisine at Radius, was proud of the sumptuous meal he had prepared for a special guest one evening three years ago at the trendy Boston restaurant. It was a feast fit for a king. But for a professional football player? Not so much.

It was not nearly enough to satisfy the voracious appetite of Connolly's guest of honor: his not-so-little brother, Dan, a strapping 6-foot-4-inch, 313-pound offensive lineman. Dan, who originally signed with Jacksonville before the 2005 season as an undrafted rookie out of Southeast Missouri State, had come to Boston for a tryout with the Patriots a week after being released by the Jaguars Sept. 1, 2007.

Dan's arrival meant a reunion with his older brother, whose own stardom took a meteoric path when he won the James Beard Foundation Award as the best chef in the Northeast in 2008.

So Patrick, who was thrilled to have the youngest of his two brothers in town, treated Dan to dinner.

"I tried to blow him away," Patrick said. "There were something like 13 courses. He appreciated it. He'd always been the most adventurous eater of all of us, even growing up."

Like most opposing defensive linemen he's faced since then, Dan made quick work of the meal his brother painstakingly prepared.

"He just demolished it," Patrick said, laughing at the recollection during a recent phone conversation from New York, where he is chef at Bobo in the West Village. "He went through all 13 courses and loved it all, but he was like, 'I could still eat,' and this was soon after dessert. So I was like, 'Well, forget it, eat all you want,' so I just sent over a bowl of short ribs and potatoes and something like that."

There was no need for a digestif after the 14th course.

"You got to realize that a 'course' at a fancy restaurant like that is something that big," Dan said, forming his hands into a circle the size of a tea cup saucer. "So you're talking about 13 side dishes that I ate. Anyhow, I

was a little hungry at the end. It didn't satisfy me, so he brought me some ribs. He was bringing me all fish and stuff and I needed something to stick to my bones and fill me up."

As he's proven this season, Dan Connolly is a meat-and-potatoes guy. A bring-your-lunch-pail-to-work guy. Connolly's blue-collar approach to his job has helped him assimilate with the four other like-minded individuals on New England's offensive line, where he's worked as Dan Koppen's backup at center and played a career-high 14 games last season, making four starts at right guard for the injured Stephen Neal.

"I don't think it was that big of a deal to go from one side to another," said left tackle Matt Light. "He's done that the whole time he's been here. It's kind of been a normal mode for him since he's been here. He definitely understands all the moving parts, that's for sure."

This season, though, Connolly has been called upon to fill the void at left guard with Logan Mankins out in a protracted contract dispute.

"I didn't really follow the ins and outs of it," said Connolly, when asked how Mankins's situation has affected him. "I came in with the intention of playing the role that I did last year, backing up those spots, always with the thought in mind that I'm going to work as hard as I can and if the opportunity presents itself and I can fill in that spot, then I'm going to make myself as ready as I possibly can."

And what if Mankins were to return this season?

"I don't really think about that," Connolly said. "It's the coaches' decision for whatever they want to do. I'll be prepared for whatever happens. If I go back to being the backup guard and center, that's fine. Whatever keeps me having a job."

Connolly seems to have adapted quite well to starting.

"This is my fourth season being with team," he said. "I've gotten reps at all those three inside positions. I feel like the reps that I got last year at right guard are only helping me this year. I know I've moved to the opposite side, but the experience definitely paid off."

That was evident in the Patriots' 38-30 victory over the Bills in Week 3. Connolly factored in a series of four plays at the end of the first half that helped swing the momentum New England's way. He helped spring Brandon Tate on a 32-yard kickoff return, then provided Tom Brady with the protection to complete passes of 29 and 13 yards that set up Stephen Gostkowski's 43-yard field goal that enabled the Patriots to take a 17-16 halftime lead.

And none of it was lost on coach Bill Belichick, who singled out Connolly for his extraordinary effort.

"On a kickoff return, he's right at the point of attack on the wedge," Belichick said. "And then the two pass plays and then a field goal where they overloaded the rush and came right over his side. [He was] the only guy really that was on the field for all four of those plays and was kind of right at the point of attack on all four of them. That was a big series in the game."

But Belichick wasn't done. He continued listing Connolly's attributes.

"Dan is a versatile player. He works hard. He's a real smart guy," he said. "I think he has really improved over the time he's been here. He came from a real small school, but his whole career he has improved and then worked hard here. Dante [Scarnecchia, the Patriots' offensive line coach] has coached him well. He's blended in with the offensive line. Those guys work together pretty well.

"I think he's made a nice career and he's steadily improved in all phases of the game."

There was a point, however, during his time at Southeast Missouri when Connolly wondered where football would lead him. After all, not many Division 1-AA offensive linemen drew attention from NFL scouts. But Connolly said he was fortunate to play alongside one such player who did, center Eugene Amano, now with Titans.

"They played for me at the same time," said Mike Chavez, Southeast Missouri's former offensive line coach. "I knew Eugene would make it just because of what he could do. But Dan's work ethic and his approach to

the whole game, I felt it would carry him through his lack of height or the lack of arm reach to a point where I thought he could do something with himself and make money with it.”

It wasn't until after his junior year, when he participated in a pro workout with Amano, that Chavez enlightened Connolly, telling him, “Hey, you've got a shot.”

“I had no aspirations, really, to play after college until that came up and I was like, ‘OK, I'll give it a whirl,’ ” said Connolly, who started all four years at Southeast Missouri.

The only plan Connolly had before getting his sports management degree was to inquire about a fifth year of eligibility to throw the shot put on Southeast Missouri's track team. Failing that, there was a thought about playing on the school's club rugby team. “It was just an idea,” Dan said. “I really didn't have any plans. I was just going to see what my future brought with finishing my degree.”

But two other events seemed to change the course of Connolly's uncertain path. The first was when he was invited to participate in an all-star game in Las Vegas, where he worked with former NFL offensive lineman Carl Mauck. “I knew Carl from some camps we had worked together in California and he told me that he thought Dan was the best offensive lineman at the all-star game,” Chavez said.

The other was when Connolly was invited to the NFL's scouting combine in Indianapolis.

“He's been kind of steady and focused the whole time, through high school and through college,” Patrick said of his brother. “In college, he played every single game and started when he was a freshman, and when he was invited to the combine it was like, ‘Whoa, he's really that good,’ and ‘This is a real possibility.’ ”

That notion was reinforced when Connolly landed in Jacksonville. He was one of two undrafted rookies to make the squad (and one of 15 in team history to do so).

He played four games that season, making his NFL debut Dec. 11 against Indianapolis, but wound up spending the next season on injured reserve and was released in 2007 when he got signed to the Patriots' practice squad. He was signed to the active roster Feb. 5, 2008, then released Oct. 20 and, two days later, was re-signed for a second tour on the practice squad. Two months later, Connolly was signed to the active roster, cementing his place as a role player on the offensive line.

Asked if he ever contemplated how he arrived at this place, Connolly looked around the locker room and replied, “Oh, all the time. I'm blessed to be where I'm at. I mean, five, six, seven years ago, I would've never thought that I'd be here.

Like I said, my junior year, before that, this was the last place I thought I'd be, so I feel blessed to be here.”

The greater blessing, of course, is that it has given Dan Connolly a seat at the table in Foxborough.

LB Jermaine Cunningham



Football journey: Jermaine Cunningham

Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- When it comes to rookie outside linebackers in Bill Belichick's 11-year tenure as Patriots head coach, Jermaine Cunningham has broken the mold.

Not only is Cunningham the highest draft selection at the position in Belichick's time as coach, he's also elevated to the starting lineup quicker than any rookie at that spot. The 22-year-old Cunningham began the 2010 season as a sub rusher, but he became a first-stringer in Week 3 and has been there since. He has been credited by coaches with 22 tackles, one sack, one pass defended and one forced fumble.

Born in the Bronx, Cunningham moved to Georgia when he was 5. After a standout high school career in which he totaled 45 sacks in his junior and senior seasons, he showed up on the radar of Southeastern Conference schools. Cunningham put together a solid career at Florida and was selected by the Patriots in the second round of the 2010 draft (53rd overall).

Cunningham shares his football journey with ESPNBoston.com:

Why he started playing: "A couple of my buddies were playing, so I went out that year. I was terrible. I wanted to quit. I came back the next year and put more into it, and felt like I was pretty good. So I just stuck with it."

First positions: "Defensive line and offensive line. In park ball, you just go out and play."

Favorite teams growing up: "I wasn't too much of a football fan. I didn't like watching it, but I did like playing it. When I was getting recruited in high school, I watched more college football."

Top memories at Stephenson High School in Stone Mountain Ga. : "Winning. We were pretty much a winning program in my time there. Just the people I was around, they were a lot of people you see playing college and pro ball -- [LSU linebacker] Kelvin Sheppard, [Redskins rookie linebacker] Perry Riley, [Memphis defensive back] Marcus Ball, [former Georgia Tech quarterback] Reggie Ball, [former Georgia running back] Kregg Lumpkin. There are a bunch of people from the high school who were pretty good athletes. We didn't win a state championship, but we did all right."

Leading Stephenson to the state semifinals as a senior: "We were just a bunch of guys who loved football. We'd go out there on defense and there was no game we thought we'd lose. We just felt like we'd blow everybody out."

One high school game that stands out: "I'd say the semifinals. It was in the Georgia Dome. That was as far as we reached. We had our eyes on the prize, knowing the next game would be the state championship. But unfortunately we lost."

Proudest high school accomplishment: "Getting a college scholarship and knowing that I had an opportunity to go to college for free."

Why he chose to attend Florida for college: "Just my visit when I got there, the people I was around and the coaches and the Gator Nation."

Other college options: "Pretty much the SEC. I wanted to keep it small, and stay in the South. I didn't want to go too far away from home, but I wanted to get away from home."

Top memories of college: "Graduating."

What he takes from the experience at Florida: "Just the community, the people there and the coaches. It's a great program."

Emotions on being selected in the second round by the Patriots: "I just felt like I was living the dream, being able to fulfill my dream and come do what I wanted to do my whole life."

What he's learned about the NFL: "It's a business. You see people come and go, and you just have to stay focused and do your job. It's a job and you have to keep getting better every day."

Favorite moment in the NFL to this point: "I'd say going out in my first game. I missed the preseason games, and playing that first one felt good."

Toughest moment in the NFL to this point: "The preseason when I hurt my ankle and being out. I'm not used to missing games."

How he'd like to be viewed as a player: "Somebody who is going to go out and leave it all on the field."

Summing up his football journey: "A dream."

DL Brandon Deaderick

The Boston Globe

Pup is able to help

Young Deaderick waited for chance

By Shalise Manza Young

November 5, 2011

That's a lot of knowledge. Deaderick, in just his second season, has tried to gain as much as they will offer him as he carves out a spot on New England's defensive line.

"All the time," Deaderick said when asked if he leans on his older teammates. "They've had successful careers for multiple years in the NFL. That's what I aspire to do as well, so any time I have a question or any time they see something, we'll conversate back and forth on what I should have done or what they were really trying to do on a certain scheme, just really understanding the game, not just using your physical abilities, because everybody is good here."

It has been an interesting path for the 6-foot-4-inch, 305-pound University of Alabama product. A seventh-round pick in 2010 (247th overall), Deaderick was inactive for the first three games last season, but then not only got onto the field, he was a starter against the Ravens, Chargers, Vikings, and Steelers. He wound up playing 10 games as a rookie, but during the bye week before the Patriots' playoff game, he was briefly suspended by the team. The punishment didn't last long, nor did the effects linger, as Deaderick started the game against the Jets.

Deaderick began this season on the physically unable to perform list after shoulder surgery, and was activated before last week's game against the Steelers. He played 16 of 81 snaps and was credited with two tackles by the coaching staff. He may have played more snaps than originally intended after Ellis left the game with a rib injury.

Because he and the Patriots' other players on the PUP list could not practice for the first six weeks of the season, Deaderick, Kevin Faulk, Ron Brace, and Marcus Cannon are still rounding into game shape. But coach Bill Belichick said yesterday that Deaderick is off to a solid start.

"He's coming along. Brandon has done a good job," Belichick said. "He's working hard and he's taking a lot of snaps. You can see it a little bit every day. It's still a lot of ground to make up, but he's certainly closing the gap."

With the Patriots still trying to find the right mix to maximize the pass rush, Wilfork is happy to have Deaderick back in the fold.

"Any time you have depth, especially from a defensive line standpoint, it gives you a chance to move guys around and give guys a break, so he definitely brings that to us," Wilfork said. "It's going to take him a little bit to get back used to playing because he's been away for a while, he missed the [training] camp we did have, so it's going to take a while for him, but that comes with the territory."

"I'm happy to have him back, I'm pretty sure the team is happy to have him back because he'll just give us more people up front we can move around."

Wilfork speaks like a proud papa when he discusses the progress Deaderick has made since arriving at Gillette 19 months ago.

"I saw him go from a baby and making the steps forward that he needed to make to be a professional. That's what this game comes down to," Wilfork said. "You have to be able to separate all your personal life and everything and get focused on your job and be a professional. I think all of our young guys have done that, so that's just one thing you have to be able to do to stay at this level. If you can't do that, you won't be at this level for long. But he's done that."

"And he's steadily learning. He's paying attention to little details now, stuff that when you're young you really don't know. But you can tell that he's starting to pick the game up a little bit more, it's starting to be more

clear for him, so hopefully he can get it done, get back out there, and start making more and more plays because we're going to need him. We're going to need everyone down the road, but we're going to need him."

Deaderick talks about the commitment required now to be successful, and is focused on getting better from week to week, whether the tape shows he had a strong game or not. He relishes the opportunity.

But for tonight at least, he'll be rooting for the success of another team. No. 2 Alabama is hosting top-ranked Louisiana State, and Deaderick and fellow Crimson Tide alumnus Mark Anderson are hoping to earn bragging rights in the locker room over former LSU players Faulk and Stevan Ridley.

Alabama leads the nation in total defense, allowing an average of just 180.5 yards in eight games.

"I'm definitely impressed," Deaderick said. "We had a lot of younger guys when I was there that were playing well, starting early in their career, and now you see the experience that they've gained, how elevated their level of play is from being in that system so long and really making it their own. I think they're playing great."



Football journey: Brandon Deaderick

By Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- The Patriots have produced two big wins in the past two weeks -- over the Ravens and Chargers -- and one surprise has been the presence of rookie defensive end Brandon Deaderick in the starting lineup. A seventh-round draft choice out of Alabama, the 247th overall pick, Deaderick has played significant snaps alongside Vince Wilfork and Gerard Warren.

After he was a healthy inactive for the first three games of the season, Deaderick has been credited with nine tackles and two quarterback sacks while seeing time at left end, right end and even as a sub rusher for a series last week against the Chargers.

The 23-year-old Deaderick is from Elizabethtown, Ky., but his home in the Patriots locker room is between veterans Wilfork and Warren. That's where he shared his football journey with ESPNBoston.com:

When he first started playing football: "Fourth grade. Little League. Radcliff, Kentucky. I played for the Bengals. That was my first year, but then I didn't play again until seventh grade. We ended up moving to Elizabethtown and I had missed the sign-up dates those two years."

Why he wanted to play football: "Because I liked to hit."

First positions: "Linebacker and offensive tackle. I really started focusing on [defensive] end in high school."

Favorite teams and players growing up: "I didn't really have a favorite team. Jevon Kearse was one of my favorite players. I always loved LT [Lawrence Taylor] -- he's all about sacks. Warren Sapp. Bruce Smith. Reggie White. All defensive players."

Top memories at Elizabethtown High School: "Beating our rival for the first time in seven years my freshman year. It was my first varsity start. Big-time rivalry in Central Kentucky -- Elizabethtown vs. Central Hardin. I was 13 and starting on varsity. To win, that was one of my biggest memories. I found out the day before that I was going to start that game. I had just been hoping to be on the sidelines, dressing as a freshman. I saw this guy walking out for Central and he was big -- huge -- maybe 310 [pounds]. He had a black visor, just jacked. I said 'I wonder who has him?' I was maybe 225 at the time and he was right on me [laughing]."

Why he chose Alabama after being one of the top prospects in Kentucky: "The tradition, and the chance to go in there and play in the SEC. I wanted to win a championship."

Top memories at Alabama: "The national championship. It's the big one. There are a lot of teams, and everything can go right for you and you still get cut out at the end. It was a real blessing. I played my role and we ended up coming out with the victory."

Comparing playing for Nick Saban at Alabama and Bill Belichick at New England: "They are two different programs. Coach Saban, he runs a top-notch program, very structured. It helped me mature a lot being there and playing for him. This is a great program [in New England]. Coach Belichick is very professional. I feel very comfortable here, really being around people who love football in both places."

Emotions on draft day after slipping to the seventh round, perhaps due to an off-field incident that involved him being shot in a robbery attempt: "Like I said before, that's over with. The cards fell where they fell and I had to play the hand I was dealt and make the most of the opportunity I was given. I had to make sure that wherever I went, I came in and gave it 110 percent so I wouldn't have any regrets. It really didn't matter to me [where I was drafted], as long as I got a chance."

First thoughts on life in the NFL and being in New England: "It was pretty much a culture shock to me. I'm not saying that in a bad way, but it's the pros. I realized that very quick, to get with the program, keep your nose down and work hard."

Emerging as a starter the past two games with the Patriots: "We're a unit. No one man is bigger than the unit. We work together and everyone has a role that they are given to help the team win in that game. I always said that it doesn't matter when you go in, it matters what you do when you go in there. If I only came in every other play, I just want to help my team."

Comparing Elizabethtown to Foxborough: "I haven't been around that much here. Elizabethtown is a nice place, very community-oriented. It's obviously a lot colder up here. Accents are a lot different. The people are different, but they're both nice."

Summing up his football journey: "I let God lead the way. I've really been blessed. I've seen lots and lots and lots of talented players never make it. Just the opportunity that I've had, I'm just so grateful. Persistence. Never giving up on your dreams. Just working and working and working because this wasn't an overnight thing. Everyone's talented, but what are you going to do with that talent? Just working hard and striving toward my goals, and I'm still doing that to this day. I haven't arrived yet. You can get released tomorrow. You have to constantly work to be the type of player you want to be."

WR Julian Edelman



Football journey: Julian Edelman

By Mike Reiss
January, 14, 2012

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Julian Edelman has become a do-it-all player for the Patriots. Receiver. Defensive back. Returner.

When recently asked how he likes the role, he responded by saying, "You know what I love? I love winning."

No matter what position or role he's filling, Julian Edelman is happy as long as the Patriots are winning. He's done plenty of that over the years, often with the ball in his hands at quarterback. But Edelman knew that his days under center would almost certainly be over in the NFL, so he had a decision to make coming out of Kent State in 2009: Would he go to the Canadian Football League and stick with quarterback or reinvent himself at receiver while facing long odds to stick in the NFL.

"The British Columbia Lions took my negotiating rights and wanted me to come play quarterback," Edelman said this week.

The offer was enticing, but he felt the tug of something else. Asked how difficult it was to choose to the NFL over the CFL, Edelman didn't hesitate.

"It was hard for the fact that you never played the other position [receiver], so you have a huge road ahead of you to learn something at the highest level in the world to it. But the easy part was that you didn't grow up wanting to go to the CFL. I grew up wanting to go to the NFL, having that dream," he said.

When it comes to football, much of the last three years have been dream-like for the 25-year-old Edelman, who hails from Redwood City, Calif.

In advance of Saturday's AFC divisional-round playoff game, he shared his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com:

When he first started playing football: "I was 8, playing Pop Warner for the Redwood City 49ers. We won a Super Bowl that year. Then we won a Super Bowl when I was 12 and we flew to Florida. That was a huge part of my life. My pops was a coach my whole life, and because I had an older brother, so I was always around the sport. When I was diapers, I was on the practice field running around with my pops and my brother."

Why the Redwood City 49ers were so popular: "You're battling for national championships every year. Just the fact of playing football at a young age, you're learning life skills from the coaches. I had great coaches there. I learned core values of life. Teamwork. Building goals. [Reacting] when things aren't going your way. Sacrificing for the team. You learn all that at a young age and it helped me get to where I am now. Not just that but the football skills developing -- how to run and catch."

What positions he played: "I was a tailback. We used to run the wishbone. I did that from 8 to 15. Then from high school, four years, I transferred to quarterback after my sophomore year."

Attending Woodside (Calif.) High School: "I played quarterback. We won a CCS championship, went 13-0 my senior year. Our third game we played Gunn High School and the year before there was some controversy at our school and they ended up canceling our season with three games to go. It's our third game of the year, we're 2-0, which was big for the school, and we're playing Gunn and down by 10 points with two minutes to go. All the fans had left and we ended up coming back and winning that game. That's when you knew it was going to be a special year. That was a huge memory of my high school career."

Going to junior college at College of San Mateo: "I didn't get recruited out of high school. I was small and a late bloomer, so I ended up at College of San Mateo. We won the Bulldog Bowl and were ranked eighth in the country or something. I was a qualifier out of high school and went to JUCO because I didn't get

recruited and wanted to further my football playing career. My top memory there wasn't a good one; we played San Francisco City College, the No. 1 team in JUCO, and it's a rivalry. We were up 17 points at halftime, there were 50 seconds to go in the game, we were battling back and forth and we ended up losing that game."

Enrolling at Kent State: "Since I did well in school in high school I could transfer [from junior college] after a year, and being a quarterback, I wanted to play quarterback at the next level, Division 1. Kent State came and they offered me after my first year. I decided to go with that. I started there for three years, had some good years, had a lot of fun and met a lot of good people. My top memory was the first win. Playing against Miami, at Miami, it was like the first time Kent had won there since the early '80s. Just getting that first win in your career, it was a special moment."

Preparing himself for the NFL draft: "I didn't go to the combine, but had a pretty productive Pro Day. The crazy thing was that all the scouts weren't there to see me. They were there to see an offensive lineman. I ended up having a pretty good day and that opened the door for a bunch of workouts. You really don't know what's going on. With the whole Wildcat thing, I think some teams were intrigued to see what I was about. I had a couple trips. All you could do was prepare. I worked with Charlie Frye, a quarterback with the Browns, a lot. I was trying to pick his brain because he was a quarterback in the league and that was a big help for me."

Getting drafted in the seventh round by the Patriots (232nd overall): "The expectation was either late or 'priority free agent' and by the time that pick came around, I was planning on what team I was going to sign with. My agent told me New England could come pick me up and that was probably one of the happiest days of my life. Even though I was a seventh-rounder, even though you're against the odds of making the team, I'll be able to tell my kids and my friends and family that I was drafted in the National Football League. It's not like baseball, where there's a thousand rounds. There are only seven of them. It was a great experience to share that with my family because they had been part of that road the whole time."

Life as a Patriot: "It's been great. It's definitely an emotional roller coaster, just the life of the NFL season, how long it is. That's why, over the years, you learn to have steady emotions and not to get too high or too low. We've won a lot of games here. Unfortunately, the outcome of some seasons hasn't gone the way we would have liked. We have a huge opportunity ahead of us this year."

Favorite teams and players growing up: "Definitely the San Francisco 49ers. I was a huge fan. My dad was a huge [Joe] Montana fan. So I grew up loving Joe, liking Steve [Young], loving Jerry Rice. Walter Payton was a big one who my father always liked. I loved Barry Sanders. Deion Sanders, I used to wear No. 21 because of him."

Patriots influences: "Getting here and playing the receiver position, obviously watching Wes Welker. That was a blessing in disguise, to play behind him and watch the way he practices and prepares, and kind of do everything the way he did. That's been a big help, along with Tom Brady; just having a quarterback who is like a mini offensive coordinator out there. He knows everything that is going on. It's been a big help to have those two. When Randy [Moss] was here, he'd help me out as well."

Role models and influences in his life: "My dad is my best friend, the guy who got me to where I am. It's not just football but becoming a man. It helps you because football is a microcosm of life -- what you put into the game, that's what you're going to do after you're done with the game, how you'll treat your other job. That's how I always looked at it and that's how he always brought me up -- a man of details, doing little things. He never had a dad, and the fact that he's done what he's done in life, from where has come from, he's a great model and person to look up to. He's definitely my hero. My mother as well. She was there, always, with a lunch in my hand, taking me to practices, supporting when me and my pops were battling about sports. My core family -- my dad, mom, brother and sister -- they're huge."

Summing up his football journey: "I've been fortunate enough to play football since I've been 8 years old. To sum it up, it's hard to say in one word, or even a lot of words. I truly am a lucky man to get to do what I love to do. It gets better every day. I never thought I'd be playing up here. It's definitely been a great experience."

DE Shaun Ellis



Football journey: Shaun Ellis

By Mike Reiss
September, 10, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – Shaun Ellis' football journey has taken him somewhere he didn't anticipate. After 11 seasons with the New York Jets, the veteran defensive lineman signed a one-year contract with the rival Patriots on Aug. 8.

The 34-year-old Ellis, who was born in Anderson, S.C. and is married with three children, said he's enjoyed the change. On Friday, he shared his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com.

When he first started playing: "I always played in the backyard, but the first time playing organized football was seventh grade, in middle school. I wasn't going to play. They had a meeting in the cafeteria for those to sign up, and I didn't go. I was going to walk home and the coach caught me and asked, 'Are you not going to play football?' I said I wasn't planning on it. He said, 'You're playing.' I was a wide receiver and backup quarterback. My middle school team (Southwood) was undefeated two years in a row."

Memories at Westside (S.C.) High School: "I started on the varsity as a freshman, playing free safety and cornerback. I ended up on the defensive line when one of the guys got hurt, and they moved me up there. I also was returning punts and kickoffs at the time. I ended up playing defensive end/outside linebacker and I've been there ever since; that was 1992. At the time, I was 6-4, 215 pounds. There was one particular game that stands out. We played Dorman, a team out of Spartanburg, and they were heavily ranked. I had seven sacks and 20 tackles."

Attending University of Tennessee: "I visited Florida, South Carolina and Clemson, but I went there on a visit and just fell in love. Just the college football environment there is top of the charts. I knew that's where I wanted to go."

Best memories at Tennessee: "By far, the national championship season. In 1998, we went undefeated, 13-0, first BCS national champions. That was an overwhelming year. A lot of things went into that season, a lot of things happened, a lot of adversity we had to go through, and to go to where we did, it was just great."

Entering the NFL as a first-round pick of the Jets (12th overall) in 2000: "Just overall excitement. Disbelief. Reflection of how hard you worked to get to a certain point, and to ultimately reach that goal, it was overwhelming. It was great times. I had a ball there, with a lot of ups and downs. But overall, it was a tremendous opportunity."

Biggest up & biggest down with the Jets: "I guess the biggest up was going to the AFC Championship game two years in a row [in 2009 and 2010]. The biggest down is losing those games. It went hand in hand."

Experiencing such a contrast in Jets head coaches: "A lot of coaches have their own personalities and how they like to do things. It went from A to B, and B to Z, and you just had to take on the coach's personality. That's how I learned to do it. Be yourself but also take on the coach's personality. As coaches changed, it proved even more for me that's how you have to handle the situation."

Signing with the Patriots this year: "It's one of those things where you think you'll finish where you started. Obviously, that didn't happen. I ended up coming to be a Patriot. I had a lot of battles throughout the years with them and this organization. To actually be here now, and getting ready to suit up for a game with them, it's still kind of weird. It's definitely a huge opportunity for me and my family, and I'm excited to get the season started and to play with a group of guys who are great as teammates and as people. We all have the same goal in mind, to try to get to the ultimate goal. The organization is really treating me well. I couldn't ask for anything more. Everyone works well with one another and gets along. You just understand the type of mental aspect you have to have when you come through this door."

How tough to go from bleeding Jets green to a Patriot: "It's just one of those where you have to move on. It's kind of like a [personal] relationship. Once it goes bad, you just move on and try to find the next good

woman. That's what I had to do. I had to re-train my whole thinking and everything to come in and do things the Patriots' way."

What he likes most about football: "I just love the preparation. All the physical aspect, that comes with the territory, but just getting ready for a game in the locker room, going through your keys, your assignments, and just getting a feel mentally how the game is going to be played out. Then you get on the field, and sometimes it unfolds that way, sometimes it doesn't. When it plays out the way you think it will play out, it's the best feeling in the world."

Mentors in his career: "My high school coach, Ted Luckadoo, helped me a lot. My AAU basketball coach when I was growing up, Marion Tarrant, he's really the one that got me to be prepared for all the different coaches' personalities. If you could deal with him, you could deal with anyone. He just had that presence and he always expected the best of you."

LB Dane Fletcher



Fletcher makes leap to bigger role

By Chris Forsberg

Friday, August 12, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- The significance of the moment wasn't lost on Dane Fletcher. One year ago, he was the undrafted free agent trying desperately to learn a new position in hopes of simply earning a roster spot with the Patriots. On Thursday night, Fletcher sported the green dot on his helmet and handled the bulk of the defensive play-calling duties during New England's exhibition opener against the Jacksonville Jaguars.

"[Coach Bill] Belichick kinda put it in a good summary, that I didn't know where the field was last year in my first game," joked Fletcher. "I made a little leap last year to this year, and I'll keep making those type of progressions. One step at a time."

Make no mistake, he's made a leap, not a step.

On a night the superstars didn't leave the sideline, Fletcher took advantage of his latest opportunity. With shades of Ted Johnson in his No. 52 jersey, Fletcher recorded four tackles -- including two for a loss -- from his inside linebacker position while spearheading a New England defense that allowed only four field goals in a 47-12 thrashing of Jacksonville at Gillette Stadium.

And while he fully admitted he was "a little shaky" given the play-calling duties that are typically reserved for an All-Pro like Jerod Mayo, the increased responsibility further demonstrated how he's no longer in an underdog role.

"It's my second year in the NFL, you just gotta think that's the past," Fletcher said when asked about his progress since being an undrafted defensive end out of Montana State. "This is the now. I don't look at it as I'm undrafted anymore, that was kinda the story last year. I'm trying to find a role on this defense. Wherever they want to put me is fine with me.

"What is going to be the story [this year]? Whatever the coaches decide it will be."

Fletcher is still selling himself a little short as he's made the most out of every opportunity he's been presented. Belichick described last year how he's seen only two players -- Tedy Bruschi and Harry Carson -- make the switch from college defensive end to professional middle linebacker. Not only did Fletcher do that, but when Brandon Spikes -- New England's second-round pick (62nd overall) last year -- endured a four-game suspension, it was Fletcher who took advantage of the extra reps.

After being inactive for the first three games of the year, Fletcher went on to play the final 14 games of the season, his campaign highlighted by his first career sack against Green Bay, sealing New England's late-season triumph over the eventual Super Bowl champs.

Now, with Spikes sidelined by injuries to start the 2011 season, Fletcher continues to take advantage. He even seems more comfortable as New England transitions to a 4-3 base defense, allowing him freedom to make plays at middle linebacker.

Which is exactly what happened Thursday. The Patriots offense sputtered early, and with Jacksonville already out front, 6-0, the Jaguars took over at their own 18 with 7:03 to play in the first quarter. On the drive's first snap, Fletcher shot the gap and went pretty much untouched into the backfield, dropping running back Rashad Jennings for a 6-yard loss that prompted a three-and-out.

New England scored on the ensuing drive and ultimately scored 47 of the game's final 53 points.

Right place, right time, Fletcher suggested when asked about the play. That'd be believable if it didn't occur with such regularity when he's on the field. In the second quarter, Fletcher practically sprinted past

Jacksonville center Jason Spitz while invading the backfield and dropped running back Deji Karim for a 2-yard loss.

In theory, the Patriots' switch to a 4-3 defense would work against a player like Fletcher, as it essentially takes an inside linebacker off the field in favor of another defensive lineman. But the formation frees him up to be a playmaker when he's on the field and that suits Fletcher just fine.

"I like to hit," said Fletcher. "There's no lie about that; I like to hit ... I like [the 4-3], getting a little distance between [the opposition] and popping some guys."

Maybe it shouldn't be a surprise, then, that Fletcher's been a hit with his coaching staff. Hence, the increased responsibilities.

"He was the most experienced linebacker we had on the field," said Belichick. "We had some other guys that weren't playing, but Dane has come a long way in terms of his understanding of the defense, calling signals, making adjustments and those kinds of things. And the signal calling is really a new responsibility for him, but we felt like it would be good to give that to him instead of Gary [Guyton]. Gary has done it before, so just to give Dane that experience tonight and see how he handled it. It seemed to go fairly smoothly. We still got fouled up there a couple times, but overall it was decent."

Fletcher admitted the noise was a bit overwhelming (and we are not talking about the crowd; it was a preseason game devoid of star power, after all).

"It was a little shaky that first series; there's a lot going on, a lot of personnel changes, but eventually I kinda calmed down," said Fletcher. "It takes a little bit to think on your own when you've got music in your ears -- not good music either, especially when you don't make a good play."

Fortunately, Fletcher didn't appear to make many bad decisions. As Mayo departed the Patriots' locker room, he flashed a smile and hollered at Fletcher as the media crowd grew around his locker. Fellow linebacker Tracy White requested a shoutout as he departed the room (and Fletcher obliged).

After all, he's willing to do whatever's asked of him around here. Just like moving to linebacker last season.

"I'm a linebacker now, there's no way I'm going back to the d-line," said Fletcher. "I feel comfortable as a linebacker in this scheme."

Later, he hedged ever-so slightly.

"I can't imagine going back to defensive end, but if they asked me to, I would. But I kinda like the inside."

The Patriots kinda like Fletcher there, too.

RB BenJarvus Green-Ellis



Not easy being BenJarvus Green-Ellis

Hard work goes into it

By Ron Borges

Wednesday, September 7, 2011

FOXBORO — BenJarvus Green-Ellis rushed for nearly 1,000 yards in 2003 in his freshman year at Indiana University.

A year later he was sharing the job with a guy named Chris Taylor.

BenJarvus Green-Ellis led the Hoosiers in rushing in 2004 but was gone by the next fall, having left for Mississippi when the coach who recruited him to Bloomington, Gerry DiNardo, was fired.

No one on the new staff at Indiana jumped in front of his car to stop him.

In two years at Ole Miss, Green-Ellis became only the second running back in school history to produce back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons, rushing for 1,137 yards and six touchdowns in 2007 after being named first team All-SEC the year before.

The following April no one in the NFL was willing to risk even a seventh-round draft pick on him.

After making the Patriots [team stats] the hard way — as an undrafted rookie free agent in 2008 — Green-Ellis labored long and hard to make enough of an impression on coach Bill Belichick and his staff to a) keep himself around and b) get his hands on the ball. What finally resulted was a 2010 season in which he became only the 11th player in Patriots history to reach 1,000 yards (1,008).

Four months later the Patriots drafted running backs in both the second and third round.

So it goes for guys like Green-Ellis. They are players everywhere they go yet seem to be guys trapped by the expectations and faint hopes of others. People look and see what they are but keep looking for what they are not, sometimes undervaluing the former because of the latter.

What allowed Green-Ellis to not only survive this for so long but to prosper despite it are two things. First, he worries only about himself. Second, he doesn't seem able to say three sentences without two words appearing. "Hard work" should be his alias.

"I just come in every day, work hard and try to learn everything I can from all the coaches on the staff," Green-Ellis said recently. "No one can really predict the future. We can only come to practice and put our best foot forward at practice and work hard."

That is what Green-Ellis has done for three years. Each year that has put him on the field a little longer and put the ball in his hands a little more often. Each time he was given the ball, it seemed, he did the same thing.

He gained yards.

He scored touchdowns.

He ran over tacklers who, unwisely, hadn't given him much thought all week as they prepared for the Patriots.

This summer few people spoke much about Green-Ellis. All the talk was about how quick and powerful rookies Shane Vereen and Stevan Ridley might be. When injuries slowed the rookies the questions were not, "Would Green-Ellis make them obsolete?" The questions were, "How soon will they contribute?"

It was as if the other guy hadn't done a thing. It was as if people had forgotten he gained 4.4 yards a carry last year on 229 rushes, which is far more than a plow horse's average, and rushed for 13 touchdowns, tied for fifth highest in club history.

Green-Ellis never complained. He "worked hard" instead. Fittingly for a guy who always seems to be fighting for his life, he spent time at the Fifth Street Gym, a refurbished old walk-up in Miami Beach, Fla., that Muhammad Ali once called home. He worked on conditioning, hand speed, rope-skipping — the little things. What he never had to work on was the thing that makes him who he is. He didn't have to work on his resolve.

"Benny is a great story in my mind," offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien said yesterday. "I'll speak for myself. I'm not looking to replace him. He's a steady guy, a smart guy. He came in here as an undrafted guy and made the football team and every year he has gotten better."

Green-Ellis didn't need anyone to hold his hand or explain those draft picks away or give him a hug. Just give him the ball and watch the bodies fly.

But there's more to Green-Ellis, you see, than "want to." There's also "willing to." Willing to listen, willing to learn, willing to lower his head. Willing to do all those things because he's unwilling to give in to how the rest of the football world has always looked at him.

"Right in the beginning, as it related to Benny, I was always impressed with his demeanor, his steadiness and his intelligence playing running back in our system," O'Brien said. "Benny obviously was working on his consistency when he first came here but he never changed his demeanor. The way he picked up our offense was impressive to me."

What's equally impressive is something else. It's that BenJarvus Green-Ellis is still standing today because a lot of linebackers and safeties who thought they knew who he was kept having to pick themselves up off the ground, after they learned who he really was — a player.

The Boston Globe

Firmly entrenched

Not long ago a spare part, Green-Ellis now the top option in the Patriots' running game

By Monique Walker

December 19, 2010

FOXBOROUGH — Patriots running back BenJarvus Green-Ellis acknowledges that he can be kind of boring. He keeps candy within his grasp because he loves to snack. He doesn't get angry easily. And he isn't big on setting personal goals.

When veteran Fred Taylor arrived in New England last season, he didn't know much about Green-Ellis. The younger running back was in his second season with the Patriots as an undrafted free agent out of Mississippi.

"He was quiet and just kept to himself," Taylor said. "I kind of got the chance to know him and realized that he was many, many years more mature than his age states. The fact that he wants [success] and he's passionate about everything he does. He listens. He's very coachable. He takes situations and tries to make the most of it."

Green-Ellis couldn't have known he would become the primary tailback for the Patriots. Yet the previous two years his teammates watched him prepare week in and week out as if he was going to be a starter. That day finally arrived this season.

Green-Ellis needs to average at least 71 yards in the last three regular-season games to become the Patriots' first 1,000-yard rusher since Corey Dillon ran for a team-record 1,635 yards in 2004. Just reaching 1,000 yards isn't the goal for a running back, but to hit the mark in a system that relies on several options to move the ball is an achievement, Taylor said.

"I don't want to say it's a milestone, but it's maybe the standard," said Taylor, who has rushed for more than 1,000 yards seven times in his 13 seasons. "It's what you're kind of judged on. In all actuality, that's only 60 yards a game. No one wants to be known for just being able to average 60 yards a game, but to say you went over 1,000, it's something that has been the standard for years.

"Since the two-back system has been implemented as of late the past few years, you know, 1,000 yards isn't so bad when you have guys splitting time at that position."

Reaching a milestone hasn't been the goal for Green-Ellis. Just getting a spot on the field on a consistent basis had been difficult for the 25-year-old New Orleans native. Green-Ellis played at Indiana and later transferred to Mississippi, where he played two seasons. He rushed for more than 1,000 yards in each of those two seasons (2006, '07) and became the second player in Rebels history to manage the feat.

But NFL interest in Green-Ellis wasn't strong. He went undrafted and signed with the Patriots in 2008. He ended up on the Patriots' practice squad in August 2008 and was promoted to the active roster in October. Green-Ellis didn't see many chances in his rookie season because of the wealth of running backs competing for carries. Even last season, Green-Ellis was inactive for four games and had his most productive outing in a 59-0 blowout of Tennessee, when he rushed for 67 yards on seven carries.

This season the dynamic of the Patriots' running backs changed. Laurence Maroney, a 2006 first-round selection, was traded to Denver after the season opener. Eight days later, Kevin Faulk was placed on injured reserve with a knee injury. And a couple of weeks later, Taylor was battling turf toe, which kept him out a significant amount of time.

The changes left the running game in the hands of Green-Ellis, Danny Woodhead, and Sammy Morris. Eventually, Green-Ellis and Woodhead would solidify themselves as the No. 1 and No. 2 options in the Patriots' offense, which is averaging a league-best 31.9 points a game.

"He's been steady and in hindsight you can see that hard work has paid off, because prior to him getting that opportunity, he didn't know he was going to get that opportunity," Taylor said. "He's just working toward trying to be a better player. He deserves everything he's gotten."

Green-Ellis has 786 yards on 184 carries this season. If he reaches 1,000 yards, he will become the 11th player in team history to do so. But reaching the magic number doesn't matter much to Green-Ellis. When it comes to setting goals, he said he doesn't do it much because motivation isn't always about achieving personal success.

"It's real easy to stay motivated because you always want to stay accountable and dependable for the other 10 guys on the field with you or the other 52 teammates," Green-Ellis said. "So it's kind of easy to stay focused. You got to make sure you're doing your job to the best of your ability because the other guys are working hard to do theirs."

One way Green-Ellis shows that appreciation is with the offensive line. Patriots guard Logan Mankins said Green-Ellis is often communicating with the line after a hard run.

"We want the best for Benny because if Benny's doing good, that means the team is doing good," Mankins said. "We all enjoy blocking for Benny. He's a great guy and he's always trying his hardest."

The yards come in spurts for Green-Ellis. He is averaging 4.3 yards a carry and rarely is pushed backward.

"Yeah, he's always going forward and he sees the holes great and he gets up in there and he gets what there is and he hardly ever loses any yards," Mankins said.

As the Patriots prepared for tonight's game against the Packers, Green-Ellis said he doesn't feel worn at this point. He is playing the most he has in his three years.

If he gets to 1,000 yards he said he may celebrate, but his goals are focused on winning.

"Right now, I'm just trying to go out and help us win," Green-Ellis said. "Whatever comes with it, I'm all for it. I've always been more about doing the best I can and wherever it falls, it falls."

TE Rob Gronkowski



It's good to be Gronk

By Jackie MacMullan

Wednesday, January 11, 2012

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- It was a simple pitch from the quarterback. The Clarence (N.Y.) High School running back hadn't even received the ball yet, but Williamsville North defensive end Rob Gronkowski couldn't contain himself.

He burst out laughing from clear across the field.

"I cracked up," Gronkowski said, "because I knew I could level him."

"Rob's eyes were the size of Coke bottles," recalled Williamsville North coach Mike Mammoliti. "He got to that poor kid before he hit the corner. It was right in front of our bench, and he just blew the kid up. Flattened him, and got up laughing.

"Then he turned and ran back to the huddle. No showboating or anything. Just a big kid playing football and having a blast."

Gronk hustled back to the huddle for one reason: to register bragging rights. The mantra among the defense that year was to lay out as many guys as possible.

"I couldn't wait to get back in there and ask my boys, 'Did you see that?'" Gronkowski said.

Did you see that? It has been a common refrain throughout the brief and glorious career of New England's prolific 6-foot-6, 265-pound tight end, who, in tandem with the golden arm of Tom Brady, will lead the Patriots against the dangerously unpredictable Denver Broncos on Saturday night.

Whether driving defenders into a fence 10 yards past the field, as he did in high school, or snagging 12 catches for 143 yards and a touchdowns against Oregon, as he did at the University of Arizona, or scoring touchdowns for New England with bruising NFL defenders clinging to him like pieces of lint, Gronk has turned heads with his ferocious intensity and disarming grin.

He has melded greatness with goofiness, developing a reputation as a Pro Bowl talent with a free-spirited, frat boy mentality. Who has more fun than Gronk? While coaches laud his intelligence and his ability to pick up complex schemes, they scratch their heads upon learning of curious decisions like posing shirtless with porn star BiBi Jones, who happened to be wearing nothing other than his No. 87 game jersey.

Gronkowski thought it was hilarious; coach Bill Belichick, not so much. A closed door meeting and a contrite apology soon followed.

"Rob's a very serious player on the football field, but like a lot of kids, he's a happy-go-lucky guy, and that's led to some suspect choices at times," said Mike Stoops, Gronkowski's coach at Arizona. "Rob likes to have fun. He's not a malicious kid at all. He's just a little quirky."

Stoops said that after Gronkowski's pre-draft interview with the Patriots, Belichick called Stoops with some reservations.

"I think Coach Belichick was thinking, 'What the heck is this kid all about?'" Stoops said. "I told him, 'The kid is smart, tougher than hell, and more competitive than just about any player I've been around.' I told him that Rob might be the best tight end I've ever seen."

The tight end thrives on contact, a byproduct of the beatings he endured as the fourth in a line of five physical boys in his family. As a 4-year-old, Rob would flail helplessly while older brothers Gordie, Dan and Chris pinned him, administered a series of excruciating charley horses, then released him only after he conceded defeat.

Within seconds, of course, little Robbie was back at it with brandished fists, pummeling his brothers, unwilling to concede anything.

"I'd go at anyone," Gronkowski said. "I took all of my brothers' bull. It made me who I am."

Rob's father, Gordon, a former offensive lineman for Syracuse who was revered by his sons, hurled tennis balls at them at close range with the aim of teaching them toughness, perseverance and hand-eye coordination. By the time Rob was 13, he was inching closer and closer to the Jugs machine his father bought them, hauling in bullets from just 12 yards away.

Diane Gronkowski's full-time job was keeping the two freezers and refrigerator in the garage and the main fridge in the kitchen stocked with hearty meals for her five sons with bottomless appetites. They blew threw two six-pound bags of Sahlen's hot dogs for a snack, then an hour later were clamoring for dinner.

Robbie played football, hockey, basketball and baseball, often devouring his meals in the car between practices. Diane would cook his favorite, chicken soufflé, cover it in foil, throw a fork and knife in the back of the van, then serve it to him after football -- en route to hockey.

Some early morning skates often came before 5 a.m., so to save time Rob's mom showered the night before and slept in her clothes.

"It was the best chance I had of getting them there all on time," she explained.

Once in a while, one of her older sons would remember to thank her. But not Robbie. Never Robbie.

"He was always tough on me," Diane Gronkowski said. "Of the five of them, he gave me the hardest time. He was always pushing, always challenging."

At Williamsville North, where he spent the first three years of high school and played on both sides of the ball, there was the time he scored all of his team's points in a 14-13 win that propelled it into the playoffs. Gronkowski caught a TD pass, sacked the quarterback for a safety and ran in a fumble recovery for a touchdown.

"They tell the big guys to just fall on the ball when it comes free," he said, grinning. "Not me. I picked that thing up and brought it to the house."

One season, Williamsville North was trailing rival North Tonawanda late in the game. It was fourth-and-2 from the 16-yard line and Gronkowski's team needed a touchdown.

"Get me the ball," he said in the huddle.

They did -- and he scored while dragging three defenders into the end zone with him.

During basketball season, as North Williamsville's best and most dominant player, he delighted in ferociously dunking the ball -- his hoops version of a spiked ball in the end zone now affectionately referred to as "Gronking."

One time when his team was on the road, he jammed the ball so hard he shattered the backboard.

The opposing team sent his parents the bill.

Gronkowski was a legend in upstate New York, a Bunyanesque athlete who intimidated with his size, speed and sports acumen. He was almost always cheerful, popular among classmates and teammates.

The only time his mood darkened was when opposing players tried to take him out.

"There were a lot of cheap shots laid on me," he said. "They couldn't stop me the clean way so they chop blocked me, went after my knees. I didn't like that."

It was good to be Gronk -- until his life took an unexpected turn shortly before his senior year. A crude email regarding a teacher circulated through school and eventually found its way to the principal's office. A group

of boys were involved, but the email was on Gronkowski's account, so it earned him a one-game suspension.

"It wasn't anything illegal," Diane Gronkowski said. "It was stupid kids doing stupid stuff, and Rob paid the price."

In the midst of the embarrassing incident, Gordy and Diane Gronkowski informed their boys they were separating. Gordie Jr., Dan and Chris were already out of the house. The youngest, Glenn, would stay with his mother in New York, but Gordon, who was in the midst of building a successful business in fitness equipment, took Rob with him to Pittsburgh. Gronkowski enrolled at Woodland Hills, and when his father made an off-hand comment to a reporter about the switch resulting in better football, Rob was ruled ineligible, since changing schools could not be predicated on athletic advancement.

A subsequent appeal explaining his parents' predicament was successful. Robbie packed up his stuff and left the only place he'd ever known, hugging his kid brother and watching his mother through the car window as he and his father drove away.

"It was not a great feeling to have to say goodbye to her," Gronkowski said. "She's always been there for us. I didn't like leaving anyone in my family."

There would be no more pregame meals of spaghetti and meatballs with garlic bread, no more quick dinners in the car, no clean laundry, no words of encouragement that he'd barely noticed until his mom wasn't there to provide them.

Rob Gronkowski looked like a sure-fire NFL prospect at Arizona before he injured his back and required surgery, which took him a while to fully recover from.

"It was very tough on Rob," Mammoliti said. "His parents were doing what was best for the family. But he was sad. He walked out with me to my car to say goodbye and he put his hand on my shoulder. It was so big it draped from one end to the other."

"He said, 'Coach, I gotta go. I'm so sorry. I don't want to. But I've got to.'"

"I really felt for the kid."

The three-hour drive to Pittsburgh afforded Gordy Sr. enough time to recharge Robbie with excitement about a new town and a new program that produced nine NFL players, including recently retired Miami Dolphins linebacker Jason Taylor and Steelers safety Ryan Mundy.

Woodland Hills coach George Novak can still recall the day Gordy and Rob walked into his office.

"I thought they were college coaches," Novak said. "Even as a 17-year-old kid Rob looked exactly like he does now -- a physical specimen with a big smile on his face."

On the first day of training camp, as his new teammates eyed him warily, Gronkowski walked into the cafeteria, strode toward one of linebackers and plucked his cookie off his tray. He bit the cookie, then put it back.

"There was this kind of awkward silence, then Rob started laughing," said former teammate Rontez Miles. "It was quite a way to introduce yourself to the team."

Noah Taylor, Jason's younger brother, first noticed Gronkowski in the weight room, where he unofficially annihilated the school's lifting records.

"He was the guy who could keep piling weights on the bar, then lift it and make it look like nothing," said Taylor, who promptly nicknamed him Drago after the imposing Rocky adversary.

Taylor and Gronkowski became fast friends. When his dad had to travel for business, Gronk bunked with Noah.

As he did in New York, Gronkowski played both sides of the ball. Taylor recalled a game against Plum (Pa.) when Gronkowski winked at him and said, "Watch this."

"He plowed straight through the offensive line and threw the quarterback into the end zone," Taylor said. "I was like, 'Whoa, big Rob.'"

A second nickname was born. While performing his tight end duties, Big Rob drove one defensive player into a fence 10 yards past the end zone.

Did you see that?

"He was drive-blocking players 20 yards down the field," Novak said. "He'd push them so hard they'd fall down and he'd collapse on top of them."

"One of the officials actually came over to us and said, 'I know your tight end is a helluva player, but you've got to tell him to ease up. He's beating up these other kids.'"

In spite of his athletic success, Gronkowski still ached for home. He missed his friends, his little brother, his mother. Diane came on weekends, brought her signature rum cake, but it wasn't the same. Taylor said Gronkowski tried in vain to persuade his father to let him return to Williamsville North once football season ended.

"There were days where he definitely moped around," Taylor said. "He missed his friends. His family was everything to him. He's like me -- a mama's boy."

That revelation was shocking to a mother whose fourth son had never given any indication that he appreciated her considerable sacrifices.

"Maybe going away like that made him realize how much he had," Diane Gronkowski said. "I'm not talking material things. I mean a lot of love and support."

"Maybe it took him having to do it without me to realize I wasn't so bad."

Following a decorated senior high school season, Big Rob joined brother Chris at Arizona. Stoops became enamored with Rob's soft hands, football intelligence, footwork and detail in executing the perfect block. Chris, a fullback, often lined up next to Rob while his brother, smiling, would plow a clear path for him.

"When the two of them were out there together, Rob was at his best, and so were we," Stoops said.

Rob Gronkowski submitted a sophomore season in which he caught 47 balls for 672 yards and 10 touchdowns, breaking Arizona's game, season and career marks for tight ends. He was a bona fide NFL prospect, a sure first-round pick -- until he suffered a back injury that required surgery.

"We helped him rehab for a month and a half," Stoops said, "but he wasn't the same player."

Robbie had already decided to go pro and trained with Chris for 2½ months. They worked out six hours a day, but Big Rob was having trouble. His back had healed but his burst was gone.

"He couldn't run under a 5.0 [in the 40-yard dash]," Chris said. "He had no vertical, couldn't jump. I was getting kind of worried for him."

"I was running super slow," Gronkowski said. "Chris thought I was done. Then one day at the end of February I woke up and my body felt good."

"I was just so happy. I was faster than my brother again. I got all my moves back. I told him, 'Brother, I'm back, and now you're done!'"

Gronkowski held his own personal pro day. He lined up for the 40 and was clocked at 4.65 seconds. A Raiders scout clocked him at 4.5, brandishing his watch for the other incredulous coaches to see.

"I don't know how his body recovered like that," Chris said. "To be honest, it was kind of a miracle."

The Patriots stole Big Rob in the second round (it rankles him to this day he wasn't a first-round pick). He impressed his coaches with the ease with which he learned the playbook. He endeared himself to his

teammates with his work ethic and locker room antics. He developed a cult following among his adoring public, which can't wait to see what Gronk comes up with next.

"At one time I wanted to be a WWE wrestler," he mused. "I still do. I want to go in the ring once and mess around and jump off the ropes and do a Stone Cold stunt."

"I told Rob whenever he builds his first house, there's no doubt there will be a big slide with a bunch of plastic balls in his living room," Mammoliti said. "He said, 'You know what, Coach? That's a great idea!'"

Gronkowski is coming off a season in which he set NFL records for touchdowns (17) and receiving yards (1,327) for a tight end. Stoops said the size and strength have always been there, but now he sees more precise routes.

Diane Gronkowski's favorite Gronk moment was in Robbie's rookie season, when he went horizontal before sticking the ball over the pylon. Naturally, he got up smiling -- and spiking.

The mother visited her tight end on Christmas Eve, but with five boys all still involved in sports on a professional or college level, a joint family celebration for the holidays is all but impossible.

Diane started a new tradition last winter. She and her boys congregate at her home in Florida to celebrate Christmas in February.

The February gift Robbie wants desperately is a Super Bowl ring. For all his football adventures, he's yet to win a championship at any level.

"I'm trying," he said, his trademark grin swallowing his face.

Rob Gronkowski is only 22 years old. He is an NFL star, a marketing dream, the best Gronk of them all.

But mostly, he's still just a big kid who loves his mom, playing football and having a blast.



Gronkowski a marvel at tight end in the mold of Iron Mike

His size, speed and power make Rob Gronkowski a threat to behold, but he's not the first of his kind.

By Kerry J. Byrne

December 15, 2011

Rob Gronkowski of the Patriots might be the perfect tight end.

His long, lanky frame creates a large "catching radius," to use the trendy buzz phrase. He moves with remarkable speed and agility for such a large man (6-foot-6, 265 pounds). He's muscular enough and tough enough to stomp on overmatched defensive backs like a Godzilla of the gridiron, casually crushing an entire NFL secondary or a small Japanese fishing village beneath his feet.

Just look at the way he manhandled Washington safeties DeJon Gomes and Reed Doughty in New England's 34-27 victory over the Redskins on Sunday. "The Gronk" caught a short pass to the right of Tom Brady then, after recovering from losing his own feet, left both defenders on the ground, flailing away helplessly at his legs in a futile effort to haul him in.

(Maybe it's just the time of year, but the scene reminded me of the way Officer Bert tried fruitlessly to handcuff Clarence in the holiday classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, before the guardian angel slipped through his fingers.)

Redskins cornerback DeAngelo Hall merely looked on at the gruesome carnage, apparently too shocked or too fearful to fight back. The result was a 49-yard gain that set up New England's first offensive touchdown.

The onfield manifestation of the tight end's physical skills has been a season for the ages: Gronkowski has already hauled in 15 TD passes, smashing the record for tight ends (13) that was shared by Vernon Davis and Antonio Gates, with three games still to play.

You might say that the Gronk has broken the mold for tight ends.

But he hasn't. That mold for breakout tight ends was cast long ago, and it puts Gronkowski in what might be the most impressive company the position has known.

The same superhuman adjectives used to describe Gronkowski today were once applied to another mythic young tight end who exploded onto the scene and dazzled the football world with his rare combination of size, strength, speed and record-setting production.

His name was Mike Ditka -- "Iron" Mike Ditka. Fifty years ago, long before he was the lovable grandfatherly old sage of ESPN pre-game analysis, 20 years before he oversaw the re-birth of the Monsters of the Midway as head coach in Chicago, Iron Mike was the Gronkowski of his day: the most explosive tight end to hit the game, well, ever.

Ditka's rookie campaign with the Chicago Bears in 1961 was a breakout moment in NFL history. In terms of the tight end position, Ditka, in 1961, was Babe Ruth in 1927 or Dan Marino in 1984. His accomplishments rewrote the standards of the position and changed the context of the conversation.

Ditka, at 6-3, 230, was smaller than Gronkowski. But by the standards of the era, he may have been an even more awesome physical specimen. Each tackle who lines up next to Gronkowski on the New England offensive line, for example, tops 300 pounds. The starting offensive tackles on the 1961 Bears, Herman Lee and Art Anderson, were barely bigger than Ditka, each about 245 pounds.

The factor that set Ditka apart from any tight end before him was not the size, but the production from the position. In fact, the position really didn't exist in the way we know it today, as an actual offensive weapon, before Ditka in 1961.

The comparisons between the two tight ends are many. Both were just 22 in their breakout season, Ditka as a rookie, Gronkowski here as a second-year player. Both have those hard-edged Eastern European surnames that just plain sound tough, like a guy you don't want to mess with in a dark alley or an open seam down the middle of the field.

Dit-Ka! The Gronk.

Ditka grew up in a family of Ukrainian immigrant roots in the heart of the Gridiron Breadbasket of Western PA. Gronkowski made his way from Western New York to the famous football breeding grounds of Western PA for his senior year in high school.

Not only did Ditka statistically reinvent the position, he did it with numbers that stand the test of time, even a half-century later. Here's a look at how Ditka and Gronkowski stack up in their breakout seasons.

Rob Gronkowski vs. Mike Ditka

Player	(Year)	Catches	Yards	YPC	Touchdowns
Mike Ditka	(1961)	56	1,076	19.2	12
Rob Gronkowski	(2011)	71	1,088	15.3	15

The numbers are gaudy for tight ends in any era. In fact, Ditka and Gronkowski are two of just three tight ends in history who hauled in 12 or more TDs with more than 1,000 receiving yards in the same season. The third was Todd Christensen, who was a seasoned poetry-spinning old salt of 27 when he turned out his career season in 1983 (92 catches, 1,247 yards, 12 TD).

Gronkowski's performance here in 2011 is frighteningly good by the standards of the position. If his current place holds true he'll end the year with 18 or 19 touchdown receptions. If he does, Gronkowski will be on the very short list of all players in history with 18 or more touchdown receptions: Sterling Sharpe (18 in 1994), Mark Clayton (18 in 1984), Jerry Rice (22 in 1987) and Randy Moss (23 in 2007). In other words, we have to start turning to wide receivers to find comparisons to the Gronk's production this year.

But within the standards of his era, Ditka had a greater impact and more prolific season.

Consider this: The 1961 Bears passed the ball just 349 times that season, completing 186. The 2011 Patriots have passed the ball 496 times through Week 14, completing 328. The Patriots will probably complete more passes in 14 games than the Bears attempted in 1961.

- Gronkowski is responsible for 22 percent of New England's receptions and 14 percent of its pass attempts end with him hauling in a pass.
- Ditka was responsible for 30 percent of the team's receptions and 16 percent of its pass attempts ended with him hauling in a pass.
- Gronkowski has accounted for 19.8 percent of New England's offense (1,090 of 5,517 yards)
- Ditka accounted for nearly one-quarter of Chicago's offense, 23.6 percent (1,076 of 4,562 yards)

Ditka also averaged an incredible 19.2 yards per catch, an almost unbelievable example of his game-breaking ability. Fifty years later, Ditka remains the only tight end in history with more than 11 TD receptions, more than 1,000 yards and more than 19 yards per catch (cap tip to the profootballreference.com player index for that info).

The biggest difference between the two might be that Gronkowski benefits from playing with Tom Brady, a future Hall of Fame quarterback who helped make Randy Moss and Wes Welker record-setting receivers and who won Super Bowls throwing touchdowns to Deion Branch and David Givens.

Ditka was paired with Billy Wade, a nice quarterback in his day, but several notches below Brady on the totem pole of pigskin.

The Gronk is one of the great young players in the game today. He's carving his own legend as we speak. But he hasn't broken the mold for young breakout tight ends.

He's merely shaping up as the best young tight end of the last 50 years, one carved in the physical and statistical image of Hall of Famer Iron Mike Ditka himself.



Football journey: Rob Gronkowski

By Mike Reiss

December 11, 2010

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- At 6-foot-6 and 265 pounds, tight end Rob Gronkowski is the type of combination player that Bill Belichick covets -- strong enough to block at the line of scrimmage and athletic enough to get down the field as a pass catcher. That explains, in part, why the Patriots traded up two spots in the second round to select Gronkowski 42nd overall.

The Patriots just beat the clock to make that draft-day trade with the Raiders. Had they not, Gronkowski could have instead been selected by the Ravens -- who later drafted two tight ends -- at No. 43.

Gronkowski isn't aware of all the behind-the-scenes details from draft day, but says he's happy to have landed in New England. He's made an immediate impact in his rookie season with 26 receptions for 322 yards and 6 touchdowns. His size is particularly an asset in the red zone, where the Patriots rank third in the NFL in terms of touchdown percentage (32 TDs in 49 trips).

The 21-year-old Gronkowski shares his football journey with ESPNBoston.com:

When he first started playing: "Seventh grade."

First position: "Quarterback."

Favorite team growing up: "I rooted for the Bills, being from Buffalo."

Favorite players growing up: "Takeo Spikes and Jeremy Shockey. Alge Crumpler, too. I liked the way they played. Spikes was on the Bills and I was always watching him. With Shockey, I was in high school when he was coming out of college and I followed him. I watched 'Crump' a lot too with the Falcons."

Mentors in his career: "My parents and my brothers. I always looked up to my family."

Playing at Williamsville (N.Y.) North High School for three years: "I was moved to tight end and defensive end at that point. Playing with my brother was a top memory, and going to the playoffs as a sophomore. We won some big games. My junior year, we beat a team ranked much higher than us -- North Tonawanda."

Moving to Western Pennsylvania and playing at Woodland Hills High School for one year: "It was pretty hectic, almost like freshman year in college. Top memories there were just dominating every team. We had a really good team."

Why he chose to attend University of Arizona: "I just saw opportunity there and liked the coaches. I just loved the place. Clemson, Syracuse and Ohio State were other considerations."

Top memories at Arizona: "Winning the Las Vegas Bowl and playing with my brother."

Lowest point at Arizona: "Freshman year when we didn't beat [Arizona State] and didn't go to a Bowl game."

Having a back injury sideline him his final season at Arizona: "It was hard watching the team play. You wanted to be out there. It makes you want to work to get back out there. It's just fun."

How it changed his expectations in the draft and why he still declared for the draft: "I knew it couldn't help me, but I just saw the opportunity. I always wanted to play in the NFL. It was always a dream. I saw that I could be playing with my three brothers, all of us in the NFL at once."

What he's learned about the Patriots and the NFL: "It's a hard-working team and it's a job. There is a lot of time spent studying and watching film. A lot more than college."

On forming a three-man TE group with Alge Crumpler and Aaron Hernandez: "Alge is a great leader, a great captain who leads by example. Playing with Aaron is fun, too. We're both rookies and we can help each other out. We all work together and help each other out."

Summing up his football journey: "I value every moment of it. It keeps going by faster and faster. I can't believe I'm here in the NFL. It seems like I was just playing in the seventh grade a couple of years ago."

TE Aaron Hernandez

The Boston Globe

His brother knows best

Hernandez gets help growing up

By Shalise Manza Young

December 23, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - Most days, Aaron Hernandez goes through the many tasks all football players must attend to, his focus on practice or the weight room or film study.

But there are days when he realizes if he turns around he'll be looking at Tom Brady and Deion Branch, players who, not so long ago, he watched on television while growing up in Bristol, Conn.

"Honestly, sometimes I sit back and think about it - it is definitely a dream come true," Hernandez said yesterday. "I'm playing with a lot of the players that I watched, like Deion Branch, Wes Welker, Tom Brady, so it's definitely an honor playing with them. Some days I walk around here like it's normal, but other days I'm like, 'Wow, it's an honor.'"

The road to get here - a budding young star in the NFL, one half of the best tight end tandem in the league - had its share of bumps for the 22-year-old Hernandez, some of them, he'll admit, he created.

Yet something else he'll admit is that he wouldn't have made it this far without his older brother, D.J.

"He's always in my ear telling me what I need to do, what I don't need to be doing," Aaron said. "I was one of those kids that always did my own thing and it wasn't always the best decisions, especially when my father passed away. So [D.J.] was always there for me and he was the one that gave me my work ethic because always watching him work hard and succeed. I always wanted to succeed, so I always wanted to follow his role."

In January 2006, their father, Dennis, died from complications after hernia surgery. Dennis Hernandez was only 49, and like his sons, was a star high school player in Bristol. He went on to play at UConn.

Aaron was only 16 when he passed, D.J. was 19 and had begun his own college career with the Huskies.

Their father's death hit the close-knit family hard, and rocked Aaron in particular. He began to act out. "Just not making a lot of smart decisions," he said, blowing off school work or cutting corners in football, until D.J. stepped in and helped Aaron get back on track.

The brothers were already close, their bond forged over highly competitive games of one-on-one basketball in the backyard (or anything else they could compete against one another in), and they've grown closer in the years since.

D.J. and Aaron got to play together at Bristol Central High for one year, when D.J. was a senior. His first pass that season was a touchdown to his baby brother.

Back then, Aaron was all potential in an awkward body.

"He was one of those guys who was - you saw talent, but he just didn't really grow into his body," D.J. said from the football offices at Brown University, where he just completed his first season as quarterbacks coach. "He was a taller, skinny kid with a size 13, 14 shoe and I just called him a big goof.

"I didn't see him play much his sophomore year because I was playing at UConn, and then I come back his junior year and I couldn't keep my eyes off him on the field. It was just something special to see him out there."

Aaron was special. In his final season at Bristol Central not only was he the Gatorade Connecticut player of the year, he established a national high school record for receiving yards per game (180.7) and set state

single-season records for receiving yards (1,807) and touchdowns (24), and was rated as either the best or second-best tight end prospect in the country.

(The player ranked just ahead or behind Hernandez? Rob Gronkowski.)

Initially, Hernandez chose to follow in the footsteps of his father and brother and play at UConn, but the University of Florida came calling and he opted to play for the Gators.

He continued to excel on the field, becoming the first SEC player to win the Mackey Award as the nation's top tight end, but off the field he still had problems. The Globe reported after he was drafted that Hernandez failed multiple drug tests at Florida; in a statement, Hernandez said he failed one.

He slid in the draft, and was there in the fourth round for the Patriots to select him. New England had chosen Gronkowski in the second round.

Coming off a career game in Denver last week (9 catches, 129 yards, 1 TD), Hernandez has surpassed his impressive rookie numbers. With two games to play, he has 68 receptions for 736 yards and six touchdowns.

Both he and Gronkowski have endeared themselves to Brady, both on and off the field. Brady affectionately says Hernandez is like a little brother, and the quarterback will easily discuss the development of the two tight ends, who have become an integral part of the offense.

Brady mentioned this week that Hernandez has learned from the veterans and is taking better care of himself. D.J. saw that firsthand on a recent visit, and knows it's part of his brother's continued growth.

"The thing people forget is last year he's 21 years old and as mature as he thinks he is" - D.J. said, with laughter in his voice - "and as wise as he is, he's young."

"I think just being around those guys, being around that coaching staff, has allowed him to grow and mature and I think he really understands how physical and how demanding the game is. In order for him to be playing for a while like he plans on, he needs to continue to take care of his body because that's part of the game as well."

Aaron and D.J. talk almost every day, despite the demands of their respective teams. They talk about X's and O's, game plans, and opponents, but they also still talk about adversity and coming through it, and life.

And Aaron knows that D.J. played a sizable role in the dream come true he's experiencing now.

"I listened at times, didn't listen at times, but he was definitely there for me," Aaron said. "He's actually one of the main reasons I am where I am today."



Long journey to Foxboro for Hernandez

By Christopher Price
September 28, 2010

Aaron Hernandez has done the impossible — he's made Bob DeSantis a Patriots fan.

DeSantis, the longtime athletic coordinator at Bristol Central High in Connecticut, was a lifelong Giants fan before the Patriots took Hernandez in the fourth round of the 2009 draft out of Florida. Now, DeSantis is taping every Patriots game, following the young man who he once taught in gym class.

"I would never watch Patriots games before, but that's what I watch now," said DeSantis, who said he was one of the happiest men in New England after Super Bowl XLII. "You know what's amazing to me? I taught him in gym class. It's amazing to me to see him on TV playing in the pros."

Through three games as a professional, Hernandez — the youngest player in the league on opening weekend at age 20 — certainly hasn't shocked the people back in Bristol. The 6-foot-1, 245-pound rookie tight end, who grew up a Patriots fan, has 13 catches (second on the Patriots [2]) and a team-high 211 receiving yards, bringing a dynamic new look to the New England [3] offense. His six catches for 65 yards and 1 rush for 13 yards in the Patriots' 38-30 win over the Bills on Sunday landed him a nomination for the Pepsi NFL [5] Rookie of the Week Award.

But it has been a long journey to Foxboro for Hernandez, a journey that wouldn't have been possible if not for the people back in Bristol.

"It was the beginning of the learning process for me," Hernandez recalled of his high school years. "When you get to high school, that's when you start learning about defenses and the more important things about the game. So I'd say that was the start to everything. That got me going. Since then, you just learn more and more.

"But that was the starting point."

"The possibility for him to make it was there," DeSantis said of Hernandez as a high schooler. "He had the gift, but so much had to line up right for that to happen."

For Hernandez, that all started lining up when he was a freshman football player at Bristol Central. According to former Bristol Central coach Doug Pina, he was one of the only players who played varsity football as a freshman. Pina said Hernandez had grown up fast, having played against his brother D.J., who would go on to play at UConn [6].

"When he came to me as a freshman, he was head and shoulders above a lot of the kids, even as a freshman," said Pina, who was the head coach at Bristol Central for eight years. "He was the only freshman that I ever took to the varsity who I didn't leave with the freshmen. There was no sense in him playing freshman football. It wouldn't have been challenging enough for him."

Pina's assessment was an accurate one — Hernandez was a football prodigy. He would go on to set numerous high school records. As a senior, he would finish with 67 receptions for 1,807 yards and 24 touchdowns on offense. He also set the state record for receiving yards in a game with 376, which was the seventh-best total in national high school history. He also set a national high school record for yards receiving per game with 180.7.

Hernandez said much of the reason behind his high school success was Pina, an old-school coach.

"He was just hard on us. He was hard on us then," Hernandez recalled. "He got us ready — because he played at Syracuse [7] — he got us ready for coaches in college and the NFL [5] being hard on us. He definitely set the tone for me and let me realize what it's like in the real world. So I was ready for it."

The numbers drew a small army of college coaches to Bristol, and Hernandez, who initially said he would go to UConn [6], ultimately decided on Florida. But it was a tough time off the field for Hernandez — in his senior year, his father passed away. That same year, Hernandez decided to jump at the chance to leave high school early so he could get a head start on his collegiate career with the Gators [8].

While his performance on the field drew raves — in three seasons at Florida, Hernandez started 27 of 40 games, catching 111 passes for 1,382 yards and 12 touchdowns — Hernandez stumbled off the field, failing at least one drug test with the Gators [8]. Hernandez maintains that it was just one failed test, and later said he was candid with teams at the combine who asked him about it.

"He's not a druggie," DeSantis said. "He made a very bad decision. He said to me, 'Coach, I messed up.' The guys at Florida, they laid it on the line to him. They told him, 'If this is the course you're going to go, we don't want you here.'"

Hernandez was able to make it work. A consensus All-American and unanimous All-Southeastern Conference first-team selection, he became the first player in SEC history to receive the John Mackey Award, given to the nation's top tight end. However, he dropped in the draft, falling into the fourth round because of what some believed were character issues. There was the drug test, as well as the tattoos that cover most of his body.

"I got calls from coaches before the draft wondering about the tattoos," DeSantis said. "You know what I told them? Eighty-five percent of them have to do with his dad and his family."

Hernandez was taken by the Patriots in the fourth round with the 113th overall pick, and has already far exceeded the expectations that were placed on him when he first arrived in Foxboro. In a Week 2 loss to the Jets [9], Hernandez had a breakout game, catching six passes for 101 yards. Combined with fellow rookie Rob Gronkowski, they have transformed the New England passing game [10], making them key players just months into their arrival in Foxboro. Through three games, the two have combined for 18 catches, 269 yards and two touchdowns.

"These young tight ends were expected to play right out of the box," said quarterback Tom Brady [11]. "When they first got here, it was like, 'All right guys, let's get ready to go.' We've been hard on them since the first day they got here. They've really taken to that role, and accepted the role, and really been coachable, they are confident kids. Both Gronkowski and Hernandez have done a great job, and it's really added a lot to this offense."

"If you know Aaron, he likes to be a part of the family, and a few of the guys have taken him under their wing, guys like [Randy] Moss [12] and Brady and [Wes] Welker [13]," said DeSantis, who still stays in touch with Hernandez. "The older receivers have really helped him along."

Hernandez is now an integral part of the New England offense, but that doesn't mean Pina is going to change his old-school approach when it comes to dealing with him.

"I think he needs to run and use the whole field and stop cutting back," Pina said with a laugh. "I've been telling him that since he was a freshman. He doesn't trust his speed as much as he should."

In the end, it's clear that with a lot of help from the people back in Bristol, things have lined up pretty nicely for Hernandez.

"I think New England did themselves some justice by getting him on their team," Pina said. "I'm happy that coach Belichick [14] recognized the kind of ballplayer they were getting. He's a solid citizen, and I'm glad that New England realized that."

S James Ihedigbo



Football journey: James Ihedigbo

By Mike Reiss
December, 17, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – When safety James Ihedigbo was signed by the Patriots on Aug. 19 this year, training camp was nearing its end and he was considered a longshot to earn a roster spot.

But Ihedigbo made a strong impression to stick with the team, and in many ways, that has been the story of his entire football career.

The 28-year-old wasn't a highly touted prospect coming out of Amherst (Mass.) Regional High School. Ditto for his when his college career at UMass ended and he set his sights on the NFL.

Little has come easy for Ihedigbo, who shared his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com this week:

When he first started playing football & what positions: "Pop Warner. I was 6 years old. Running back and safety."

Why he went out for football: "I started playing soccer. My friends at the time started getting into football, and asked me to play. At first, my parents were like 'No, keep playing soccer. You're good at it.' I eventually switched over and the rest is history."

Favorite teams growing up: "Dallas Cowboys, Green Bay Packers and the Patriots."

Favorite players growing up: "Early as a kid, it was Emmitt Smith. Then Brian Dawkins."

Top memories of high school football at Amherst Regional: "Playing in a state championship. I had a big run up the middle and it ended up being one of my first newspaper clippings [in the Daily Hampshire Gazette]. My mom still has it, me breaking a tackle."

Fond recollections of high school football & friends: "Just so much fun. The brotherhood of it. You're playing with a great group of guys who are still best friends to this day – Marcus Williams, Mike Ononibaku. They were great runners, together they almost rushed for 2,000 yards, and I ran for 1,100."

Why he attended UMass-Amherst: "UMass was one of the schools that wanted to give me a chance. Holy Cross did, too. Other schools wanted me to walk on, but I was like 'If I'm going to walk-on, why not be in my hometown?' I made the best of it."

Top memories of UMass: "Wow, so many. So many. I'd have to say one memory was against Holy Cross. I came off the edge on a blitz, sacked the quarterback, and kind of did a tuck-and-roll and stood up. I didn't celebrate or anything, but just looked at the crowd. It was a key play in the game and the crowd was going crazy. I had a girl come up to me after the game and she said, 'I've never been to a football game before, but that play gave me goosebumps because it was so intense.'"

Favorite part of the UMass experience: "Being a part of the '06 team that made a run to the national championship. There was a stat [on TV] when Montana was playing the other weekend, and it was that they were 18-1 in the month of December at home. We gave them that one loss in '06. You don't forget those memories."

Expectations entering the NFL: "My expectations were just to do my best. You knew the combines were coming up, so you focus on training your best to put forth your best performance. I took a visit to Cincinnati [with the Bengals] and they were really interested in me. I thought being drafted was a possibility by them, and they told me they would take me in one of the later rounds, sixth or seventh. Then that didn't happen. I was disappointed, but it wasn't the end of the world. In the end, it didn't matter to me how I got in, just that I got in. I was determined to get my foot in the door."

How he landed with the Jets: “They brought me in to fill-in at their rookie minicamp. They already had five or six safeties at the time, so I was just an extra guy. I ended up pulling my hamstring during the minicamp. It was bad and I could barely run. I kept doing drills and everything, and I think they saw my passion and desire for the game and decided to offer me [a contract].”

Top memories with the Jets (2007-2010): “Playing in the AFC Championship. We did it back-to-back years. You’re in the week of practice and you’re saying, ‘Wow, we’re one game away from the Super Bowl.’ It’s almost surreal. You’re that much more focused. Everyone is that much more driven to the cause at hand. Everything is enhanced. Everyone is that much more alert during the games. You study film that much more, knowing you’re that much closer to the ultimate goal. There is a lot you can learn from defeat and losing. I remember after the Indianapolis game, sitting on the bench with David Harris as the confetti came down. We looked at each other and said, ‘Not again. We don’t want to feel this again.’ Then we make it to Pittsburgh, and we had the feeling we were the better team, having beaten them earlier in the year. We came up short again. It was a difficult thing to swallow, but there are still a lot of good things that come of it; the experience of playing in big games.”

Thoughts on not getting tendered a contract by the Jets after ’10 season: “It was really tough. I had a relationship with the coaching staff and [general manager] Mike Tannenbaum, he’s a UMass guy as well. He gave me a chance. When he brought me in [at the start], he said, ‘You’re a UMass guy, I want to look out for you and give you a chance. Prove to me that I’m right.’ Having that, understanding that, and working to prove him right – and getting to where we did as a team and them seeing my progress as a player, getting better and better each year – that they wanted to cut ties and go in a different direction was shocking to me and my family. Then again, it was still motivation. I came here and Bill [Belichick] gave me a chance, and saw something in me that was worthy of playing on this defense. I took it and now I’m looking to really excel. I’m blessed, with the opportunities I’ve been given and making the best of it.”

Describing life as a Patriot after signing a one-year deal with the team in training camp: “Hard-working, truly. I’ve never been part of a team where you work this hard. But it also proves there is a reward. When you win, and you win this consistently, it’s not by chance. Everything you put in is what you get out. We work really hard here and it shows on Sundays.”

Role models in his life: “I really look up to my mom, Rose Ihedigbo. She never missed any one of my football games. From when I was 6, she drove me to every Pop Warner game; in college, she traveled to every away game. Even now that I’m in the NFL, she comes to every game. She doesn’t miss one. Her dedication to me, that helps motivate me, and just her work ethic in general.”

Summing up his football journey: “I’m a firm believer in God’s work in my life. I just have to say it’s a favor of God. He’s opened up doors for me and I couldn’t have drawn up a better story. I couldn’t even have dreamed of it being the way it is. It’s some type of divine intervention that I’ve had the doors open with these opportunities, and excelled. A lot of people complain and say ‘I’m never going to get my chance.’ While they’re saying that, their chance is passing them by and they don’t even realize it. So it’s just always being alert to seize the opportunity that was given to me.”



James Ihedigbo steadying influence in secondary

By Dan Duggan

Sunday, December 11, 2011

FOXBORO — Matthew Slater’s head was spinning in the days before his first career start at safety against the Colts in Week 13.

Slater mostly had played special teams and wide receiver in his four-year career, so he had to cram to prepare after coach Bill Belichick informed him of his new role. Once on the field, Slater was unsure if he was lining up correctly at a position he hadn’t played since his days at UCLA.

When Slater needed assistance, he could count on hearing the voice of safety James Ihedigbo.

"If there was ever a doubt about where I was supposed to be lined up, he got me in the right position," Slater said. "His communication — I don't think I would have been able to do it without him."

It was the same for Sterling Moore when the rookie was unexpectedly pressed into a starting safety spot alongside Ihedigbo in Week 10. And during wide receiver Julian Edelman's cameos on defense, Ihedigbo has been instrumental in getting the wide receiver up to speed.

This is Ihedigbo's first season with the Patriots [team stats], and he didn't play much defense during the first four years of his NFL career with the Jets, but that hasn't stopped him from becoming a steadying presence for a defensive backfield in a constant state of flux due to injuries, inconsistency and ineffectiveness.

"Some people are born to lead and some people have that," the Northampton native and UMass product said. "It's a testament to my upbringing and the structure of my household and what my parents taught me."

Ihedigbo landed with the Patriots late in training camp after the Jets made no attempt to re-sign the inexpensive free agent. The 28-year-old inked a one-year, \$600,000 deal with the Patriots, with no guarantees beyond the chance to fight for a roster spot.

Ihedigbo initially made the team for his special teams skills, but he worked his way into the starting strong safety spot by Week 5. He hasn't relinquished the job since.

"This is the league of opportunity, so any time a coach takes a chance on you, you have to make him right," said Ihedigbo, who has 51 tackles this season. "It lets them know that if they have faith in you that you can get the job done. That's what my career has been about — always seizing the opportunity at hand, no matter what it is."

Ihedigbo hasn't seized his enhanced role quietly. While most players claim to lead by example, Ihedigbo has been one of the increasingly rare vocal leaders.

"Sometimes you need a fire lit under you. Sometimes you need somebody to wake you up out there, and he's done that defensively and on special teams," Slater said. "I don't know where we'd be without him right now."

Belichick offered equally high praise of Ihedigbo with a comparison to veteran defensive end Andre Carter, who has been lauded as a model of professionalism.

"I would say those two guys are very much alike," Belichick said. "A lot of the things that they do in terms of their approach, preparation, professionalism off the field, communication — all those things are exceptionally good."

Ihedigbo has transitioned seamlessly into the Patriots' business-like environment after thriving with the Jets, where trash talk was second nature.

"I was myself when I was in New York and I've been myself while I'm here," Ihedigbo said. "I think that's been a good thing for me. I want to be a person that what you see is what you get."

Ihedigbo admits he was surprised and confused by the Jets' decision to let him walk away, but he's channeled those emotions into motivation.

"Even from the beginning of the season I had a chip on my shoulder that I'm going to prove to them that they made the worst decision by letting me go," he said. "And with that, I'm coming out every week and playing my tail off."

That mindset is nothing new for the former Amherst Regional High star who had to walk-on at UMass. Ihedigbo became a first-team All-American by his senior season, but then started at the bottom again after signing as an undrafted free agent with the Jets.

With each obstacle he has overcome, Ihedigbo has emerged with more determination.

"I've always had to kick down the door and I have no problem doing that," Ihedigbo said. "It's built my character into the person that I am. I handle business in that manner due to the fact that I've been

overlooked. I embrace every challenge and every opportunity. I don't take it for granted ever. Tomorrow is not promised, so each day you have to embrace it and run with it."

The Boston Globe

Safety help

Patriots' Ihedigbo follows parents' example with his education foundation

By Monique Walker

October 16, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - Growing up in the Ihedigbo family meant participating in a few traditions.

There was homemade pizzas on Fridays, gathering bottles and cans for extra money on Saturdays, and rooting for the Dallas Cowboys on Sundays. But every day was dedicated to education and faith.

The routines and goals cemented a bond for a family from Nigeria that relocated to Amherst in the 1980s and lived on the bare minimum, all to pursue higher education. Apollos and Rose Ihedigbo raised five children and eventually graduated with doctorates from the University of Massachusetts.

The youngest of those children is Patriots safety James Ihedigbo. Football doesn't require a degree, but Ihedigbo's career is helping him create opportunities for others back in Africa. Watching his parents dedicate their lives to education encouraged Ihedigbo to establish a foundation to promote education.

"That's something that is my heart and soul," Ihedigbo said. "I've been given a platform to play football at the highest level and I can help other people.

"I look at it this way: My parents excelled to where they are without the help of others. It was just determination and hard work. I'm in a position where I can help other people get to the level my parents did and even higher."

In 2008, Ihedigbo established the HOPE Africa Foundation as an extension of the work his father did in Nigeria, where he and his wife started the Nigerian American Technological and Agricultural College. During a trip to work with the college in 2002, Apollos Ihedigbo died of kidney failure, just before Ihedigbo graduated from Amherst Regional High.

Ihedigbo is using his foundation to carry on the dreams of his father to educate underprivileged children. The foundation is expanding its efforts and is teaming up with UMass to provide scholarships to children from Africa who want to pursue higher education and return to their countries to make an impact.

"One of the goals of why we left Nigeria for the United States was to study and achieve and go back to Nigeria to establish a school that will support the children or families who could not do it on their own," Rose Ihedigbo said. "So education became very important to us.

"We wanted all of our children to achieve some form of education. My commitment to them - including James - was I would support them, but you have to graduate."

Childhood lessons

Apollos and Rose Ihedigbo left Nigeria for New York in the late 1970s with their three children so Apollos could complete his bachelor's degree. He received a scholarship to UMass, and he and his family would settle in Amherst in the early 1980s.

It was there that their youngest sons David and James would be born.

Apollos Ihedigbo, who also was a pastor, attended school during the day while he pursued a doctorate in administrative education. Rose Ihedigbo went to school at night, taking classes toward a doctorate in early childhood education.

Money was tight, which forced the family to find ways to supplement their income. Living near a college campus meant lots of bottles and cans left over from college students. The family would collect them, rinse them out, and recycle them for money.

Apollos Ihedigbo delivered pizzas as a part-time job and learned how to make them. He would bring home dough on Fridays and everyone would gather to make personalized pizzas.

The pizzas became so popular that the children invited their friends to participate, said Onyii Brown, the oldest of the Ihedigbo children. While making pizzas, they told stories and learned lessons.

"My father's story is so amazing to come from where he did, we have to be the way that we are because [otherwise] it would be disrespectful to everything he has done and worked for to both of my parents," Brown said.

In their spare time, the Ihedigbos came up with ways to educate their children about Nigeria. They were taught their native language of Igbo and saved money for trips back.

"The first time, it was definitely like a culture shock," Ihedigbo said. "I was younger and didn't know what to expect. It has different smells, a different environment, different people, and a whole different culture, so at first, it's like, 'Wow, I'm out of my element.'"

"But then you grow to love it. It's part of who you are. And the person I am. You just embrace it and enjoy it."

But they also wanted their children to have different experiences. Rose Ihedigbo was walking home with her four boys one day when she saw a Pop Warner football game. She didn't know much about football but was struck by the uniforms.

"I was so thrilled to see the puffy shoulders and the big helmets the kids were wearing," Rose Ihedigbo said. "When I inquired, they said it was Pop Warner football and I signed all four boys up."

After the practices, the boys would come home and break down their plays to their parents to help teach them the game. Apollos Ihedigbo grew to love football around the time his boys began playing and watched the Cowboys, who were frequently on television. Soon, the rest of the family became fans.

Ihedigbo played football, basketball, and lacrosse but he didn't get far before he was reminded about his priorities.

"[My father] always instilled the fundamentals of our faith and yet always excelling in education to be the best," Ihedigbo said. "I mean, it was education, education, education. I couldn't even go to basketball practice without homework and everything being done."

That approach carried on when Ihedigbo walked on at UMass to play football. All of his siblings were educated at UMass, and he would be the last. After his first season, he became a three-year starter for former coach Don Brown, who is now defensive coordinator at the University of Connecticut.

Under Brown, Ihedigbo discovered how to take his ability to pick up things quickly and apply it to football.

"He taught me how to understand defensive schemes," Ihedigbo said. "He used to say you don't know it until you can teach it - teach it to other teammates and lead film study for all the other guys."

Many contributions

Ihedigbo is in his fifth NFL season, after playing four years with the New York Jets, and he has emerged from special teams to secure the first start of his career last week against his former team at safety.

Nick Caserio, the Patriots director of player personnel, said Ihedigbo is a complete player.

"He's a smart player, he's an instinctive player, he's tough, and shows up in the kicking game," Caserio said. "He's come in and worked hard and made the most of his opportunities."

In the first team meetings, Ihedigbo's awareness and ability to process information was obvious to Patriots safety Patrick Chung.

"He's very smart," Chung said. "He communicates with us and was able to come in and picked up the playbook pretty fast, so I mean that's good."

Ihedigbo said he doesn't mind being described as smart, but to play in the NFL everyone has to have some level of intelligence. What is most important is seizing opportunities and recognizing the blessings.

"I'm just truly, truly blessed," he said. "Opportunity is the key to life. A lot of times people worry and say, 'I'm never going to get an opportunity,' and as they're saying that, their opportunity is passing them by.

"I just put my head down and work every day and when my opportunity comes, God willing, I'll be ready to take it on."

DB Nate Jones

The Boston Globe

Jones received a callback He then starred in victory for Patriots

By Monique Walker
December 9, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - Patriots defensive back Nate Jones knows there are plenty of free agents waiting for a call to return to the NFL. Just nine days ago, he was one of them.

Jones was cut by the Dolphins Oct. 5, and waited for a team to give him a chance to continue his eight-year career. While Jones waited, he prepared.

"A lot of us still feel like we can play, so it's on you as a professional to stay in shape and do what you have to do, what you need to do, and as an older guy you know what your body needs to stay in shape, stay on top of things," said the 29-year-old Jones. "I have faith in God and my beliefs. I just turned it over to him. It wasn't the end of the world, but it was a position I had never been in and it was a position a lot of veterans had never been in.

"There's a lot of good players who are not playing football right now. But again, I'm fortunate to be here and I'm trying to take advantage of the opportunity and bring to this team whatever I can bring."

Four days after Jones signed with the Patriots, he started at safety in last Sunday's 31-24 victory over the Colts. Jones finished with nine tackles, playing a significant amount of snaps.

The Patriots went with a few new faces against the Colts, with receiver Matthew Slater making his first NFL start at safety, and Nick McDonald earning his first start NFL start at center. But Jones was unique in that he had days to learn his responsibilities in a new system.

"I thought Nate did a good job," said coach Bill Belichick. "I mean, he wasn't even familiar with what we were doing, so he had a steeper learning curve, but he's a more experienced player, so there's a trade-off there. [He] played the defenses pretty well, was good in communication, got his hands on a couple balls, made a few plays. It was far from perfect, but I thought he did a good job."

There was plenty for the Patriots to like about Jones, who was drafted by the Cowboys in the seventh round in 2004 out of Rutgers. His introduction to the NFL came under the guidance of Bill Parcells.

Jones played for the Cowboys from 2004-07, and with the Dolphins in 2008-09. He was cut by the Dolphins last season and picked up by the Broncos, but was released during camp this year, only to be re-signed by the Dolphins Sept. 20. He played two games before he again was released.

"Nate's played a lot of football," said Patriots director of player personnel Nick Caserio. "He was somebody that we were familiar with having played against him, even in Dallas. He's an experienced player, had some position versatility, pretty smart guy, pretty instinctive guy."

Those instincts showed up immediately with the Patriots.

"He knows the game and he was able to come in here and learn extremely fast," said Patriots safety James Ihedigbo. "He played at such a high level and I have nothing but respect for him. He's such a great player."

As the Patriots prepare for Sunday's game against the Redskins, Jones, who has played in 102 games in the NFL, is relieved to have a game, and a full week of practice, behind him.

"With itineraries and schedules, a lot going on, but as a professional you learn to manage everything," he said. "A week under the belt feels good, a win feels good. Now I've got to go out and just repeat everything and get another win this weekend."

Aside from learning the scheme, Jones said there are other challenges with joining a team so late in the season.

"[It's] simple things like learning all the guys' names, communicating, and being on time to everything, and knowing where I have to be," he said. "These are all things that come with the territory. So, you have to take it one game at a time."

LB Niko Koutouvides



Football journey: Niko Koutouvides

By Mike Reiss
December, 10, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – Linebacker Niko Koutouvides has shown he can still cover ground in a hurry – on and off the field.

Having spent the first nine weeks of the 2011 season without a team, Koutouvides signed a one-year deal with the Patriots on Nov. 9. In four games, he's already totaled six special teams tackles, and he was a surprise starter on defense last week against the Colts in the team's nickel package.

Meanwhile, Koutouvides has raced home to Connecticut to see his wife and children (2 1/2 and 8 months) whenever possible. Born in New Britain, Connecticut, this is the first time he's played so close to home after stints with the Seahawks (2004-2007), Broncos (2008) and Buccaneers (2009-2010).

Koutouvides has played in 103 career regular-season games and eight playoffs contests, one of which was the Super Bowl in his second year in Seattle. When asked about his niche in the game, he described it this way: "Probably a guy who understands his role, who takes pride in his knowledge of the game and being limited in errors. Obviously, special teams is where I made my bones and I've taken a lot of pride in that."

The 30-year-old Koutouvides shared his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com this week:

When he first started playing football: "I was 8 years old. Both of my parents aren't from this country, and my brothers and me actually started out playing soccer. Then my oldest brother started playing football in midget and then I kind of followed. With two older brothers, I followed their lead."

What positions he played: "I was a little chunkster. A nose tackle and a center."

Top memories at Plainville (Conn.) High School: "Probably my junior year, which was the first time in our high school history that we won the conference and went to the state playoffs. We had a great group of guys. Obviously the friendships still last here today and it's something I'll never forget."

Positioning himself to play Division-I college football: "I kind of followed the lead of a friend of mine who ended up going to Syracuse. To do that coming from our high school was something that didn't happen often. I said I wanted to play at a high-level Division I-A school, but my senior year we didn't have a very good year, so I was getting Division 2 offers, smaller schools. I ended up going to a prep school, Milford Academy, and then all these offers started coming in. That's when I said, 'Hey, I have a shot to play football at a big school.'"

Top memories at Milford Academy: "Milford is a football powerhouse. It's definitely a hard grind. You have your ups and downs, but the place is really, really fantastic to give those who can't qualify an opportunity to still go to college and get a Division I-A scholarship, and it gives those who didn't have the exposure in high school to get it. You say to yourself, 'I'll give it one last shot to see if I can get a scholarship and help my family and myself out in the future.' That's kind of what it did for me."

Why he decided to attend Purdue: "They were the first to offer me and they had just come off beating Kansas State in the Alamo Bowl. Kansas State had Michael Bishop and that was a big win for Purdue, with Drew Brees having a phenomenal year. I took a visit there and they had a bunch of senior linebackers leaving, so the opportunity to play right away was there. Academically it was a good school and I said 'They have a chance to do something special here and maybe fight for a national championship.' I felt comfortable and gave them a verbal commitment and I actually canceled the rest of my visits."

Top memories at Purdue: "Obviously going to the Rose Bowl with Drew Brees and Matt Light on that team. That was an awesome experience. Making All Big 10 was a big accomplishment, but like I said, the friendships and bonds are special in college. You cherish those the rest of your life. Blood, sweat and tears

are all for each other, you just play for each other. The college environment – the tailgating, the walk through campus ...”

Expectations entering the 2004 NFL Draft: “People were saying third, fourth round, maybe the fifth. I was the type of guy who was just happy to get picked.”

Spending the first four seasons of his career in Seattle, where he was a special teams captain at one point: “An amazing group of guys. A very, very high winning percentage with Coach Holmgren. We went to a bunch of playoff games and a Super Bowl. Just a solid group of guys that wanted to work hard together. Playing in those playoff games at Qwest Field was amazing. Seattle is a great city. I loved the people there. It was a great foundation for me to start my NFL career.”

Moving on to spend one season in Denver (2008): “That was a little tough. I went in signing a three-year deal and thought I’d spend more time there, but sometimes it doesn’t work out. That’s kind of the way it went.”

Spending the next two seasons in Tampa (2009-2010): “Great time. Great group of guys. I loved my coaches. [Head coach] Raheem Morris was young and very inspiring, very exciting to play for. It was a young team so I was a veteran player there for my age. That was kind of cool, having that role, giving some information to the young guys from having grown up in the league.”

Spending the 2011 season out of football before the Patriots signed him Nov. 9: “You hear these stories all the time in the NFL. In any situation, when something is taken away from you, you come back appreciating it that much more. I’m so grateful for another opportunity. I thank Mr. Kraft, Coach Belichick and the whole organization for giving me an opportunity. Each day I just tell myself that I have to keep working hard and getting better to help this team win football games.”

Players he admired growing up: “I was a big Bo Jackson fan. I loved the dual sport thing he did. I thought it was amazing. I thought Bo was the ultimate athlete. I liked his character. Now that I play in the NFL, to try to comprehend that he did both sports, it’s truly amazing. It’s tough to see a great athlete like that get hurt.”

Favorite team growing up: “I grew up a Giants fan, because I was a Mark Bavaro fan. I was actually a Pepper Johnson fan, too. Carl Banks. Phil Simms. They were an awesome team to watch.”

Summing up his football journey: “I think it shows that you don’t have to necessarily have a football background. Anyone can learn the game as long as you put the hard work and effort into it. I’ve had my ups and downs my entire career, but you learn from those. That’s one thing about football, the learning lessons in life and how your true character will be brought out in this sport. I really respect that part of it. I think it’s an awesome game and I have a lot of love and passion for it.”

OL Matt Light

The Boston Globe

A guiding Light, on and off field

Dependable lineman is always there for Patriots and charity

By John Powers

January 22, 2012

FOXBOROUGH - Matt Light wasn't thinking tenure when he turned up here 11 years ago as Purdue's most oversized export.

"I never really thought about it," said the Patriots left tackle, who is so entrenched on the premises by now that he could serve as a stadium stanchion. "I always live in the moment."

In a season when the offensive line has used eight different combinations, the 33-year-old Light has been his usual steadfast self, starting all but one game.

"Matt has had an outstanding year following up on last year," said coach Bill Belichick. "He's really had a great career for us. Matt goes up against some of the best pass rushers in the league at that position, really on a weekly basis. He'll certainly see another great one this week in [Terrell] Suggs."

This season, Light has grappled with the likes of Tamba Hali, Trent Cole, Dwight Freeney, Brian Orakpo, and, most recently, Elvis Dumervil to keep them from putting his star-spangled signal-caller on his rear. In this afternoon's AFC Championship clash with the hard-beaked Ravens, he will be doing it with a fifth Super Bowl on the line.

"That left tackle position is so important to the passing game to protect the backside of the quarterback," testified Tom Brady. "And there's nobody I'd rather have back there than Matt."

Stability and longevity have been the hallmarks of a performer who has played 155 regular-season and 16 playoff games since 2001 (an ankle injury cost him all but three games in 2005) and who has started all but two.

"He's been a real stalwart for us all season and, really, for a decade," said Belichick. "He's been here a long time and done a great job."

Light's tenure here coincides with that of his charitable foundation, which he established when he entered the league and which he plans to continue after he retires.

"This doesn't end when I stop playing football," vowed Light, who could have several more productive seasons if he stays healthy. "This won't be a flash in the pan."

Light always has taken the long view, which is why he banked a big chunk of his seven-figure signing bonus and enrolled in the NFL Business Management and Entrepreneurial program after he signed a six-year contract extension. He had seen other players make wrong decisions when presented with business opportunities, Light said during his week at Harvard five years ago, and he didn't want to do the same.

"I have a fairly good sense of what it takes to make it in the world," he said.

Helping young people make it has been at the center of the Light Foundation, which emphasizes hard work, goal-setting, honesty, and accountability, the values that Light learned growing up in Greenville, Ohio, a rural city not far from the Indiana border whose population is less than a fifth the capacity of Gillette Stadium.

The foundation's centerpiece, a 400-plus acre camp named Chenoweth Trails, is located there, where Light still has a home.

"We want to have a presence wherever I've been," he says. "Obviously growing up in Ohio I wanted to help out there and do something with the camp."

But the foundation also stages events in West Lafayette, Ind., home of his alma mater, and in Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

Light's celebrity shoot-out, featuring numerous teammates, raised \$400,000 for the foundation last year and he sponsors a scholarship in the memory of Danny Pires, the New Bedford Standard-Times sportswriter who covered the team.

Hard to miss

When Light says "presence," he means it literally.

"Matt doesn't just put his name to it," said foundation administrator Cindi Mitchell. "He's an active participant and mentor to these kids."

At 6 feet 4 inches and 305 pounds, Light is impossible to miss when he turns up, as he did at last autumn's auction, which grossed \$40,000 for Foxborough's Burrell, Igo and Taylor elementary schools.

"His name being on the ticket drew a good amount for us," said Juliette Petrillo, who co-chaired the fundraiser. "He was worth his weight in gold."

Light, who autographed six footballs that went for \$300 apiece, did a bit of emceeding himself.

"He just did a great job of getting people involved," said Petrillo. "He poked fun at himself. I can't say enough about how kind and warm and wonderful he was."

Not that Light is a stranger around town. He lives here, and his children attend local schools. When Light is back in Greenville, he's the same guy everyone knew back when.

"Matt's just a real down-to-earth person," said Mayor Mike Bowers, who knows Light well enough that he can jokingly call him a "slacker."

"The genuineness you see goes a long way with his friends. He doesn't flaunt his status as an NFL player. He doesn't say, 'I'm a Pro Bowl lineman and I have three Super Bowl rings.' He'll say, 'I'm Matt Light, you want to go out and hunt?'"

Light, who comes from the same county as sharpshooter Annie Oakley (Phoebe Ann Moses to her friends), is a passionate outdoorsman whose foundation believes that fresh-air activities foster self-reliance, accountability, and respect for the environment.

"Matt connects well with the kids," said Bowers. "He has a real heart for them. It means a lot to the kids that he always puts himself out there."

Always there

When Light began his foundation after signing his first contract, he wasn't sure how long he'd be in the league, so he and wife Susie bought a modest condominium not far from the stadium. But the Patriots, who had drafted Light in the second round as the 48th overall choice, quickly installed him as a starter on the squad that shocked the Rams to win the franchise's first Super Bowl crown.

Two more rings soon followed, as well as a \$27 million extension in 2004 that took Light through last season.

"It was huge for me and my family," he said. "It gave us stability. Obviously I felt comfortable here with the players and the coaching staff and Robert [Kraft] and his family. That was a no-brainer."

His current two-year contract, which came after last year's lockout when Light was a free agent, was less of a done deal.

"Ultimately this is where we wanted to be," he said. "It's a business sometimes. It was a crazy time for everybody."

But Light once again has been an anchor for an offensive line that has been pockmarked by injuries.

"We lost [Dan] Koppen in the first game of the year," said Brady. "We've had four centers. All the tackles have played. We have guards that have played fullback. We've had tackles that play tight end."

Except for an ankle injury that kept him out of last month's Miami game Light has been at his post every week.

"Matt is very professional," said Belichick. "He works hard. He's in good condition, always has been. Knows our game, knows our opponent's tendencies, studies film very well, practices well, is a very durable and dependable player."

Only Kevin Faulk and Brady have been here longer. In the Patriots Pro Shop, Logan Mankins is the only other offensive lineman to rate a personalized shirt, although Light's version doesn't come close to fitting him.

By size and demeanor, he is the team Falstaff.

"Jokester, funny guy," said Faulk. "We can keep going on about that."

But Light, who is a player representative, also is designated morale booster.

"If a teammate is down," observed Faulk, "he knows how to pick him up in an instant."

Helping others is part of Light's DNA, as is continuity and commitment. While his foundation, whose endowment approaches \$1 million, has a board and several paid staffers Light is religious about staying closely connected.

"I don't like to do anything with my name on it where I'm not completely aware of all aspects and involved with everything," he said.

His approach always has been all-in. If Light devoted half as much time to a for-profit enterprise as he does his foundation, he'd likely make a pile of cash. But money long ago stopped being a concern.

"I'm definitely not a flashy guy," he said. "It doesn't take much to keep me happy."

His one foray into flash was an extensive Globe-chronicled makeover, complete with facial and pedicure, that transformed Light from "alpha male to metrosexual" to help promote his foundation in 2004. His spa sheen may have faded, but Light's charitable commitment endures.

"Matt would give you the shirt off his back," said Bowers. "He might even give you the jersey off his back for a fund-raiser - and I think he's done that."



The Light touch

Pats veteran tackle improves with age

By Ian R. Rapoport

Saturday, December 17, 2011

FOXBORO — Even in serious situations, Matt Light [stats] is quick with a joke. It's the Patriots [team stats] left tackle's way of defusing an inquiry he doesn't like or handling a reality he'd like to keep at arm's length.

Sometimes, it's about how the Pro Bowler was beaten for a sack. But more recently, it's been about how he doesn't look anything like the 33-year-old offensive lineman that he actually is.

"I know," Light said, "but my face says it all."

True, there are a few more wrinkles than there were when he earned his first Super Bowl ring in 2001 or when he went to his first Pro Bowl in 2006. True, amid the always flowing mane are probably a few more gray hairs.

But on the field, during a season that many assumed would be his last, Light has looked ageless. In preparing to face a Broncos pass-rushing tandem of Von Miller (11.5 sacks) and Elvis Dumervil (7.5 sacks) with the ever-present task of keeping quarterback Tom Brady [stats] clean, Light is calm and confident.

Ho-hum. No big deal. As always.

“From my point of view, it’s been that way for roughly 11 seasons,” Light said.

Hold down a trio of edge rushers like Dwight Freeney of the Colts, Trent Cole of the Eagles and Brian Orakpo of the Redskins, all in a row, and the NFL world will take notice. Even if Light doesn’t want anyone to.

His coach, however, has.

Asked if it is safe to say Light is having a good year, coach Bill Belichick said, “No doubt.”

“Matt has played very well. He’s had a solid year,” he added. “He missed a little bit of that first week of training camp but after that, he’s done everything that everybody else has done. Real experienced player that’s seen a lot of football, seen a lot of good guys out there, competed well. We’ll need it this week.”

When the Patriots signed Light to a two-year contract worth up to \$12 million, with \$7 million guaranteed, some wondered if they overpaid. The thought was Light would stay one year, allow first-round draft pick Nate Solder to get acclimated, then step aside.

In preseason, Light, acknowledging an understanding with Belichick, was “just happy to be a part of it for another year or two.”

Yet Light has been a rock, while the right tackle position has featured an injured veteran Sebastian Vollmer and learning rookie Solder, and the center position is on its fourth player.

Still, as a unit, the offensive line is tied for fifth with just 22 sacks allowed. Light is now second in Pro Bowl voting for left tackles. It is not yet known if sterling play will extend his plans of one more year.

How good has he been?

The analytical site ProFootballFocus.com has him with positive protection ratings in eight of the 13 games, despite battling many of the NFL’s top pass-rushers. He has only allowed three sacks, two came from Cowboys stud DeMarcus Ware, and his blocking assignment has hit Brady only seven times. There have been seven games in which his man hasn’t touched Brady.

Oh, and he’s played every snap in 12-of-13 games. Instead of a question mark, he’s been the rock. Light’s season started slowly, thanks to a lagging shoulder rehab due to the lockout. There’s no residue now.

“I’m healthy, I’m happy about that,” Light said, cautiously. “Just going out there and working with those guys. I got a great crew. Old man (guard Brian) Waters and my trusty sidekick (guard) Logan (Mankins) and the guys that have filled in at center, they’ve all done a phenomenal job. Seabass (Sebastian Vollmer) and Nate (Solder), those guys are playing really well, man. It’s a fun room to be in right now.”

Miller and Dumervil will be hard to handle tomorrow. Miller comes with speed and power, while Dumervil is crafty with a motor. For a Patriots team looking to start fast, sound protection will be key. Light doesn’t appear concerned.

“You worry about what you got to do,” Light said, “and let it all fly.”

DL Kyle Love

The Boston Globe

Love's backup plan

By Julian Benbow

October 15, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - It wasn't the easiest concept for David Turner to wrap his head around, but by Kyle Love's logic it made perfect sense.

The way Love tells it, it was a game day at Mississippi State and the Bulldogs were expecting Love to line up at nose tackle and slam a few offensive linemen together like action figures.

Love was thinking about how awful the last week of practice had been, and how he didn't deserve to be on the field.

He went to Turner, his defensive line coach, and said, "Coach, take something away from me."

By "something," Love meant snaps - a play or two, maybe a series even.

Turner, not exactly following the reasoning, asked, "Why?"

He thought maybe Love had been bitten by injury, but Love was looking for motivation. There was something blue collar about being a backup. When Love arrived at Mississippi State, he had to earn every second of the seven games he played as a freshman. Then, as a sophomore, he started nine games. His junior year, he started twice. His senior year, he started 10 of 12 games.

There was always a difference, he said. Not starting meant that whenever he did see the field, he had to prove he deserved to stay out there.

"It was just something I did mentally to make me play with an edge," he said. "I just came out and I played hard. It's always been like that."

"Whatever his motivation, whatever his reason, I thought it was the right thing for him to do," said Turner. "I don't know, if I was in his shoes, if I'd have done it. But it was the right thing to do."

Love, undrafted when he came out of Mississippi State last year, is in an earn-everything situation with the Patriots. His gridiron IQ and his run-stopping ability make him a likely successor to Pro Bowl nose tackle Vince Wilfork. But he's willing to watch and wait.

"I always felt like I had that chip on my shoulder, like I'm the underdog, like I'm overlooked," Love said. "Even here, if I start or don't start, I just play hard. But if I don't start, I'm going to play harder."

Bit of a late bloomer

Love wasn't the darling of recruiting. Every so often, the dot.com recruiting giants would sweep through North Clayton High School in College Park, Ga., but they never aimed their cameras at him.

"They didn't pay him a lot of attention," his father, Anthony, recalled. "I guess as a parent we didn't know much about getting the film out and stuff like that. We just kind of figured his talent would shine and somebody would notice him."

They noticed one of North Clayton's linebackers and another defensive lineman.

Love stood 6 feet 1 inches, weighed 310 pounds, and played both sides of the football, but flew under the radar.

He wasn't flooded with college offers. A few form letters from schools would show up in his mailbox. He wrote them off.

"My dad always told me not to worry about the letters," Love said. "I got a lot of letters, but letters don't mean anything. They send that to everybody. The only time it actually matters is when they come to your house, they actually pursue you. They call you every day, they come visit."

There were only three, maybe four coaches who visited. Mississippi State's Sylvester Croom was the first.

He asked, "Why isn't anyone recruiting you?"

Love told him, "I don't know."

Croom flattered him, "You're really good."

Love was open with Croom.

"To be honest with you, I'm lazy," he said. "That's probably the reason no one's recruiting me."

He had talent, but needed to be pushed. When he got to Mississippi State, he was surrounded by workers. In fellow defensive lineman Reggie Odom, he had a health nut for a roommate. Odom worked out, ate right, and forced Love to do the same.

"It was times where I was like, 'I don't want to do that. I don't want to eat healthy. I want to sit down and relax,'" Love said. "He picked me up."

Turner arrived for Love's sophomore season. They initially had an oil-and-water relationship.

"He wasn't any different from most young players, you had to push him," Turner said. "You could tell there was some ability there. That's what a coach's job is to try to get the most out of him, maximize his potential."

"I think early in his career, and I know early with me, he fought it, but I think he realized I was just trying to get him to be the best possible player he could be. It was just a maturation process. He started to mature and understand that I just wanted the best that I could get out of him and we were working toward the best thing."

Beyond his build, Turner knew Love had qualities that other linemen didn't. He was intuitive, aware of what offenses wanted to accomplish and able to explain it to the coaching staff.

"Kyle was a student," Turner said. "In 26 years of coaching, Kyle was the smartest D-lineman I've ever coached."

They butted heads, but by the end of Love's time there they respected each other. Turner, now the defensive line coach at Kentucky, drove down to Georgia for Love's wedding.

"I was tough on him," Turner said. "And the reason I was tough on him was because he had the ability. And I'm proud of what he's done."

Pushed to be the best

Almost every morning, a text from Anthony Love comes across Kyle's cellphone, a digital dose of motivation.

One of the most recent ones read, "God does not want you to be good, because everybody's good. God wants you to be great."

For every person pulling for you, someone pulls against.

Anthony remembered a conversation his wife, Miriam, just before Kyle left Mississippi State with head coach Dan Mullen, who took over for Croom when Kyle was a senior.

He told her that only one player - Anthony Dixon - would be drafted out of Mississippi State.

"Don't even waste any time thinking about it," Anthony Love remembered the coach saying.

"He just didn't believe [Kyle] was going to be a professional player," Anthony said.

Kyle was not drafted.

“So he took that up there, that underdog mentality,” Anthony said.

Last season, Anthony was constantly trying to find ways to motivate Kyle.

“It’s entirely up to you now to prove these naysayers wrong,” he said. “You can play the game.”

He wanted to make sure that Kyle knew that because he was an undrafted free agent, he was different and he always would be.

The practice squad wasn’t enough.

“I know they say you’re a part of the team,” Anthony told him, “but really, you’re not. You have to make the 53-man roster.”

Love played nine games as a rookie, with seven tackles and a sack.

This year, the conversations have a different theme.

“Every year you have to make it again,” he said. “You’re always having to make the team.”

He came into training camp on a mission to prove something to coach Bill Belichick.

“I came in for camp this year knowing I was a backup guy,” he said. “I wanted to show Belichick I could play fast. I started seeing stuff faster, playing faster. I got a lot of compliments and just kept on doing it.”

He’s played in all five games, and has eight tackles.

“He’ll tell you that he wants to be on the field,” Anthony Love said. “I’ve never seen him so highly motivated about this stuff.”

When the injury report was released Thursday, Love (back) was listed as questionable.

“Is that a real injury?” said Anthony Love. “Is that going to stop you from playing?”

Kyle said he was fine.

“I’m just trying to get better every day,” Love said. “Me being a guy that’s probably known to be a backup guy, whenever it’s time for me to step up and start or play, I’m there and I’m going to try to do the best I can.”

The Boston Globe

Love: Lots to like

Patriot vows never to stop working to earn spot

By Shalise Manza Young

August 21, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - During his time at Mississippi State, teammates began calling Kyle Love “Mini-V” for his resemblance to Vince Wilfork.

The nickname piqued Love’s interest in the Patriots nose tackle, and Love started paying closer attention to the man who anchored the middle of New England’s defensive line.

Little did Love know that when his days with the Bulldogs were done he’d become teammates with the man he tried to emulate.

“Oh, he’s a big influence, like a big brother to me,” the 24-year-old Love said yesterday. “He’s been showing me the ropes since Day One.

“I stay close to that guy always. Watch me out here, I’m right beside him, no matter what. I’ve always got his back and I know he’s always got mine.”

Thursday night in Tampa, Love was alongside Wilfork at the start of the preseason game as the Patriots rotated defensive tackles. Shaun Ellis and Albert Haynesworth have missed time, giving Love more opportunities to play.

“We just want to go out there and play hard,” Love said of pairing with Wilfork. “Coach gave us a challenge and we took it and ran with it, and that’s how we’re going to continue to play.”

Signed as a rookie free agent last year, Love impressed the coaching staff enough to make the 53-man roster, and is now part of the youth movement on defense.

After playing in only one of the first eight games, Love worked his way into the defensive line rotation midway through last season, and earned his first start in the regular-season finale against the Dolphins. He had his first sack the week before against the Bills.

While Love overcame the long odds a lot of undrafted rookies face, he has vowed to take nothing for granted.

“I’m always trying to fight every day,” he said. “I’ve got a big chip on my shoulder. I feel like my life here is harder so I just try to give it my all every day, try to do the best I can, try to get better as the day goes on.”

Asked what he meant by his life in New England being harder, Love explained, “Coming in as an undrafted rookie, I feel like I’ve always got to push. I’ve been like that all my life, since high school, so it’s nothing new to me. I’m just going to keep on fighting.”

Hanging on to the fact that he was undrafted could serve Love well. Rodney Harrison never forgot that he was a fifth-round pick, and practiced every day as though he were fighting for his job, even after a decade in the NFL.

“I feel like if I keep that mentality I’ll stay around, so that’s going to be my mentality my whole career,” Love said.

Love continues to be pushed by his father, retired Army colonel Anthony Love (Kyle was born in South Korea because of his father’s military travels).

“My dad, he’s a big key to my success. He always tells me to give my all no matter what, give the coaches a reason to keep me,” said Love. “He’s always been like that, even since high school, middle school, so my life hasn’t changed since.

“Every game day, the day of or the day before, he sends me a text message or some kind of - something to get me excited, some kind of words of encouragement.”

The words of his father, and a look around the locker room to see the number of defensive linemen against whom he’s competing, are reasons Love will never lose the sizable chip he carries.

He insists there hasn’t been a moment in the year-plus he’s been a Patriot where he’s let himself feel comfortable.

“I don’t really feel like I belonged all along, I just feel like I’m just going to do whatever I have to do to stay around,” said Love, who married his college sweetheart, Constance Walker, July 16.

He doesn’t quite believe he belongs, he refuses to feel comfortable, and he refuses to say he’s pleased with his progress. Based on that, Love may very well continue to have success.

“I wouldn’t say pleased,” he said. “I think I can do more, I think I can do better, and that’s what I’m going to continue to do.”

QB Ryan Mallett



The Apprentice: Ryan Mallett remains committed to learning while he sits and waits

By Christopher Price
December 14, 2011

FOXBORO -- After spending the bulk of his college career in the spotlight, Ryan Mallett understands that he's got to spend a little time in the shadows, especially when he's an understudy to someone like Tom Brady.

While several other quarterbacks from the Class of 2011 have already made a dent in the league -- including Carolina's Cam Newton, Tennessee's Jake Locker, Cincinnati's Andy Dalton, Jacksonville's Blaine Gabbert and Minnesota's Christian Ponder -- Mallett has spent his first season with the Patriots biding his time, sitting behind Brady and Brian Hoyer while serving as New England's No. 3 quarterback.

The 6-foot-6, 238-pounder, a third-round pick of the Patriots this past April out of Arkansas, is fully aware what the deal is, and has decided to make the best of it.

"I've done this before, so it's really nothing -- I had to sit out that year at Arkansas, which obviously wasn't fun," he said, referencing his collegiate transfer from Michigan to Arkansas. "Right now, I have to put my focus somewhere else.

"It's tough. I feel like as a competitor, you always want to play, but you have to understand the situation that you're in. And that's what I'm doing. So this year, I'm competing with myself a lot. I really compete inside my head a lot and try and make myself better at certain things."

As a collegian, Mallett could boast a resume every bit as impressive as any of the rookie signal callers who are in the league now -- 8,388 passing yards and 69 touchdown passes in two-plus seasons (one at Michigan, two at Arkansas), including 3,869 yards and 32 touchdowns last season with the Razorbacks. But he slipped to the third round this past April, falling to No. 74 before the Patriots called his name.

Mallett did see extensive action in the preseason. He debuted on Aug. 11 against the Jaguars, and in a 47-12 win over Jacksonville, he finished 12-for-19 for 164 yards and a touchdown. (He engineered four scoring drives on the night.) There were some struggles throughout the preseason (including an interception in his next outing), and he finished up with a 6-for-16 outing (57 yards) against the Giants.

This year, with the Patriots carrying three healthy quarterbacks on the roster for the first time since 2007, Mallett has been inactive for 12 of the 13 games. Instead, he's made his bones this season during the week helping run the scout team offense, which provides a weekly look for the defense at what to expect in the upcoming game. It's a thankless task, but one that can lead to bigger and better things down the road: Brady spent much of the 2000 season running the scout team offense, and things have turned out OK for him.

"I get opportunities to run the scout team a little bit, and whenever I do, to me, I take that like it's a game," he said. "That's my game. It really is. That's all I have right now."

Brady has been impressed with Mallett's approach.

"Ryan has been great to be here with. I really enjoy him -- he loves football," Brady said on Wednesday. "I know he does everything that coaches ask him to do. He works hard. It's great having him."

In many ways, the extra time has been a blessing for Mallett. Throughout training camp, Mallett was consistently one of the last players off the field, and when practice had ended, he could frequently be seen going through a footwork drill, working with coaches and players. He said the extra time has allowed him to improve on his mechanics, as well as get into the weight room and add some bulk.

"I've really been working hard in the weight room -- I've seen the improvements," he said. "I really just put a lot of time into that than I have in the past because I have a little bit more time. I'm really attacking that and I'm starting to like that a lot more."

"I think he's made a lot of improvements, as Brady did," Belichick said of Mallett. "Brady's rookie year, he was like 205 or 207 [pounds] or whatever it was. He gained a lot of strength in both his upper and his lower body. That's helped him, both in throwing and taking hits, durability and all that. Ryan has definitely gotten on that program. He spends a lot of time in the weight room and doing what we ask him to do."

When it comes to working as a backup, in the end, it's all about how you approach the gig. And Mallett says this year has been all about keeping your eyes and ears open and your mouth closed.

"It depends on how you approach it -- I approach it like I'm trying to learn everything I can," Mallett said. "I watch Tom and see what he does, and then I try and do it my own way. I think it's worked out pretty well. But I'm just doing what the team needs me to do right now, and I love it."



Football journey: Ryan Mallett

By Mike Reiss

October, 29, 2011

Patriots rookie quarterback Ryan Mallett at work during the preseason. FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – Rookie quarterback Ryan Mallett has done his best Ben Roethlisberger impersonation this week. One of his primary jobs over the last four days was to help run the scout team offense, which meant giving the defense as close to a replica of Roethlisberger as possible.

"You just try to do what he does. I've enjoyed it, because he moves around a little bit," Mallett said.

Unlike some other rookie quarterbacks around the NFL who have been thrust quickly into starting roles, the 23-year-old Mallett finds himself in a different situation. He's No. 3 on the depth chart behind Tom Brady and Brian Hoyer, meaning he operates mostly under the radar. Head coach Bill Belichick recently praised his progress in an interview with Sirius NFL Radio ([link here](#)).

"He's had a good opportunity to learn and improve, and do things off the field that can help him get better. And he's worked real hard at that. I think he's making a lot of progress," Belichick said.

The 6-foot-6, 238-pound Mallett, whose high school and college careers were anything but under the radar, shared his "football journey" this week with ESPNBoston.com:

When he first started playing football: "Sixth grade. I played left guard and linebacker. There was a weight limit to play quarterback at that age; you had to be 135. I was 150, so I couldn't touch the ball. I just wanted to play quarterback, which happened in the seventh grade. That experience gave me respect for offensive linemen the rest of my career."

Playing football at Texas High School in Texarkana, Texas: "The main thing was playing for a great group of coaches. Football was it. That helped encourage my passion for the game, which I already had because my dad was a coach. I had a bunch of great teammates and we had some really good teams. We didn't lose too many games."

Why he initially attended the University of Michigan: "The system and the coaches, I really loved how they ran their offense. I really had a strong relationship with the coaches [Lloyd Carr's staff]. They recruited me hard and I could tell they wanted me there. I loved everything about it when I went to campus."

Transferring to Arkansas after a Michigan coaching change: "The offense [new coach Rich] Rodriguez ran wasn't suited to my style. I'm more of a drop-back, throw-the-ball guy. I didn't want to be in the 'gun all the time. So I made the decision, and it was hard, because I loved Michigan. The coaches were awesome, the fans were awesome, but I felt it was something I had to do personally."

Why Arkansas was the right choice: “It’s home, my hometown team, the team I grew up cheering for. You had a coach [Bobby Petrino] coming in there and I had obviously seen what he did at Louisville, and the offense he ran. When I went for a visit and he showed me, it was pretty much a done deal right then.”

Top memories at Arkansas: “In terms of one play, it would have to be fourth-and-3 against LSU, fourth quarter, and we hit a touchdown – a double move to Joe Adams that put us in the Sugar Bowl. That was a sweet play, one of my all-time favorites.”

Summing up his time at Arkansas: “If there was one word, it would be ‘awesome.’ You get to play in front of a rabid group of fans that love their hometown team. That’s really the big draw there. To walk into that stadium, and come through the ‘A’, and all the fans, just awesome.”

Drafted by the Patriots in the third round: “It was exciting. I worked my whole life to get to this point and finally had a chance to prove myself. Now it’s just working and trying to get better, and getting everything as quickly and thoroughly as possible. I’m learning every day. I obviously have great teachers, great coaches. It’s a great organization to be in. It’s about working hard and doing the right things. You have to come to work every day ready to work.”

Drawing from his experience in the preseason: “It’s not college any more. It’s more difficult. But once I start to feel the game, and pick up and keep working, I think I have a chance to get even better. I watch how [Tom Brady and Brian Hoyer] do things and try to incorporate them in my game. That’s helped me grow as a player.”

Having the luxury of growing behind the scenes: “Obviously, as a competitor, you want to play. But I understand my role as a teammate and on this team, so what I try to do is be a good teammate and help with whatever I can, and wait my turn. I had to do it before. Some of the guys who have been thrown in there [around the NFL] have played great, and I don’t doubt I could do the same, but it’s not my role. I’m a team guy. I do whatever they tell me to do.”

Role models in his career: “My dad was definitely one. I always grew up going to his practices in high school. I’d go out there and pick up the footballs and just throw them. He taught me and coached me when I was younger. He’s always been my role model.”

Favorite teams growing up: “I didn’t have too many favorite teams. I just liked the game. I did like the Cowboys because of Troy [Aikman] and Michael [Irvin] and those guys.”

What he likes about football: “Really everything, but the competition, especially in the NFL. Every day in practice is a competition. In college, not so much; you have more players, more scout team guys. In the NFL, the competition is great and that’s what drives you.”

What he’s learned about New England: “That is snows in October [laughing]. That’s the first time I’ve ever seen that. I love the area. The people are great. It sort of reminds me of back home.”

Summing up his football journey to this point: “My journey is not over. I won’t be able to sum it up it’s over. It’s on a continuing path right now.”

LB Jerod Mayo



Patriots: Jerod Mayo leader of defense

By Jennifer Toland

Sunday, September 11, 2011

FOXBORO — When Rob Ninkovich arrived here for training camp 2009, one of the first new teammates he met was fellow linebacker Jerod Mayo.

And one of their first conversations went like this:

"I said, 'How long have you been in the league?'" Ninkovich said. "I thought he was an eight-, 10-year guy. But he was like, 'Just two.' And I was like, 'OK...'"

It is true that Mayo, just 25, projects a veteran presence and prudence and wisdom.

"He's got that big face on him and the long cornrows. He just looks older," Ninkovich said with a laugh. "It's just the way he presents himself as more mature."

As Mayo enters the fourth year of his NFL career, a career that already includes an All-Pro selection and Defensive Rookie of the Year award, he is undoubtedly ready to take on an even greater leadership role.

On the eve of their 2011 opener, the Patriots' defense has a new look (4-3) and a number of new players (Albert Haynesworth, Shaun Ellis and Andre Carter), but Mayo, along with Vince Wilfork, Devin McCourty and Patrick Chung, remain the constants, the steadying forces of the unit with something to prove this year.

"We definitely have a chip on our shoulders as a defense," Mayo said. "We're trying to go out there every week and pitch a shutout. That's the goal. Hopefully, (tomorrow night in Miami) we can go out and start the season on a good note."

Mayo, becoming more the face of the Patriots' defense, appeared on a regional cover of Sports Illustrated's NFL preview issue.

In 2010, Mayo, a first-round draft pick out of Tennessee, had a league-leading 193 tackles. He had a pair of 19-tackle games and became the first Patriots player with three consecutive 100-tackle seasons since Lawyer Milloy had five straight from 1997 to 2001.

"Jerod is vital to us," Ninkovich said.

Former Patriots linebacker Tedy Bruschi, now an ESPN analyst, has always offered high praise for Mayo. The two played together for one season — Bruschi's last, Mayo's first — in New England. This summer, Bruschi said Mayo "will be the best linebacker in the game within two years."

Last year, Bruschi had similar accolades. He called Mayo a "tackling machine," and said the next step for Mayo was to become a game-changer.

Mayo may get his chance this year. The Patriots' 4-3 base should allow Mayo, who started all 16 games at inside linebacker last season, to attack from all angles, as he did in the preseason game against Tampa Bay.

In that disruptive performance, Mayo had five tackles, including two for losses, plus two sacks, three quarterback hits and two pass deflections.

That's the kind of game-changing stuff Bruschi was talking about.

"Whatever Coach (Bill) Belichick wants me to do," Mayo said, "I'm willing to do. Whether that's rushing or dropping or doing whatever, that's what I'm going to do."

Belichick said this week Mayo will continue to be the primary play-caller on defense.

"Everyone's learning the defense at the same pace and communication is huge and it starts with me," Mayo said. "If there's a busted call out there, a busted play, it's probably my fault. Making sure everybody's on the same page, that's my job."

For the third straight year, Mayo has been elected a team captain.

"He has all the respect in the world from me," Belichick said, "the coaching staff, and, I'm sure, the players just because of what he does and the way he does it."

Mayo further solidified his reputation as a solid Patriots citizen when he was presented with the Ron Burton Community Service Award last week.

During his time in New England, Mayo has donated much time to children's causes in the area. Last year, he started The Mayo Bowl, a celebrity bowling event that raises money for Pitching In for Kids, an area children's charity.

"My biggest passion is just giving back to the kids," Mayo said. "They're our future and I know it sounds cliché, but it's the truth. Some of them really don't have direction and things like that, so any time it has something to do with the kids, I'm always there."

The Patriots have shown glimpses of what they hope will be an exciting and play-making defense during training camp and in four preseason games. The real unveiling comes on "Monday Night Football" tomorrow in Miami.

"It's a chance for us to showcase our skills and we've worked hard," Mayo said. "I feel good, I feel confident. I feel like we have a bunch of guys on the defensive side of the ball hungry and tough enough to play the game."



Football journey: Jerod Mayo

By Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Before he made his first tackle for the Patriots, Jerod Mayo made a decision to live within five minutes of Gillette Stadium. His thinking was that he planned to be at the stadium most of the time, doing what he loves and striving to improve, that anything more than five minutes away was wasting his time.

The 24-year-old Mayo made an immediate splash in 2008, becoming just the second Patriots player to win the Associated Press Defensive Rookie of the Year award (Mike Haynes in 1976 was the other). After battling through a knee injury in 2009, Mayo has returned to form this season, with coaches crediting him with a team-high 103 tackles.

Mayo, who hails from Hampton, Va., has emerged as one of the leaders of the team's defense. He shares his football journey with ESPNBoston.com.

When he first started playing football: "I think I was 5 years old, it was back in Virginia. Played a little Mighty Mites. My mom put me in that. It was a good time."

Why he first started playing: "My mom believed in us playing every sport and then seeing what we liked. I played soccer, basketball, baseball, football. I kind of eliminated them as I got older. It ended up being football."

First positions: "I played guard [laughing], then moved to fullback. I've always played linebacker."

Top memories at Kecoughtan High, where he was a Prep Star All-American: "Before I got there, they were a winning program, then they took a dip, and my junior and senior year we were pretty good. I played running back. That was a good time, but at the end of the day, I like to give the hits instead of taking them. I ran the ball like I was a linebacker. We had some good games against Heritage High School, a big win. Any time you are an underdog and get a big win, it's huge."

Why he chose to attend Tennessee: "SEC football, stadium holds 110,000. At the time, the linebackers there were known to go to the NFL and that was always a dream for me. It was a good decision."

NFL players he looked up to at that time: "I've always been a big fan of Derrick Brooks. He was one of those guys who did it all -- he could tackle, run, cover passes."

Favorite team growing up: "I liked the Oakland Raiders. Those guys just seemed like they were a hard-nosed team, and I love hitting. It seemed like defense was a big part of that team out there early on. It was the teams with Tim Brown, Rich Gannon, Napoleon Kaufman and those guys."

Best memories at Tennessee: "Going to the SEC championship, even though we didn't win. We went twice. Just the camaraderie you build with the guys, living with a group of guys, just building relationships and things like that."

Toughest memories at Tennessee: "We came into the season one year, my red-shirt freshman year, ranked No. 3 in the preseason. We ended up going 5-6, losing a lot of games."

If he didn't attend Tennessee...: "Probably Virginia Tech. A lot of guys from my area go there."

What he appreciates about the game of football: "Camaraderie and being with a group of guys, going out there competing, and having that team feeling."

Hardest thing in his career: "Losing, especially when things might fall to the defense."

Getting drafted by the Patriots in the first round: "Great feeling. The year before, they won 18 games, so any time you can go first round and go to a successful team like the Patriots -- that won all those games without you -- you just try to go in and learn as much as you can."

Walking into the Patriots locker room for the first time: "It was great. You play with these guys on video games and then all of a sudden you're in the same locker room with them. I'm not going to say I was star struck, because I wasn't really following the Patriots like that, but at the same time I knew who the guys were. It was great to be able to play with them."

What he learned from Tedy Bruschi, Mike Vrabel and other veteran linebackers: "Just how to be a professional, on and off the field. Coming in early, staying late, studying film."

Learning about life in New England: "I've learned about snow [laughing]. Most of all, I've learned how passionate the fans are. You hear a lot about hockey and other sports, but these fans also love football. It's great having them out there."

Summing up his football journey from Mighty Mites to the Patriots: "Just having a band of brothers. You grow up with guys in your neighborhood, playing football, then you go to high school and some of those guys are still with you, but some of them fall off. Then you go to college and most of the time you don't go with anybody from your hometown. You don't know anybody, so you're starting over from scratch. Just building those relationships. I still have friends now that I played with in Midgets. It's the relationships."

CB 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."

OL Nick McDonald

The Boston Globe

Patriots' McDonald front and center

By Shalise Manza Young
December 6, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - Her name is tattooed on his chest, near his heart.

Nick McDonald grows quiet when he is asked about his mother, Irene, who died of liver cancer when he was 14. She was just 44. He was just a freshman in high school in Michigan when he lost his mother just eight months after her diagnosis.

The experience shaped him into the person he is today.

"It was terrible but I think it's made me who I am and you can't take life for granted, you can't take anything for granted - that's why I can't take this opportunity for granted," McDonald said yesterday.

But what McDonald didn't say is that he hasn't lost one parent, but two: his father basically abandoned him and his three siblings less than a year after Irene died, moving to Louisiana and leaving them to fend for themselves.

When they were evicted from the family home, McDonald and his older siblings, both over 18, were on their own, while Nick and younger brother Chris were separated, taken in by family friends, McDonald told a newspaper in Michigan during his senior season at Division 2 Grand Valley State.

The opportunity McDonald speaks of is playing for the Patriots. He was promoted off the practice squad just 24 hours before Sunday's game with the Colts and started at center, the first regular-season minutes of his young NFL career.

His girlfriend and friends were in the stands at Gillette Stadium. But the initial plan was for McDonald to be taking the game in with them.

"They were kind of shocked," to learn he would be starting and not sitting next to them, McDonald said with a chuckle. "They were all pretty excited about what happened. They had no idea till they came up [to New England], which was kind of cool. I got to tell them that."

With the perspective of someone who has experienced what he has at just 24 years old, McDonald admitted to butterflies before the game.

"You just have to look at it like, you know, it's not war, you're not building rockets, it's football," he said. "It's a kids' game, you just have to have fun with it."

He earned kudos from quarterback Tom Brady, right guard Brian Waters, and coach Bill Belichick.

"I thought he did a real good job for not having many reps with the first group and just really getting them [last] week," Belichick said. "He hadn't had a lot of exchanges with Tom, or just Logan [Mankins] or Brian, working next to them with combination blocks and things like that. I thought he did a real good job."

McDonald has been fortunate to be with two successful teams: He was signed as a rookie free agent by the Packers, and made the 53-man roster out of training camp last year. Though he was a day-of-game inactive every game, including the playoffs, he earned a Super Bowl ring and learned quite a bit from his time there.

"It helps when you have guys on the O-line who have been around for a while and see how they play and obviously a guy like Aaron Rodgers, he's going to help you and it was great to see a good team go that far and be a part of that, which definitely helps," he said.

"People don't think of the fact that everybody is part of a win. I mean, in practice, getting guys ready, I was on the roster but I was going against the starting defense every single day, and I think everybody deserved [a ring], even the practice-squad guy."

When McDonald didn't make the Green Bay roster this season - he was among the final cuts - he quickly was scooped up by New England and went from working with Rodgers at times to working with Brady.

"They're both amazing quarterbacks, they work extremely hard," McDonald said. "Very passionate guys, great, they love their team, they love their teammates. These guys are winners, that's just naturally what they are and they work very hard."

McDonald got his chance Sunday because Ryan Wendell suffered a calf injury that day. McDonald is the fourth center the Patriots have used this season. Dan Koppen was injured in Week 1 and Dan Connolly was injured against the Eagles just more than a week ago.

Belichick wouldn't say if McDonald will continue to play once Connolly and Wendell get healthy.

"I've just got to keep working hard," McDonald said. "In the weight room, film study, know what I'm doing and just be prepared."

P Zoltan Mesko

The Boston Globe

Mesko took stock during long lockout

By Shalise Manza Young

August 13, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - It seems highly unlikely that Zoltan Mesko would lounge around on his couch for days on end, but when he explains why he interned at an investment firm during the NFL lockout, he makes it sound as if it were either that or become a couch potato.

The Patriots punter, who heads into his second season after setting a league rookie record for highest net punting average at 38.4 yards (his gross distance on 58 punts was 43.2 yards), spent the offseason splitting time among working out, honing his football craft, and interning at Graham Partners in suburban Philadelphia.

"I just tell people it's an investment firm and invest their money and hopefully do better than the [stock] market's doing right now," he said recently.

There was some balancing required to keep up with his workouts, but Mesko thrives on a regimented schedule. Former Michigan roommate Tim North said last year that Mesko goes to bed at the same time and wakes up at the same time every day, getting eight hours of sleep, and keeps a notebook of all of the things he has to do from day-to-day.

Like many second-year players, Mesko is more comfortable in training camp.

"I would say it's a different approach because I know what's going to happen," he said. "I know mentally what is thrown my way and I know what the coaches expect of me and I'm more welcoming of that challenge."

Though Mesko is Michigan's all-time leader in punts and punting yardage, there was still much to learn when he arrived in New England. For one thing, he didn't really have a position coach in Ann Arbor, and now he has energetic special teams coach Scott O'Brien to help dissect every phase of his punts.

There were some mis-hits, as every punter has, but there was also the booming 65-yarder in overtime against Baltimore. The Ravens were pinned at their own 19-yard line, a significant swing in field position. Baltimore went three-and-out, New England got the ball back at its own 38, and seven plays later Stephen Gostkowski nailed the winning field goal.

Of Mesko's 58 punts in 2010 - thanks to the Patriots' high-octane offense, he wasn't called upon too often - 19 were downed inside the 20-yard line, and five were touchbacks.

"I've definitely broken down some things, with the help of Scott O'Brien, he's been a tremendous help, he's been in the business for 30 years of coaching punters and kickers so he's got a plethora of knowledge to share," Mesko said. "With his help and others and going to camps, and actually working with [former Patriots punter] Chris Hanson a little bit it's a whole multitude of things, little things that make the difference."

Mesko has been strong in camp thus far, and he was looking forward to seeing how he fared against Jacksonville. He only had to punt once - a 53-yarder in the first quarter.

He also has gained a sense of comfort with long snapper Matt Katula, who joined the Patriots midway through last season, and Gostkowski, whom he serves as holder on field goals and extra-point tries.

"When somebody has an average, below-average day we definitely pick each other up, it's definitely a unique fraternity," Mesko said. "We have to support each other and kind of get gelling before the beginning of the season, we're right on schedule with that. We're doing well."

"It's definitely nice to have people that have a passion for the game and they're not shy - if I need extra help, like today, I pulled Matt and said, 'Hey can I get an extra 10 minutes of work with you,' and he was very welcoming. So I'm definitely excited to have people like that on the team."

He's written down some goals for the season, though he doesn't want to share them.

"I do have some high expectations; hopefully my hard work in the offseason pays off," he said.

The market he's learned so much about may be faltering, but Mesko's hoping his stock only goes up.



Mesko beats the odds on journey to success

By Simon Evans
Tue, Oct 12 2010

MIAMI (Reuters) - Every NFL player can count themselves fortunate to have a contract in one of the most lucrative leagues in the world but few have been as lucky as New England Patriots rookie punter Zoltan Mesko.

In 1996, the Mesko family were among the six million or so people who try their luck in the United States' green-card lottery which annually gives 50,000 people a 'diversity immigrant visa'.

The odds of winning are roughly 0.008 percent but the Mesko family succeeded.

"I think I was playing a video game in the next room and my Dad came in with this big envelope and said: 'I have got to show you something'.

"My Mum thought it was another cockroach from the kitchen or something, she freaked out, but then he made the message clear and I was ecstatic. We looked at it as going to the land of opportunity and it really is," the Romania-born Mesko told Reuters in an interview.

The 11-year-old Zoltan and his ethnic Hungarian family headed, as so many immigrants do, to New York City but after six months they moved on to Ohio, the heartland of the U.S's Hungarian community which has produced a surprising number of well-known NFL players over the years.

Miami Dolphins' Hall of Fame head coach Don Shula and full-back Larry Csonka along with New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath, all came from Hungarian families, while on the kicking side of the game Budapest-born Pete Gogolak is credited with bringing the soccer-kicking style to the code.

NATIVE TONGUES

You would not guess from first meeting the clean-cut, well-spoken Mesko that he was born in the town of Timisoara, Romania, during the dark, final years of Nicolae Ceausescu's communist dictatorship.

Mesko's English certainly does not give him away. Despite speaking his native tongues of Romanian and Hungarian, along with German, there is not a hint of his East European background in his accent.

He does, though, have the attitude and determination that typifies generations of immigrants from that region to the U.S. As he puts it: "Give me some lemons and I will make lemonade."

After the family settled in Ohio, another twist of fate led Mesko from the fun of playing soccer with his friends to a career in American football.

The youngster was playing 'kick ball' with friends and managed to knock out a light in the school gym. Instead of being punished he was offered a chance to kick on the high school team.

"At first I kicked field goals but the special teams coach at high school encouraged me to punt, which I didn't want to do because you don't have that glory of kicking a last-second field goal.

"But I ended up excelling more at punting because my body is better suited to punting, being tall and wearing size 14 shoes."

As a child in Romania, Mesko knew little about American football other than the occasional 'big hit' shown on sports highlights shows but it was clear to him that the game was going to offer him greater opportunities than soccer could.

"I was playing soccer and football at the same time in ninth grade and it was hard to let go of it but once I realized I could get a college scholarship... my parents didn't have any kind of funds set up for me, or any savings for that matter, I wanted to save them money and also not to have to take out a loan.

"It was a way to avoid that route -- I earned a scholarship and learned the game of football," he said.

ACADEMIC PURSUITS

Mesko turned down Ivy League opportunities to head to the University of Michigan where he was able to combine his academic pursuits with top-class college football.

Despite his outstanding record in high school football, Mesko had to sit out his first year but he enjoyed five fruitful years at the University, leaving with a reputation as a top punter, a bachelor's degree and a masters in sports management.

Those qualifications, Mesko hopes, will stand him in good stead when his career as a punter in the NFL comes to an end.

"I always wanted to have a Plan B and that is why I am not afraid of failing, even at this level; this is just a bonus for me. Whatever happens from here, I can always use my education."

The NFL has its own version of a lottery, called the draft, and Mesko was picked up by the New England Patriots this year, the latest chapter in his unlikely story.

"The probability of winning a green-card lottery is very slim. It is just so many things that have gone right for me -- I guess there is some luck involved," he said.

He is sure, though, that even without his father's lottery win he would have made something of his life.

"I would probably have been working in Germany. I went to a German (language) school and I would have done anything to give myself the best opportunity to succeed in life, whatever that may have been."

CB Antwaun Molden



Gritty Patriot Antwaun Molden tackles adversity with big heart, determination

By Ian R. Rapoport

Friday, December 9, 2011

FOXBORO — He was much smaller then. Antwaun Molden didn't grow to be 6-foot-1, 200 pounds until his sophomore year of college, which only begins to tell the story of why the runt of the litter was overlooked at every stop on his tragic and ultimately fulfilling journey.

Then a sophomore at Ohio's Warren G. Harding High, Molden would race to the front of the line during drills at football practice. Four inches shorter and 60 pounds lighter, he knew pain was coming.

"I'd be like, 'What is this kid doing?'" recalled Robert Andrews, then the school's defensive backs coach. "He would keep nagging, like, 'Coach, can I get a rep?'"

What Molden got was a beating from bigger players who slammed him into the turf. And Molden simply kept rising.

"That's how I was," Molden said. "Always wanting to show that I could hang with the big guys. I kept getting knocked down, but I had some fight in me."

It is the story of Molden's life. The Patriots [team stats] cornerback filled in for captain Devin McCourty last month, grabbing his first interception against the Eagles. He is not yet a star.

But he may be the Patriots most unlikely success story.

"I reflect on it a lot," Molden said, "this path, this journey. It keeps me humble."

Molden made it through high school while living with and caring for his grandmother, Bernice, after his mother abandoned him and his father wasn't around.

He landed on Eastern Kentucky University's team, despite blending in on a high school squad overflowing with NFL-bound stars like Mario Manningham and Maurice Clarett. He made it to the NFL, even while cancer took his fiancée as a senior at ECU. And he has contributed to the Patriots after three injury-riddled seasons with the Texans.

Molden is still standing.

"He's been a fortunate person," said Andrews, a father figure. "I'm elated. Because sometimes you think of those days, Houston, the injuries, frustration and you wonder is it over? But I believe the ending has already been written, and it's a great ending."

Against the odds

Molden doesn't believe he'd be where he is without his grandmother. A self-described "man of the house," he performed chores while Bernice — gimpy knees and all — struggled to make ends meet for Molden and his sister.

Molden was known as a baseball player in high school, but never a great athlete. As Andrews put it, you have the star quarterback, the star tailback . . . and the person who everyone picked on. That was Molden.

A timid speaker who sometimes became so flustered he would blurt out a sentence that didn't make sense, Molden was an easy target. The fact that he would waive his big hands around to try to finish a thought didn't help. Classmates harassed him, and he was left to fend for himself.

"I never had a brother to defend me when times got rough," Molden said. "I did get picked on because those guys ran in cliques. I fought back. That's what made me strong."

Andrews added, "He couldn't fight them all," though Molden tried. And Andrews counseled.

Their relationship began when the coach grabbed a young Molden's arm and joked as motivation, "You got to get in the weight room." Molden was crushed, because he had been working. He quickly told his grandmother, who called Andrews to explain that Molden took his words to heart.

"Then we built a relationship," Andrews said.

Finding his place

The diminutive Molden struggled to get on the field, also hampered from the one time his biological father showed up to give the coach a hard time. So, he threw himself into practice, covering the gunners on punt teams for stretches of 20 minutes at a time, inadvertently building his man-to-man technique.

"I would not let him off the field," recalled the hard-driving Andrews.

He played for national No. 2 Warren G. Harding as a senior, then transferred to Cleveland's Glenville High and joined the track team. He moved in with Andrews, and had he not been nearly 18, Andrews would have become his legal guardian.

At Glenville, future NFL players like Ted Ginn and ex-Patriots linebacker Pierre Woods accepted Molden. Finally, someone did, and Andrews said, "He wasn't the guy everybody cracked on."

The two remained close. Andrews encouraged him to find his real mother, nurtured his confidence, and relied on their shared Bible readings. Andrews' own family life deteriorated, and they leaned on each other.

Quietly, Molden's profile grew. A stunning performance at a Nike Combine as a prospect gave Molden the idea "that I could compete with the best," he said

Unlikely prospect

He enrolled at Toledo struggled academically, and landed at Andrews' alma mater, Eastern Kentucky. But there was more tragedy there.

One day after he proposed to his long-time girlfriend, Joi Smith, she was diagnosed with a rare form of muscle cancer. She passed away nine months later.

Molden, somehow, somehow, had three interceptions and nine pass deflections as a senior, willing himself into an NFL prospect.

"When my friends were going out," Molden said, "I was running stadiums. Those things add up."

He took a leap at the NFL Combine in 2008. A sparkling 4.39 40-yard-dash convinced the Texans to make him a third-round selection. Yet it quickly unraveled again. Three coordinators and two injuries later, he was released this preseason.

"Actually, it was a big weight off my shoulders," Molden said. "A new beginning."

Landing in Foxboro

The Patriots claimed him despite his limited experience. Coach Bill Belichick joked that, "Believe me, we've gone on a lot less than that to evaluate a player."

Molden showed up as a physical defender in the fourth preseason game, without having seen a playbook. Since then, Molden increased his film study to 10 hours a week, honing in on technique's under Andrews' tutelage.

"I told him Bill is a guy you'll develop under," Andrews said. "Bill sees potential."

His first interception was the most promising sign that success may stick. It was music to the ears of those who have stuck with him.

"It's been a hard road," said agent Craig Schaffer of Elite Sports. "But he is the consummate professional."

Andrews and Molden are still close, though Molden has turned into a man himself. He is married to Chanelle, and has a daughter, Amariah, who is one-and-a-half.

Regardless of what happens with the Patriots, he's already a success.

"I always would tell him, 'Look how you were treated, look how people gave up on you,' " Andrews said. "Your calling is to tell your story."



Football journey: Antwaun Molden

By Mike Reiss
September, 24, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – It makes sense to think we'll see more of Patriots cornerback Antwaun Molden on Sunday.

The Bills run a spread offense, which in turn, should have the Patriots' sub defense on the field for most of the game. That increases the likelihood that Molden sees more playing time.

The soft-spoken Molden was claimed on waivers from the Houston Texans on Sept. 1. He is a bigger cornerback (6-1, 198) whose style of play fits the Patriots' scheme alteration in 2011 which calls for more man coverage.

Molden, who grew up in Warren, Ohio, shared his football journey this week with ESPNBoston.com.

When he first started playing football: "It was Pee Wee league, I was 11, and played for the Little Browns in Warren, Ohio."

Why he first started playing: "I was a baseball player, and someone approached me after our Little League championship and asked, 'Have you ever thought about playing football?' He saw my speed from running the bases. I said I hadn't thought about it. He went over to talk to my grandmother and asked if I could try it. She said OK. We put our little deposit down, I got fitted for my big helmet, my big shoulder pads, and it took off from there."

First position: "Tailback."

Growing up in Warren, Ohio: "It was tough. I was raised by my grandmother and I thank God for her. She was a lady who [devoted] the second half of her life to take care of my sister and me. Warren is known for being rough, [it's next to] Youngstown. The main thing I had to do was stay focused and put myself around positive people, those who would encourage me and help me along the way to becoming a successful person that I am at this point of time. There is a lot of history in Warren. We're just scratching the surface."

Top memories from playing at Glenville High School under Ted Ginn Sr. as a receiver and cornerback: "We were ranked No. 2 in the country. We had an ESPN High School Game of the Week, we played Massillon Washington. We came back to beat them in the fourth quarter of my senior year. So it was a great rivalry; it started in the early 90s and they canceled the rivalry because there was a riot at the 1990 game. It was a 10-year wait. At that time, we were undefeated and they were undefeated. Other than the state championship, I think that was the most memorable game."

Making the transition to college: "I walked on at the University of Toledo, redshirted my freshman year, and my second year I was second-string strong safety. I wasn't on scholarship, and my grandmother and I,

we couldn't afford to stay at Toledo. After three semesters, Eastern Kentucky offered me a scholarship and within 48 hours I made a transition from one place to another. My high school coach, Robert Andrews, used to go there. He has friends there and put in a word for me, which was a blessing. It was a four-year scholarship and I graduated there in 2007."

Top memories at Eastern Kentucky: "Definitely the OVC [Ohio Valley Conference] Championship. When I first got there, it was a struggle to win. We were at the bottom of the ranks and we worked our way up to the top. It was hard work and I got to experience the tough times and good times there."

Entering the NFL as a third-round draft choice of the Texans in 2008: "Entering my senior year, Domonique Rodgers-Cromartie and I were battling for the number 1 and 2 spots [among prospects]. I broke my hand and couldn't make as many plays as I wanted to make, so I dropped off. At that point, I didn't know how it would go, I didn't know if I would be drafted. After the season, I was invited to the Texas vs. Nation game and my stock went up there. I went to the combine, ran 4.38, and put up some top numbers in every category, top 3 percent. I remember getting the call from [Texans general manager] Rick Smith and him saying 'Congratulations, you're a Texan.' It was a great, great experience."

Summing up three years with the Texans in which he played 31 games (0 starts): "It was definitely fun, but at the same time I had four defensive coordinators and four defensive backs coaches. I was waiting for that opportunity. But in terms of the environment, I loved the Texans, loved the players, loved the coaches, they were good people. At the same time, it's a business."

Landing with the Patriots: "I'm still getting acclimated. Every guy has a responsibility and they handle that responsibility. I like that. And everyone is accountable. That's one thing I take pride in, working hard. That's what these guys around here do for each other – make each other better, on the field and also off the field."

Visiting with the Patriots at Gillette Stadium before the 2008 draft: "When I first came in this year, I was like 'I remember this place.' The first person I met was Bill Belichick. He met me at the door. He's very straight-forward and I'm looking forward to working for a person like him."

Mentors in his career: "Definitely Robert Andrews, my high school coach. I never had a father figure and he took me under his wing at the age of 14. That's around the mark when kids start heading the wrong way, but he nurtured me like a father-son [relationship]. He always encouraged me along the way. At the same time, he was always tough on me – very, very tough on me. He's a father to me; he was my coach, mentor. He was the utility man in my life and I thank God for him."

LB 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."



Ninkovich experiment yielding solid results

Glen Farley
November 20, 2011

FOXBORO — According to Patriots head coach Bill Belichick, acquiring talent in the NFL is "no perfect science."

Maybe not, but a couple of years after the Patriots decided to take a flyer on him, outside linebacker Rob Ninkovich has proven to be a pretty good experiment.

"We've seen guys - Wes Welker was cut by a team (San Diego), (Tom) Brady went in the sixth round. It's no perfect science," said Belichick. "Rob's come in here, he's done a good job for us since the day he got there.

He's performed well in the kicking game, played outside linebacker, backup long snapper. ... He can do a number of different things. He can rush the passer, he can play with strength in the running game, he's a good pass defender, plays in the kicking game, long snapper. That's a pretty good resume. He's done a good job for us."

Ninkovich's latest entry on his resume was his best of all.

If not for teammate Andre Carter's franchise record-tying four sacks in the game (originally credited with a franchise record-setting 4.5), Ninkovich's five tackles, two interceptions (one 12 yards for the fourth-quarter touchdown) and two passes defensed in the Patriots' 37-16 win over the New York Jets at MetLife Stadium last Sunday night just may have earned him AFC Defensive Player of the Week honors.

The fact that Ninkovich returned one of those interceptions for a TD one-upped his performance in a Monday night game at Sun Life Stadium on Oct. 4 of last year when he was credited with five tackles, two interceptions, two passes defensed and a sack in the Patriots' 41-14 victory over the Miami Dolphins.

According to fellow linebacker Jerod Mayo, there's a Noah's Ark aspect to Ninkovich's game.

"They come in twos with Rob," Mayo said of the interceptions, "so we're happy for that."

Not bad for a guy whose placements on the waiver wire also came in twos - twice each by two teams, New Orleans and Miami - before the Patriots signed him as a free agent on Aug. 2, 2009.

"Kind of just keep working and don't let anything get you down," Ninkovich said, explaining the approach that kept him going in his bleakest NFL hours. "Throughout my career there's been ups and downs and things that haven't gone my way, but you can't let that affect how you play because obviously there's going to be things that are going to set you back. You've just got to fight through it, keep working."

Turns out the guy who, coincidentally, often sports a Rocky Marciano t-shirt in the Patriots locker room still had some fight in him when he arrived in New England with just six tackles in eight games with the Saints and the Dolphins.

"I really don't know (why the Patriots took a chance on me)," said Ninkovich. "Maybe they thought I was just going to go out there and give them everything I had."

"Coming in here, I knew this was an opportunity for me to come to an organization where they would let a guy come in and do anything he can do well. They're going to put him in good places to make plays so I knew this was a good chance for me to maybe make an impact on special teams my first year, which I was able to do."

That was precisely the tact the Patriots took, Ninkovich finishing with more tackles on special teams (11) than on defense (10) in 15 games in 2009 prior to appearing in all 16 of the Pats' games, starting 10, and registering 58 tackles, four sacks, three passes defensed and those two interceptions in 2010.

Through nine games heading into tomorrow night's contest with Kansas City at Gillette Stadium, the Patriots coaches' film review has credited Ninkovich with 33 tackles, four passes defensed, four quarterback hits, those two interceptions, one sack and one fumble recovery this year.

"I think Rob's case is similar to a lot of other examples that I could give you, (in) that the first thing that happened was he was on special teams," said Belichick. "He played in the kicking game and was productive in the kicking game and so he's going to every game to play on special teams."

"Defensively when you have that situation, when you know that a player is going to be at the game because of his value in the kicking game, then he starts to gain a greater role on offense or defense because as a coach you know he's going to be there. ... If the player is there because of his role in the kicking game, then he can expand that role to offense or defense."

WR Chad Ochocinco

The Boston Globe

Open receiver

Ochocinco goes deep about past, new situation with Patriots

By Shalise Manza Young
September 11, 2011

WALPOLE - It was the call Chad Ochocinco had been longing to receive for at least three years.

When it finally came, it brought him to tears.

It was early on the morning of July 26 when agent Drew Rosenhaus rustled Ochocinco from his sleep with the news that he had been traded.

To New England.

"The tears went to flowing," said Ochocinco. "I was free. I was free. And on top of that, look at where I'm going."

The receiver was leaving Cincinnati, the only NFL home he'd known. It was a situation that had grown toxic in many ways. The organization long ago had shown that it wasn't truly committed to putting the best team on the field; Ochocinco wasn't always giving his best effort; and his relationship with coach Marvin Lewis had soured to the point where Lewis took to bashing him on a conference call with San Diego reporters before the Bengals played the Chargers late last year.

He was coming to New England, to play for a coach he long ago had befriended and with a quarterback considered one of the best the game ever has seen.

Ochocinco called Foxborough "heaven" - fitting, since he just had been in something akin to NFL hell.

He arrives at Starbucks in his now-famous Toyota Prius, in a navy blue Red Sox hat, gray hooded sweatshirt, camo-patterned cargo shorts, and brightly colored old-school Asics trainers.

Over the course of a two-hour conversation - an interview that winds from his upbringing in the hardscrabble Liberty City section of Miami to his admiration for soccer superstars Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo to an aspiring gospel singer he recently saw on television - Ochocinco is at times every bit the boastful man who has drawn fines and the dislike of old-school football fans for his choreographed touchdown celebrations.

But for the most part, he is nothing at all like the image most people have of him - an image he knows he helped cultivate.

Ochocinco, born Chad Javon Johnson, was raised primarily by his grandmother, Bessie Mae Flowers, who was strict and had him in church weekly. Despite working as a teacher and counselor, she couldn't get him to focus on schoolwork. Flowers's now-deceased second husband, James, whom Ochocinco calls "granddaddy," was one of the few male influences he had growing up.

When asked how he ended up being raised by his grandmother, Ochocinco initially elects not to discuss it. But he later offers that his mother, Paula, moved to Los Angeles with his younger brother, Chauncey, when he was young. She did not take him with her.

His father was in prison for almost all of his childhood; Ochocinco didn't meet him until he was out of high school, and he was excited to do so, though Flowers wasn't in favor of it. He wanted to know something of this man, learn a little of what he was about.

His father still lives in Liberty City, but Ochocinco keeps him at arm's length.

Flowers kept him busy with soccer, football, basketball, tee-ball - anything to try to keep him out of trouble. He jokes that he stole a Snickers bar once when he was around 9 ("I was hungry and I didn't have a dollar") but Flowers quickly found out.

"I got my [butt] whupped, too," he said.

As he's telling the story, a car rolls through the lot. The driver sees the newest Patriots receiver sitting on the patio outside the coffeehouse and waves.

"Who was that?" Ochocinco asks, surprised.

He is reminded that he is a bit of a celebrity.

Growing pains

The man who now has 2.7 million Twitter followers (many of them gained through his successful run on "Dancing with the Stars"), who has been featured in commercials for Reebok shoes and pistachios, who has his own iPhone application and video game, almost wasn't.

"Soccer was the first love," he said. "When I got to high school, ninth grade, you start thinking career-wise, because you go from high school to college and after college it's time to rock and roll, and soccer wasn't the deal. Not in the States, especially not back when I was in school in '92, '93, '94.

"So I had that talk with Grandma, and she was like, 'If this is what you want to do, if this is what you really want to do and you're thinking about doing it professionally, I think football's the route you need to go.' And football it was."

But his path to the NFL was a circuitous one. He admits that he blew off his own classes at Miami Beach High School to take part in friends' physical education classes, especially if they were playing football.

He got by, barely, needing summer school after his senior year to graduate. He went to Langston University, a small, historically black school in Oklahoma, but he was thrown out for fighting before he ever played in a game.

When he returned to Miami, Flowers did not welcome him back with open arms.

"Grandma said, 'I wash my hands.' That's her favorite thing. She said, 'Boo-boo, I wash my hands. I can't do no more,'" he recalled.

He went to Los Angeles, reuniting with his mother and Chauncey, and enrolled at Santa Monica College, a junior college. That's where he met Charles Collins, the coach who turned the high school quarterback into a receiver. Collins remains a mentor and father figure, someone who will tell Ochocinco what he needs to be told, not what he wants to be told.

"He was a typical young guy who thought he knew it all," Collins said. "He of course had talent but he was one of those different kids - playful, a clown, funny, but he had his energy channeled all over.

"He thought he was better than what he was. He had never played wide receiver until he met me. I had to teach him to play how his talent would let him. He had to just be refined and taught, and that was a job in itself - it was a challenge."

It took Ochocinco three years to graduate from Santa Monica, tripped up by that pesky classwork again. He needed a year to get his academics in order, but Collins estimates he spent about 300 days of that year around the coach, and that's when he began listening when Collins told him to stop being so immature. Be accountable. Become a young man.

He was back in uniform for Santa Monica in '99, and Dennis Erickson, then at Oregon State, gave him the chance to spend his final season of eligibility with the Beavers in 2000.

He starred and was drafted in the second round by the Bengals, 36th overall, in 2001.

"He was a dreamer, and I held his hand and he got lucky," said Collins. "I was able to point him to his dream. I guess timing is everything. He met me at the right time."

During the pre-draft process, he was worked out by Bill Belichick. An unlikely friendship was born.

Showtime in the pros In the NFL, he finally blossomed, as a receiver and as a personality.

That's when the gold teeth, the blond Mohawk, the touchdown celebrations, and "The List" started. He went to five straight Pro Bowls and recorded six straight seasons with at least 1,100 receiving yards.

The generation of kids raised on the highlight-happy "SportsCenter" loved him. The NFL altered its rules to try to stop him from being so showy.

And then: Ochocinco.

Collins calls it a "persona" and refuses to call him by that name. He also believes Ochocinco is tiring of the moniker, but is sticking with it because he created it.

Ever the pragmatist, Ochocinco amped things up during the lockout, trying his hand at bull riding (he lasted 1.5 seconds at an event in Georgia), filming a guest spot on the television show "Blue Mountain State," and working out with the Kansas City Wizards of Major League Soccer and European teams Barcelona and Real Madrid.

He talks excitedly about watching Messi and Ronaldo up close, marveling at their ability to run so fast while controlling the ball.

All the while, he kept up his football training, posting video of his workouts on his personal website. He gets defensive at the idea that he might not be in top shape after dealing with so many distractions during the offseason.

As with most father-son relationships, Collins said, Ochocinco listens to him but sometimes listens too late.

Collins backs up Ochocinco's claim that he's incredibly friendly and will strike up a conversation with anyone, but he is also a homebody who simply loves having fun and in some ways is even a bit shy.

A woman approaches and asks to take her picture with him to send to her son, who just returned to college the day before.

Loosening up Ochocinco admits that he tried to force his way out of Cincinnati during the 2008 season because he saw that things weren't going to get any better. The Bengals wouldn't let him go.

Even Collins, who was the Bengals' receivers coach that year (he's currently with the UFL's Sacramento franchise), says it was past time for the sides to part ways. It affected Ochocinco's play; it affected his passion.

It's no coincidence that Collins says his star pupil wasn't playing the way he had taught him.

"The attention to the details of the position and the craft, playing with more of a sense of fundamentals, [being] technical, sound, not compromising routes, not compromising techniques, not relying on talent," Collins lists. "Talent is so overrated. It's in the details of how you do things."

As both were busy with their respective preseasons, they haven't talked in about a month, since Ochocinco was traded to New England. They very likely will talk again this weekend, before Ochocinco plays his first regular-season game with his new team.

The 33-year-old feels "born again, rejuvenated, like a weight off my shoulders" since coming to the Patriots. "Just . . . it's a good feeling."

He got off to a rough start, dropping passes in training camp and catching just three in three preseason appearances. He came to the team with a preconceived idea of what the "Patriot Way" meant, and trying to be buttoned-down while learning a playbook vastly different from the one he had down cold in Cincinnati stifled him.

But he has learned that he can be himself. Not the over-the-top guy from a couple of years ago; he has mellowed, that much is evident, and there is a limit to what Belichick will allow. Still, loosening up has liberated him, and he's back to talking trash on the practice field, something that no doubt will carry over to games once he gets to that next level with Tom Brady, the one that has them communicating with just a look.

He won't be the focal point of the offense, and he insists that's fine by him. Make no mistake, he wants Brady to look his way - "every receiver in the NFL is a diva" - but he relishes the opportunity he's been given.

"Here it should be a lot easier," he said. "You got so many weapons that means the defense is going to have to pick and choose what you're going to do.

"I'm not even worried about that, man. The ball gets spread around. I'm playing with one of the best. He knows what he's doing."

Can't please everyone He is wrapping up his dinner, a term that in this case is used loosely: three slices of lemon loaf and two tall caramel macchiatos.

His struggles already have been talk-radio fodder. He says he's already at a comfort level of 7 out of 10 and rising; him at 7 is good, but him at 10, with Brady, can be great.

He's asked how he wants Patriots fans to see him.

"How they see me doesn't matter," he said. "They're going to make their judgments, and they're going to stick with those judgments regardless.

"You're going to have people that care and that love me no matter what, I can do no wrong, and then people that really don't give a you-know-what. I'm only worried about those that care.

"I'm not trying to win anybody over. Either you love me, if you don't, oh well - I love you anyway."

FB Lousaka Polite



Football journey: Lousaka Polite

By Mike Reiss

December, 31, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – Veteran fullback Lousaka Polite, who signed with the Patriots on Tuesday, had a good idea about the way the organization goes about its business.

That's because he's from the Bill Parcells School of Football.

"Luckily, I started out my career in Dallas and Coach Parcells gave me a really good opportunity and he's helped mold me into a lot of what I am today as a player. I always will appreciate that," Polite said this week, before explaining what he learned most from Parcells.

"It's about being detailed and doing it right, and understanding that's it a business, nothing is personal, and it's all about the team. He has to do whatever he has to do to get you playing your best. You have to take the coaching well and change whatever he asks you to change, and deliver."

The 30-year-old Polite spent the 2011 season without a team when the Patriots called him to see if he'd be ready to deliver for them in a pinch, likely as a short-yardage specialist and special teamer. Polite received the call after the Patriots had multiple injuries along the offensive line, which affected their short-yardage package.

In detailing his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com, Polite said he's excited about this next chapter in his career:

When he first started playing football: "Nine years old. I was new to the city; I was born in South Carolina and I moved to Pittsburgh. Just to get involved, I started playing sports. I started with baseball first at age 8, then the following year I started football. All the guys in the neighborhood were playing football. It was something I wanted to try out. My uncle actually took me up there, and I never stopped."

Football in Western Pennsylvania: "It's big there. High school football is big; on Friday nights the city kind of shuts down."

Positions when he first started playing: "My first game I played guard. I did that for two games, and after that I moved to fullback. I've been a fullback ever since."

Role models in his career: "Definitely my parents. They worked hard for everything. I have an uncle who got me into football and he's definitely a role model. He talked to me on the mental side, and how to process things and go through things."

Favorite teams and players growing up: "I was a Steelers fan, of course. My favorite player was Barry Sanders. He was always humble. He was one of the best in the league but you would never know it. He was always about the next play; score a touchdown and he wasn't dancing. I admired that about him."

Top memories of playing at Woodland Hills High School in Pittsburgh, the same school Rob Gronkowski attended: "We were a pretty good team. There is a very rich tradition there as far as winning. We won a lot of games. That camaraderie is what stands out, and just building those bonds with guys that I'm still close with today."

Top memories at University of Pittsburgh: "You start out as a 17-year-old kid and when you leave there, you're a man. There were a lot of changes and transformation [football-wise at Pitt] throughout my five years, with new stadiums and everything else. Just watching the culture change – [Pitt] might have been 2-9 my senior year of high school when I was being recruited, but after I got there, we were going to bowl games. It was a fun atmosphere."

Why Pittsburgh was the right choice for him: "I looked at other schools, a lot of different schools in the MAC and a couple ACC schools. At first, I wanted to go away for school. It ended up being better to be close. I didn't go home a lot, but it was always good to have that as a backup. All my teammates that couldn't go back home, they'd come to my house for New Year's and stuff like that. That helped build cohesiveness between us."

Entering the NFL in 2004 with Dallas after going undrafted: "I knew fullbacks didn't get drafted high, if at all, but you always hope and wish you might get drafted. At the end of day, my goal was to make it and do the best I could, and play as long as I could, as long as I was healthy. That transition was definitely difficult, being undrafted. There aren't many opportunities so you have to make them count."

Top memories of starting on Cowboys practice squad and ultimately playing in 28 games for them between 2004-2006: "Starting my first game [in 2005]. Just playing in the NFL. Scoring my first touchdown in Dallas."

Signing with the Bears in 2007 and playing in 5 games that year: "The energy [from their Super Bowl appearance] definitely carried over into training camp. It was a learning experience. I wasn't the starter. I was a backup, played a lot of special teams, and learned that there is more than one way to skin a cat. Every stop has been a learning experience and I think you should always be able to take something from a coach, because they're a coach for a reason. At this level, if you're a coach then you have knowledge, so [it's up to the player to] take it and add it to your repertoire."

Signing with Miami when Bill Parcells took over the football operation and playing there from 2008-2010: "Parcells, Coach Sparano, I felt like it was a second chance. It was another chance to show them what I was made of. We separated for a year but they gave me another chance, and that was a great experience. I was able to kind of get in a groove, play a couple years. I got a home down there, and a family down there. That's kind of the maturation process as far as becoming a man. That took over."

Adopting a short-yardage niche in Miami, converting 41 of 43 conversions on third-and 1 and/or fourth-and-1 over three seasons: "I think the most important thing when you're there is find something; whatever they ask you to do, do it to the best of your ability and you help yourself that way."

Experiencing a 2011 season without football until the Patriots signed him Dec. 27: "It was tough. Sundays were hard, but I knew that I could play this game, I've proven I could play. I just had to work for my next opportunity. This is a great opportunity."

What he loves about football: "That everybody has to learn together. It always means more when you're fighting for your brothers. I think the hardest part, and the most impressive part about football, is getting 11 individuals to come together as one."

Summing up his football journey: "I'm ready and excited to see what's next, but at the same time, there is no such thing as looking down the road. I'm here right now and I'm going to try to make the most out of every opportunity because it's never been easy. That's why you have to stay focused on what you're doing right now."

RB Stevan Ridley



Football journey: Stevan Ridley

October, 15, 2011

By Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – Rookie running back Stevan Ridley is on the rise.

The third-round draft choice has totaled 161 yards on 25 carries (6.4 avg.) as a second option behind BenJarvus Green-Ellis, and filled in as a kickoff returner last week in place of the injured Julian Edelman.

In all, Ridley has played 45 snaps this season, and for the most part, he's made the most of them. His 33-yard touchdown run against the Raiders was one of the team's best offensive plays of the year.

Speaking with the 22-year-old Ridley, one thing stands out – he is setting the bar extremely high for his career. That shined through when Ridley shared his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com this week:

When he first started playing football: "I started in the third grade, Pee Wee football."

Why he started playing: "I was actually playing soccer and basketball. Football was a new sport and I was finally old enough to get out there and play. Everyone in my family played football. I had a lot of quarterbacks in my family, from my dad to my brother, all the way down to my uncle, and I was the biggest one out of all of them. I liked to run the football and having the ball in my hands, so I naturally started at running back. Then I got too overweight in Pee Wee football and they had to put me at tight end. We ran some end-arounds."

Attending Trinity Episcopal High School in Natchez, Mississippi: "It's a small school, Kindergarten through 12th grade, and winning the state championship after my brother was a top memory. He was won one, and I followed behind him and got the second. That's where my career started. I go back whenever I can."

Enrolling at Louisiana State: "It's about an hour and 15 minutes away from home, and I had a single-parent mother who I knew was willing to come to every game. She found a way to do things, and she worked hard to put two kids through private school [Trinity Episcopal High School]. It was either there or Ole Miss, and LSU was closer to home, so that's where I naturally went. I felt they were a better program and also they were a running team. Coach [Les] Miles came in and talked to my mom and she liked the way he did things. We jumped on the plane and went to LSU."

Top memories at Louisiana State: "It would have to be beating 'Bama last year at home. That was a big game for us. Also, coming in as a freshman and watching Jacob Hester while learning the right way to do things on a national championship team. I saw what it took and I knew how hungry you had to be, and the kind of leadership you had to have to be successful."

Role models in his life and career: "My mom, for sure. She's a very strong Christian lady and I think that has a lot to do with my success. I feel a lot of people in this world are lost when it comes to Christianity and things they believe in. Everyone has their own preferences, but one person who has stood by me my whole career and told me the right way to do things, and it's been by the bible, has been my mom. I've had a lot of success just following what she's told to me. That's by far my role model and lead example."

Favorite teams and players growing up: "I guess I would have to say the Saints, because I was from down South. I didn't really have a favorite player, but I watched Emmitt Smith when I was young and that's why I wore 22 in high school. As I got a little bit older and watched a little more football, I actually Shonn Greene a lot and liked his style of running. I got to meet him last week."

Being drafted by the Patriots in the third round: "Couldn't be any better. It's a dream come true. This is a program that has high expectations and Coach Belichick holds everyone at a high responsibility. We have to

come in and be responsible and do the things they ask us to do. With me, that's all I can do, just come in, fall into my role, and do my job."

Experiencing life in the NFL: "It's a 7-to-5 job. It's not 9-to-5. You have to really love it and can't get caught up in all the distractions. You have to be a man."

What he loves about football: "The physical contact. What other sport can you do that?"

His approach on the field: "I'm a humble person. I know this game can be taken from you at any time. So I try not to get caught up in the highs and lows. You have to stay at a level head because each week it changes. Injuries come. Careers end. Anything can happen. So every day, you have to play like it's your last and run with it. I think a lot of people lose sight of that. It's a job, and they pay us well, but it's a lot of hard work. Every day, you have to go out there and bring it because there's a guy right behind you waiting to take your spot."

Where the football journey heads from here: "Trying to go down as one of the best. There are plenty of leaders around – Tom [Brady], Kevin Faulk, big Vince [Wilfork] across the line. There are people here who are going to go down as some of the best players, so for me, it's just trying to live up to those expectations and go down as one of the best running backs to ever play the game."



Stevan Ridley Becoming an Asset to Patriots' Offense, Working to Be 'As Close to Perfect' As Possible

by Jeff Howe
Sun, Oct 2, 2011

Rookie running back Stevan Ridley has emerged as the Patriots' top backfield threat over the last two weeks, and his combination of burst and power has given the offense a unique weapon.

Ridley had a strong showing in the preseason but didn't get much of an opportunity in the first two weeks of the regular season. It's all changed over the last two weeks, when he has amassed a team-high 139 yards on just 16 carries. The third-round pick had 10 rushes for 97 yards and his first career touchdown during Sunday's 31-19 victory against the Raiders.

Ridley has plenty of power between the tackles, but he displayed a new level of speed to the outside to get through the secondary on his 33-yard scoring scamper. He looks like the most explosive running back at the Patriots' disposal, and he'll provide a good complementary style to BenJarvus Green-Ellis if the two share the brunt of the workload.

"We're just playing ball, and however the coaches use us, that's how we go out there and try to be a dominant effective unit as a whole complete backfield," Ridley said Friday. "We don't want to fall off any between [Danny Woodhead], Shane [Vereen], Benny and me. We want to be solid in there. We have [Kevin Faulk] in there, also, and until he comes back, he's coaching us from the sideline. We just have to be solid as a whole unit, as a running back corps."

Patriots head coach Bill Belichick has used his running backs in waves over the past few years, so a couple of strong performances from Ridley doesn't necessarily mean he'll take over as the team's top option. However, it does give the Patriots another commodity who has proven it on the field, even if it's just been on a limited basis.

Green-Ellis, who will be an unrestricted free agent after this season, has been adored by the coaching staff throughout his tenure in New England. He's dependable and powerful between the tackles, but his breakaway speed isn't on the same level as Ridley and Woodhead.

It's a small sample size, but Ridley has taken his short opportunities and yielded long rewards. He's got 150 yards on 19 carries this season, and his 7.9 yards per carry can't be ignored, either.

Ridley has been consistently humble and unassuming throughout his brief tenure in New England, and he has preached hard work through the backfield competition. He's also a team-first guy who believes that the coaching staff will put the running backs in an opportunity to succeed with their individual skill sets.

For Ridley, he's been enjoying his chance and taking his run through the professional ranks to the best of his ability. He's adapted that rookie mindset that he still doesn't know a whole lot, so he has spent each day trying to make himself a better player.

"You never know everything, so you have to go out there each day and take in the coaching," Ridley said. "It's not really one thing. I've been around the game a long time, but you learn to go out there and critique things and learn the small details on things more than others. We're athletes. We're here for a reason. We work hard as a team. For us, we just have to go out there and try to pay attention to the small things and try to get as close to perfect as we can."

WR Matthew Slater

Los Angeles Times

Patriots' Matthew Slater turns versatility into something special

By Sam Farmer
December 30, 2011

Matthew Slater bulked up in a big way the moment he entered the NFL.

The New England Patriots handed the former UCLA player not just one Yellow Pages-sized binder but two — one for offense, the other for defense.

"The first day in this building they gave me two playbooks," Slater said in a phone interview Thursday. "There was no, 'We'll give you one, then we'll give you the other.' It was, 'Here's both.' I felt like I was in a graduate studies program, making flash cards and everything."

Safe to say that Slater has graduated with honors. Not only has he stepped in at various times at receiver and safety for the playoff-bound Patriots, but Slater also made his first Pro Bowl this week as the AFC's special teams player. It was as a special teams player — on returns and on coverage — that Slater made his mark with the Bruins, earning All-Pac-10 honors as a returner in 2007.

Slater's only NFL catch turned out to be the Patriots' first big gain of this season, a 46-yard reception in the opener against Miami. Because of injuries in the defensive backfield, he's also started three of the last four games at safety.

But by far his biggest contribution has been as a coverage specialist on special teams, for which he was voted a team captain before this season.

"It's kind of the dirty work that goes on," he said. "As a youngster coming up, you don't really think, 'I want to be a great special teams player.' You want to be a great receiver or safety or whatever it may be. But early on in my career, being around [Pro Bowl special-teamer] Larry Izzo and ... just seeing how special teams can change a game, it's a craft that's really valued."

This is, of course, Slater version 2.0. His father is Jackie, a Hall of Fame tackle who made seven Pro Bowls in 20 seasons with the Los Angeles Rams.

Upon learning his Pro Bowl news this week, Matthew's first call was to his parents.

"Obviously, it meant a lot to my family," he said. "There was a lot of yelling on the other end, in particular my mother in the background.... You would have thought they'd named my dad to his eighth Pro Bowl. He was very excited, just overwhelmed with emotion."

That's partly because the Slaters understand how much their son has been through in his career since the Patriots made him a fifth-round pick in 2008. There were plenty of forks in the road.

The first came in the 12th game of his first season when the Patriots were slugging it out with Pittsburgh at Gillette Stadium. The Steelers scored on their first possession of the second half and took a 13-10 lead, then kicked off to Slater. The rookie muffed the catch, the Steelers recovered the loose ball and quickly converted it into a touchdown. That gave the visitors the momentum they needed on their way to a 33-10 victory.

Even though that was the last game the Patriots lost that season — they finished 11-5 with Matt Cassel filling in for the injured Tom Brady — they still missed the playoffs. Slater couldn't help but feel some culpability.

"I could have easily gone in the tank," he said. "It was very difficult for me at that time because I felt like I'd cost my team a chance to win a game, and we were in the mix, in the playoff hunt. I felt like I let a lot of people down."

"But adversity is a part of it. If you play the game long enough, things are going to go well and things are going to go bad. It's how you respond."

More challenges were ahead. In the final exhibition game of his second season, he suffered a dislocated elbow, an injury that has sidelined some players for an entire season. It kept Slater out just two weeks, even though it meant his typical week consisted of six days of misery to go along with four quarters of football.

"Just missing two games was a small miracle, no doubt about it," he said. "Dealing with the pain was the toughest thing that season. I had a huge plastic brace, like a bionic arm, almost the whole season. But it was very difficult even doing everyday tasks — showering, putting on a shirt, things like that were difficult because I couldn't really move my arm. To get out there on Sunday and play football, that was crazy."

Often when coaches are making cuts in training camp, special-teams players are among the first to go. Slater has beaten the odds in that sense, augmenting his value by becoming a capable backup on both offense and defense. Patriots Coach Bill Belichick has long coveted those jack-of-all-trades-type talents, using players such as Troy Brown and Julian Edelman on both sides of the ball.

As a young player, Jackie Slater only dabbled in multiple disciplines. He entered Jackson State as a high school defensive lineman but soon became a fixture on the offensive line. Early in his career with the Rams, he was occasionally used on the defensive line in short-yardage situations. For the most part, though, he anchored the right end of the offensive line.

So he marvels at the career his son has carved as a do-everything, Swiss Army knife of a player.

"To be moving even from right tackle to left tackle is a change, and then to be moving from one side of the ball to the other is a much bigger change," Jackie said. "In my mind, if you asked me to do what Matthew is doing at that age, that would be tough.

"Let me just put it this way: After 20 years of playing experience and another decade or so of exposure to professional football, I never did that.

"He's treading new ground."



Special bond for Slater

Patriot's Pro Bowl selection a connection to Hall of Fame dad

By Ron Borges

Thursday, December 29, 2011

FOXBORO — First you have to get past the insulting idea that this is what they think of you as a football player. If you can manage that it doesn't mean you'll end up where Matthew Slater is, but if you can't do it you never will.

This week, Slater was named to the AFC Pro Bowl squad as its special teams coverage selection. It is an honor but not one many dream about. In fact, it's not an honor even your dad dreams about.

"It's been a humbling experience for me to watch Matthew," Hall of Fame offensive tackle Jackie Slater admitted proudly from his home in Southern California yesterday. "I never had quite the admiration for special teams players I should have. I always felt kind of sorry for them.

"Watching Matthew has given me a good insight into what goes on in the heart and the mind of a man (playing special teams). No job is too small for him. Growing up, most people don't envision themselves getting coldcocked covering kickoffs. You think of yourself catching passes, intercepting balls, scoring touchdowns. It really is amazing what my son has done when you think about it."

What he's done is go from an undersized fifth-round draft choice, who spent most of his collegiate career at UCLA returning kicks, into a jack of all trades and a jackknife on kick and punt returns. Actually, make that a Jackie knife.

"My dad has always been my hero," Slater said. "He's always been the example for me. He taught me how to be a pro. I remember going to Hawaii with him as a child. We talked about how special it was for him to go to the Pro Bowl (seven times). To follow in his footsteps is an honor."

It's an honor hard-earned and well-deserved.

It's also one both Slaters would have been glad to see go elsewhere had circumstances been different because no one, to be honest, dreams of being involved in the dizzying mayhem of special teams play even if it can make you a star rather than somebody who sees them.

"Initially it was definitely tough to accept," Matthew Slater said. "Every guy in this locker room was the man on other teams. Guys like me dream of catching deep balls or intercepting them, but I've grown to love what I do. I've learned the value of it."

"In college it's looked down upon, but as you get older you start to get more appreciation for it. I embraced the role they saw for me. It's a way to keep employed."

It's a difficult way to be sure, something akin to being the test dummy inside one of those safety crash commercials. It is a high-speed collision profession, one that is as much mental as it is physical and it's plenty physical.

"It took me three, four years to really accept that was what my team was looking for me to do," said Slater's coverage teammate, Tracy White, whose been at it for nine years. "You have to accept it and put everything into it. Everybody coming into the NFL doesn't look at special teams as their main role."

"I've made a career out of it. Matthew took the same attitude. Size don't matter. The job is 90 percent mental. He's smart. He knows how to read things. I got a lot of respect for him."

Jackie Slater had to wait eight years to accomplish what his son has done in four. For nearly a decade, the elder Slater was one of the NFL's best but least recognized left tackles, so when he finally made his first appearance in Honolulu it was a moment he'll never forget.

Yet to learn this week that his son will now have the same opportunity struck a chord that only a father can understand. Getting there himself was great but this?

"I really wanted to go to the Pro Bowl bad," he said. "It was so good to finally get there. I remember Matthew chasing pigeons on the beach, standing next to Howie Long's kid (Chris, a Pro Bowl defensive end with the Rams this season). Matthew was a little older, but Howie's little boy stood up in his stroller and I remember thinking, 'My kid should be bigger than his kid.' Look at him today."

"I wanted to get to the Pro Bowl bad, but the way I felt at that time pales in comparison to Matthew going. I'm just elated he'll get to experience that feeling."

This has been a season of experiences for Matthew Slater, who made his first NFL reception (good for 46 yards), started for the first time in his career in three games at safety and forced his first fumble while making 10 tackles. He also leads the team in special teams tackles for the second straight season with 17. He has, in a sense, done it all, just not the way he once thought he would.

That's how life goes. It takes its own meandering path and you can either fight it or accept it. Matthew Slater chose the latter and here he is on his way to taking his father to Hawaii just as his dad once took him.



Matthew Slater's special joy is captain selection

By Mark Daniels

Friday, September 9, 2011

Two weeks ago, Matthew Slater was fighting for a roster spot.

After Wednesday's practice, he was named one of six captains for the Patriots [team stats]. As you could expect, the 25-year-old wide receiver says he felt a buzz and a little tingling after the announcement.

The fourth-year special teams standout couldn't help but smile before yesterday's practice and says he got to this position by embracing his role on special teams.

"I don't like it, I love it. It's something I really get excited about ever since college. I've embraced it and it's a craft," Slater said. "I'm trying to get as good as I can at it. Learn from guys on this team, other teams. I have a blast out there doing that."

For Slater, it's all about getting his hands dirty. He loves the one-on-one and 2-on-1 battles during kickoff and punt returns. He's worked hard with special teams coach Bill O'Brien and says he learned a lot as a rookie from former Patriots special teams captain Larry Izzo [stats]. Izzo made a career out of being a special-teamer, and after an up-and-down career at UCLA, Slater saw what he had to do to last in the NFL.

Midway through college, Slater changed from a wide receiver to safety, but it was on special teams where he thrived. In his senior year, he set a UCLA and Pac-10 record after returning three kickoff returns for touchdowns. He was selected by the Pats in the fifth round of the 2008 NFL draft.

"For me, I realized at a young age with guys like Larry around that you can make a career out of that," said Slater. "I knew if I was going to have a chance to accomplish my dream of playing in the National Football League, then special teams was going to be a vehicle for that. I knew coming in that I was going to have to do a little bit of dirty work."

Slater says it's important for people to recognize their roll on the team. It's also about being a leader. That's something he learned from his father, former NFL offensive tackle and Hall of Famer Jackie Slater, who always encouraged him to be a man of character and integrity.

And after the team's vote for captains, that's how he's viewed.

"I definitely thought I was fighting for a roster spot and I was," Slater said. "And it is kind of a weird shift to go from that to now being a captain, but I'm just grateful for the opportunity, really appreciative that my teammates think that of me and I'm going to try to do the best job I can to lead those guys."

OL Nate Solder



Football journey: Nate Solder

By Mike Reiss
October, 1, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – At 6-foot-8, 319 pounds, it's hard to miss offensive tackle Nate Solder on the football field. The Patriots' first-round draft choice stands out for his size, and in a credit to his athleticism and ability to adapt quickly, he's been noticeable for his solid play as well.

Solder has been thrust into the mix quicker than anticipated, starting at right tackle in place of Sebastian Vollmer in two of the first three weeks, while also serving as a third blocking-type tight end. Solder is expected to once again be in the starting lineup Sunday in Oakland, with Vollmer already been ruled out.

In sharing his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com this week, Solder, a native of Buena Vista, Colorado, came across as humble, well-versed, and appreciative of his current opportunity:

When he first started playing football: "Seventh grade. Middle school. I played defensive line, running back, tight end and kicker [laughing]. All my friends were playing and it looked like fun."

Life as a kicker: "I was OK. I just did the kickoffs."

Top memories of Buena Vista High School: "Some aren't so good. We lost in the state championship my senior year, which was disappointing. We had some big games and we had a really close team. It was a lot of fun, and a lot of us still keep in touch. That's really the top memory."

Positions in high school: "Middle linebacker and tight end."

How big he was in high school: "I thought I was huge -- 6-7, 230 [pounds]."

Where the height came from: "My mom. She's 6-2."

Why Colorado was the best choice to attend college: "It was there or Dartmouth. When I found out Colorado offered me, I took a trip there and fell in love with it. I just knew it was the place I wanted to be. They had a good biology department, which I was interested in. Getting a good degree was important to me. I didn't know things would work out in football."

Being interested in Dartmouth: "The head coach had been at Colorado as an assistant. He recruited the Colorado area and he had seen me, and wanted me to come out there because I had the grades. Ultimately, I wouldn't have been able to afford it because they don't give athletic scholarships."

Transitioning from tight end to offensive tackle at Colorado: "When I was a tight end, I wish I would have had more passes thrown to me, but it wasn't a big deal to me because I wanted to get better at blocking. I saw my future being much brighter at tackle than tight end. I thought I could help the team a lot more at tackle. When the coach gave me the opportunity, it only took me a day or so to think about it. There was a transition period and a lot of learning. I'm still learning, as we all are."

Why the coaches made the switch: "They gave me an option, but they needed tackles. They didn't have enough. I just wanted to have a larger on the team, too."

Mentors and role models in his career: "I think first of all, it's my mom and dad. I was thinking about this the other day because my mom hasn't missed a game since middle school. I remember younger than that, she was at a lot of my games too."

Favorite teams and players growing up: "Thinking back to when I was a tight end, I loved Shannon Sharpe. I thought he was awesome. I was a Broncos fan. Herman Meier*, the downhill skier, he was one of

my heroes. I ski raced when I was younger. That was kind of my sport up until middle school. I was a big ski racer.”

What he loves about football: “The competition. You’re out there in front of thousands at the highest level. That’s exciting.”

Reaction of being a first-round pick of the Patriots: “It was unreal. I never saw myself as that. I wasn’t highly recruited out of high school. I didn’t think a whole lot of myself throughout my college career. It wasn’t unexpected, because enough people told me it could happen, so I believed it, but it didn’t seem to match my personality. I still feel like the undrafted guy that’s trying to make the team.”

Any big plans with the money he earned as a first-round pick: “I have plans of some charitable things that I’d really like to do, and I’ve wanted to do them for a long time. We’re still in the process of that, but I’m looking forward to helping out my high school and helping out my college, and that type of thing.”

What he’s learned the most about the Patriots: “I can’t speak for anyone in the program, but I know we put a lot of work into studying the film, knowing what’s going to happen, and being as mentally prepared as we possibly can be. As a rookie, that really helps you. You have coaches like Coach Belichick and Coach Scarnecchia who really put a lot of emphasis on learning and understanding and developing guys like me.”

Where does the football journey head from here: “That’s kind of in God’s hands. I’m just going to come in here, do what the coaches tell me, and work as hard as I can. There are a lot of ‘ifs’ in life, but I just do the things I can control and hopefully it’s to the [top].”

Anything to add that wasn’t asked: “I’ve always tried to be well-rounded. I was thinking about this the other day, a lot of my time in college was spent on football, but also on various other things. So I have other interests. But right now, I’ve made a conscious decision that this is my sole purpose, my sole drive. This is really what I’m interested in doing, is being a good football player.”

The Boston Globe

Challenge he chose to tackle

By Shalise Manza Young
October 20, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - It started, as many good ideas do, with a simple question - and a bit of resistance.

University of Colorado offensive line coach Jeff Grimes had his eye on one of the Buffaloes’ tight ends, a tall, thin sophomore named Nate Solder, who had played in all 13 games the previous fall, primarily as a blocker.

So Grimes asked head coach Dan Hawkins if he could approach Solder about playing on the offensive line. Hawkins signed off, and Grimes sought out Solder.

“I told him, ‘You can play a little at tight end or you can come work with me, be a left tackle, and in three years you can be a first-round pick,’” Grimes recalled yesterday. “I pulled out a number of articles, guys who had started as defensive ends and transitioned to offensive linemen, tight ends who did it.

“I talked to Nate. He was very cerebral, thoughtful. He said, ‘Let me think about it,’ and walked out of my office.”

That day, Solder weighed 265 pounds, and, according to Grimes, had just 2 percent body fat. Always health conscious, Solder was worried he’d have to get “big and sloppy,” as Grimes put it. But the coach assured him he didn’t need to weigh 350 pounds, only around 300, enough to deal with the defensive linemen with whom he’d be tangling.

“He came back three days later and said, ‘OK, I’m ready to do it,’” said Grimes.

In a matter of months, Solder put on 35 pounds of lean body mass while increasing his body fat percentage only slightly. When Grimes asked how his new pupil was gaining weight so effectively, Solder revealed that

he'd bought six nutrition books - actual textbooks, not magazines or weightlifting guides - and read them cover to cover.

"And the rest is history," said Grimes, who left Colorado after the 2008 season for Auburn, where he remains the offensive line coach. "That's how it started. The only part I had in it was I saw a guy that had the potential to be a great tackle."

Solder isn't doubting Grimes now.

Just as Grimes said, three years later Solder was a first-round draft pick, part of a strong tackle class that included Boston College's Anthony Castonzo (Colts) and Southern Cal's Tyrone Smith (Cowboys).

New England made Solder the 17th overall selection in the 2011 draft, the first time since 2005, when it took Logan Mankins 32d, that it chose an offensive lineman in the first round.

Despite not having the benefit of spring camps to learn the ins and outs of the playbook and work with offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia, Solder was pressed into duty in the first game of his first regular season when starting right tackle Sebastian Vollmer couldn't play because of a back injury.

Not only did Solder start, he was challenged with keeping Miami's Cameron Wake, one of the NFL's top pass rushers last season, away from Tom Brady. And he was at right tackle, not left, where he had little experience.

Solder not only kept Wake at bay, he drew raves for his play. He has started four of the Patriots' five games since, as Vollmer continues to work his way back (the veteran suffered a setback against San Diego in Week 2).

The man who lines up on Solder's left shoulder, Brian Waters, has been in the NFL for 12 seasons. He joined the Patriots just before the opener, and doesn't mince words when it comes to Solder.

"I've been around a couple of young tackles. Nate has done exceedingly well," said Waters. "He doesn't get overwhelmed. There's not a time in the game when you look at his eyes and he kind of has those 'doe eyes' where everything is going too fast. You don't see that with him. He's really confident and skilled but he has a really calm nature about things.

"Even when things may not go as well from play to play, he does a really good job of kind of moving past and moving to the next play, which is something a lot of young players don't do very well."

The qualities Grimes saw in Solder are the same ones that serve him well now.

"I saw a kid that had decent, average athleticism as a tight end, but you take that same level of athleticism and put it on O-line and it's off the charts," said Grimes. His speed, foot quickness, there are very, very few guys out there that have that kind of athleticism. Looking at his frame, I knew he could carry weight.

"As much as any player I've been around, he has a very blue-collar mentality. Doesn't say much, just, 'Tell me what the job is.' He carries a quiet, workmanlike attitude every day. I saw him, even at only 265 pounds, he had a physical mind-set. He had the mentality. I was blown away by his work ethic; probably one of the best I've been around, at any position."

Displaying the humility of which Grimes speaks - and the tight lips required of any Patriots rookie - Solder says he only wants to improve, and that he has a long way to go.

"It's just about improving every week, and so there has been some improvement, which I'm happy about, but I have so much more I need to improve on," Solder said. "So I don't want to look back and make any kind of statements of how it's been. I need to still improve to get where I want to be."

Waters isn't afraid, even at this point, to call Solder "exceptional," though he also says the rookie has work to do. Grimes expects that he'll be an All-Pro someday.

As for Solder, who leans on Vollmer for advice and says the Patriots need Vollmer back even though it would relegate him to backup, he's just taking it all in - and doing what he can to protect Brady.

“It seems like every week I’ve played a really good pass rusher and it seems like every week they have something they can get me with,” he said. “It hasn’t been pretty, but I’ve been learning.”

LB Brandon Spikes

The Boston Globe

Spikes learns game on the fly

By Monique Walker

October 24, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - Patriots linebacker Brandon Spikes isn't hard to spot on the field. After a play, he is the guy hopping around while his dreads flop against his helmet.

After a tackle or big play, Spikes celebrates, and it doesn't matter if the play results in a loss of yards or a small gain. Spikes, who is in his second season in the NFL, can't help himself.

"I want to be exemplary, play hard and relentless," he said. "I want to be energetic and be electric. I think it's fun to watch. I guess people are noticing it, but I always played like this [at the University of Florida], and it's just contagious.

"You turn on the film and see guys flying around having fun, playing the game we've loved ever since we were young. I know they say it's a job now, but for me it's the same old job. I'm living the dream and having the time of my life."

The season may seem like it's just beginning for Spikes, and in some ways it is. He suffered an ankle injury during training camp and didn't play in any of the exhibition games. His absence during the preseason sparked questions about his standing with the team, but the Patriots didn't hesitate to publicly support him.

Progress has been gradual for Spikes, but he reached another level last week when he was part of a big play at the end of the Cowboys game that helped give New England's offense the opportunity to orchestrate a 20-16 victory.

With the score tied at 13 and a little less than six minutes to go, Patriots tackle Vince Wilfork sniffed out a play and alerted the rest of the defense. Spikes picked up Wilfork's alert and pounced on Dallas running back Tashard Choice seconds after a shovel pass for a 3-yard loss. The Cowboys settled for a 26-yard field goal.

The defense came up with another stop and gave the offense the ball back with 2:31 to go. Quarterback Tom Brady went 8 for 9 on a final 80-yard touchdown drive that gave New England the victory. The Patriots had their bye yesterday and are at Pittsburgh Oct. 30.

Spikes played a career-high 67 snaps in the win against Dallas, which boosted the Patriots' record to 5-1. He had eight tackles, one quarterback hit, and plenty of chances to display his excitement after those plays.

Fellow linebacker Rob Ninkovich said he and his teammates appreciate Spikes's efforts.

"Brandon's got a lot of energy," Ninkovich said. "He's fun to play with. It's entertaining, really, because he's out there having fun and that's what it's all about. I enjoy playing next to him because he's going to be flying around and giving me his all. And everybody else who's out there, we want to do the same for him - we're going to go out there and give it our all."

While Spikes was hurt during camp, he was trying to learn as much as he could as the Patriots shifted from a 3-4 defense to a 4-3. The injury was a disappointment for Spikes, who was drafted in the second round in 2010.

Getting back on the field was a priority for Spikes, who was suspended the final four games of his rookie season when he tested positive for a substance found in a prescribed medication that violated NFL policy.

Spikes was inactive for the season opener against Miami. He made his season debut in Week 2 as a sub. But he has started the last four games.

"I think Brandon has been improving a little bit every week - increased his practice reps and his playing time," coach Bill Belichick said. "He really missed the entire preseason and he missed the Miami game, so

his preseason is kind of coming to a close right now, I'd say, in terms of timing and practices. He's getting better and he made some plays for us on the next-to-last possession defensively [against the Cowboys]. When they were trying to run the clock, he blitzed up the middle a couple times and was disruptive, and we were able to get the runner for little or no gain. He showed up on a few plays."

Spikes said he notices the difference in his comfort level now.

"I missed a significant amount of time," he said. "With football, you got to get a feel for it. You keep coming with repetition day by day. I was definitely behind, but now I think I'm kind of getting upbeat and I'm in top shape. I feel like I'm taking it all in with the defense. I just want to keep getting better every day."

Being a disruption on the field is Spikes's goal. In watching old film, Spikes noticed the effort of Hall of Fame linebackers Lawrence Taylor and Dick Butkus.

"Just watching some of the older, great linebackers play, I just try to mold my game like them," Spikes said. "You could tell when they hit a guy, that guy got up and he knew. He didn't have to look around and see who it was. He knew who it was."

Spikes said he is doing all he can to contribute.

"I always feel like no one ever stays the same - you're either getting better or getting worse," he said. "Whenever my number is called I'm going to come in and try to be productive. My teammates see it and people see it. It's just being accountable."

OL Donald Thomas



Football journey: Donald Thomas

By Mike Reiss
January, 7, 2012

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – Growing up in New Haven, Conn., Donald Thomas never played Pop Warner football. His high school didn't have a football team.

This naturally makes his "football journey," and his four-year NFL career, unique.

The 26-year-old Thomas, who is in his first year with the Patriots, has been utilized this season as a short-yardage power fullback. He was also an emergency starter at left guard in the team's Dec. 24 win over the Dolphins.

Coach Bill Belichick recently said he was happy that the 6-foot-4, 305-pound Thomas was part of the team.

"Donald has worked hard, he's a smart guy and he's been very dependable for us on a daily basis," he said.

With Logan Mankins' injured knee potentially making him unavailable for the team's playoff opener, Thomas' presence becomes that much more important.

The former University of Connecticut standout, who is married (Quita) with a son (Deegan) and dog (Dozier), shared his football journey with ESPNBoston.com:

Why he started playing football: "I was at UConn as a regular student my freshman year and I was bored. One Saturday morning I was playing basketball with members of the football team, it was after the season was over, and some of them asked me, 'Why not play football?' I had never really thought about it. I said, 'Let me give football a try.'"

Making the team as a walk-on: "I remember walking into the football office and saying, 'I'm a student here and I'd like to play football.' This was around the time of spring football and I remember seeing Coach Edsall coming out of the football building and me running over to him asking him about a tryout. He said they'd call over the next couple days, and I ran 40s and agility drills. I got on the team and that summer, I stayed up to work with the team."

Describing his football progression at UConn: "My sophomore year [as a student] was my redshirt freshman year. I was on the scout team. The next year I was on special teams, the fullback setting the wedge. Then halfway through my senior year – when I started a few games at guard -- I was asked to come back for a fifth year and was given a scholarship. I said 'Why not?' I came back and started [13] games."

Hardest thing about playing football: "Just learning the game. I didn't know anything. I didn't know terminology and didn't understand techniques. I had no football sense. I was just reacting to what I saw, but I couldn't read if it was a blitz or get into a rhythm with snap counts."

Top memory at UConn: "Just the first time playing in a game."

Favorite teams growing up: "I didn't really have one. I liked the Cowboys back in the 90s, with Emmitt Smith and all those guys, the all-stars so to speak."

Entering the NFL as a sixth-round draft choice of the Dolphins in 2008: "It was crazy. Surreal. I didn't think something like that would happen. But then as the draft got closer, and you get more and more phone calls, it becomes more of a reality. Some teams were saying third round, others said they'd pick me in the fourth if I was there. I was just happy to get picked up in the sixth. When it happened, with the excitement, I didn't even realize what city or state I was going to. I didn't care who is was or where it was."

Elevating to the starting lineup as a rookie along with No. 1 overall pick Jake Long: “Some viewed me as the surprise of the draft class and there were times when I’d be getting interviewed more than Jake. There were highs and lows. You go from starting [13 games in 2008 and 2009] to being released a couple of years later. You see how it can be taken away.”

Injuries affecting his time with the Dolphins, who cut him at the start of the 2010 season: “Growing up playing basketball and baseball, those are sports with relatively no impact. Maybe you’d have a sore knee, or get hit in the hand by a pitch, or get a raspberry from sliding into a base. In football, it was something I hadn’t dealt with. After making my first start, I needed [foot] surgery and was out for the season. Bouncing back from that was tough, and then I tore my pec. It was rough and stunted my development at times.”

Signing with the Lions in late November of 2010: “I went on a tour of over 10 teams, working out for them. One week I worked out for three teams, almost doing two workouts in one day. I ended up in Detroit with about seven games left in the year. That was the week before they played New England on Thanksgiving. It was a trying time. I’m glad I had the chance to get on a team and didn’t miss the whole year of football.”

What it’s like to be trying out for so many teams: “I never really unpacked a bag from the day I got released. You’d get the call Sunday, fly out Monday, then work out Tuesday. You wouldn’t know if they’d sign you, and when it didn’t happen, you’d go home and keep working out, waiting for another phone call.”

Landing with the Patriots on Sept. 14 after the Patriots lost center Dan Koppen in the season opener: “I thought I had a pretty decent camp in Detroit, but it just didn’t work out. I ended up getting released after the last game. I was signed by the Patriots right after their Monday Night Football game and it’s been a relatively quick transition. From Detroit to New England, the way it’s run is different. This is a very good experience for me. Overall, it’s been great. The guys in the locker room are warming to new guys; there are no egos or anything like that. [Coaches] demand a lot out of you and you have to give it to them on a weekly basis.”

What he’s learned from playing football: “To control what you can control, because you never know what can happen. It’s not easy to reach something like this. Perseverance. Going through this experience has made me a better person.”

Summing up his football journey: “I’m definitely blessed and grateful for the opportunities I’ve had. You never know when you’re going to get thrown a curveball and you have to adjust to it. So far, it’s been a great four years. I hope to get four more.”

The Boston Globe

Thomas has become next in line for Patriots

By Julian Benbow
December 31, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - It took him a couple of series to settle down.

Donald Thomas hadn’t played a regular-season game in two years. Suddenly, last week against the Dolphins, he was starting at left guard for the Patriots against the team that drafted him.

“It was crazy,” Thomas said. “You’re thinking, ‘What if I get to start against my old team,’ and then it happens.”

The faces were familiar.

Randy Starks, Kendall Langford, Paul Soliai.

“Everyone was exactly the same from when I left,” Thomas said.

There was some chatter during a TV timeout after the second series, but Thomas couldn’t bring himself to take the trash talk seriously.

"It was weird because I was so used to going against those guys in training camp every day," he said. "I was just like, 'Man, shut up. You're just running your mouth. I know you. We've hung out together. You've come to my house to play video games. I've been to your house. Shut up.' It was cool, though."

There was a time when Thomas was the best-kept secret on the Dolphins' offensive line. One injury changed that.

It was the first game of the 2008 season, the first game of Thomas's career. He was a sixth-round pick with upside who had come in and started every preseason game.

He had a connection with coach Tony Sparano, as both had roots in Connecticut. Sparano liked the way Thomas worked. So when the Dolphins opened the season against the Jets, Sparano said the right guard spot was Thomas's to lose.

Of all the plays, it happened on a field goal attempt. Jets nose tackle Kris Jenkins started the chain. He rammed into the long snapper, who in turn crashed into Thomas's leg.

Thomas watched the play on film, but just once.

"I don't know exactly how it happened, but you see my knee came up, then you see my foot pop up, and then you see me try to put it back down and it pops back up again," he said. "I still see it clear as day right now."

He continued playing with his left foot pointed outward, pushing off of it sideways. He was hobbling more than he was running.

"It was completely torn," Thomas said. "I could feel the bone clicking in there because it was nothing holding the toe. They had to put a steel plate in the bottom of my shoe because my shoe wasn't even bending."

He had never been seriously injured. Maybe a fractured knuckle from his high school baseball days or a sprained ankle. He was told the next morning he needed surgery for a Lisfranc injury.

Thomas played two games of high school football. His school, Career Magnet, didn't have a team. He played two games for West Haven High, before it was determined he couldn't play for a school other than his own. He became a power-hitting first baseman instead, but when he didn't get the scholarship offers he wanted from colleges, he decided to go to the University of Connecticut solely for academics.

One problem.

"You go from being an athlete your whole life to just being in class," he said. "I was bored out of my mind."

He went to a couple of UConn football games his freshman year. He saw players around campus. One day, a few of them were in the gym playing basketball. They looked at him - 6 feet 4 inches, 310 pounds - and the questions began.

"You go to school here?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Why don't you play football?"

He told them the story.

They said, "You're bigger than a lot of the guys on the team already. You should try out."

He thought about it, and decided to walk on to the team. From there, it was a whirlwind. He went from the scout team to setting the wedge on kickoff returns to starting at guard to going to the Hula Bowl, then the East-West Shrine Game, then the NFL combine. Then the draft.

"It happened so fast," he said. "The season flew by. I was having a good year and it was, like, easy. I was actually surprised."

The injury in Miami was the first time he had seen a red light. He spent six weeks in a cast, six in a boot.

"A lot of people don't come back from that injury," he said.

He had every intention of coming back better, stronger. The Dolphins won the division title that year. Thomas wasn't on the field but he was around so much - never missing a meeting - that the year again flew by. He was cleared to lift weights in the spring, then during the second week of workouts he tore his pectoral muscle.

"Freak accident," he said. "I'm like, 'Am I cursed.' "

Thomas was worried. He would miss organized team activities, he thought, and people would start wondering about him. He recovered quickly, was cleared the week before training camp in 2009, and played in all 16 games, but because of an ankle injury only started 12. But things weren't the same.

The next year, the Dolphins drafted a guard in the third round.

"From here, it was like I was at the bottom looking up," Thomas said.

He was buried on the depth chart, and eventually released.

"It hurt," he said. "It hurt my pride more than anything."

Things began to turn for him in training camp this year with the Lions. They didn't keep him, but when the preseason ended teams were interested, including the Steelers, Buccaneers, and Patriots, who had Thomas on their radar during the 2008 draft.

"Definitely, we had interest in him," said coach Bill Belichick. "But there was a degree of a lack of total history and production from him that was somewhat circumstantial, and how do you project it? Is that the kind of player that we like to work with? Yes. After watching in Miami and going down there and really winning the starting position and then being available and all that, we had a chance for him this year. I think it's worked out well."

With left guard Logan Mankins battling a strained medial collateral ligament, Thomas's role may increase.

"I'm excited for Donald Thomas," said right guard Brian Waters. "I'm excited for those young guys who really stepped up, because that shows that these guys are ready and willing, and they deserve to be in this league, and deserve to be in this locker room."

Thomas, now 26, feels like a veteran, and regardless of the situation he faces - goal line, short yardage, two-minute drill, blitzes - he's prepared. "You control what you can control," he said. "You can't control everything. You take it how it comes."

The Patriot Ledger

Doubting Thomas? Look where Patriots offensive lineman is now

Pats lineman never played football before college, but now a pro

By Glen Farley

December 23, 2011

FOXBORO — He walked into the student gymnasium on the campus of the University of Connecticut one Saturday with the simple intention of playing a little pickup basketball.

He didn't know it at the time, but when Donald Thomas walked back out of that gym that day, he was an NFL prospect in the making.

"I'd been playing sports my whole life — baseball and basketball," said the Patriots' backup offensive lineman, who earned eight varsity letters in the two sports at Career Magnet High School in New Haven,

Conn. "I got to (UConn) and was just a student with no sports affiliation. I was kind of torn on what I wanted to do.

"After the football season, I'd see (members of the Huskies' football team) around campus. One day, we were playing basketball together, maybe half the team – Saturday afternoons are big on the UConn campus; everyone comes out and plays basketball in the student gym – and they said, 'Do you go to school here?' I said, 'Yeah.' They said, 'You should play football, man.' I'd look at them and think, 'I'm just as big as some of them.' I went home for Christmas break, thought about it and said, 'You know what? I'm going to play football.'

"I went back to school, worked out the whole semester and got a chance to talk to the head coach (Randy Edsall) when they were doing spring ball," said Thomas. "He brought me in, let me meet with the coaches, and they gave me like a workout/tryout so to speak. They said, 'We'll add you to the roster and you can be a walk-on.' So I started working out with the team during the summer."

The experience was new to Thomas, whose high school lacked a football program. What's more, Thomas hadn't even played Pop Warner football.

"Pop Warner and stuff like that, my mom (Veronica) would be overprotective and say, 'I don't have time to bring you to practice' or 'I don't want you playing.' So I'd miss sign-ups," said Thomas. "I was so into baseball, I didn't really miss it. I was on AAU travel team baseball. I loved baseball so much, it wasn't like I was crying when she told me I couldn't play football. I'd play fall ball (in baseball) and then there was basketball."

The transformation, then, was rather amazing.

A walk-on, Thomas originally served as a defensive tackle and end for UConn's scout team in 2003. After redshirting a year, he returned to hold a role on special teams and developed into an All- Big East guard in 2007 who was chosen by the Miami Dolphins in the sixth round of the 2008 NFL Draft.

"My whole goal, when I looked back at it, was to be able to tell my son, 'I played Div. 1 football. I played at one of the higher levels of collegiate football and earned a scholarship. Anything you strive to do, if you put your mind to anything you can do it,'" said Thomas, whose wife recently gave birth to the couple's first child (Deegan Charles Thomas).

"I was thinking of playing, graduating and maybe going to law school. To now be able to tell him I didn't play any football growing up, played football in college and made it to the NFL, that's a story a lot of people can't say.

"Things just took off. It's crazy. This is only my fifth year (of) really playing guard, while some guys have been playing O-line for 15, almost 20 years. I'm not trying to brag or anything, but that's just rare."

The Dolphins' starting right guard in his first NFL game, Thomas injured his foot in the 2008 opener and spent the rest of the year on the injured reserve list. He appeared in all 16 of the team's games in 2009, starting 12, but was released on Sept. 4, 2010, signed by Detroit and was inactive for the final six games last year.

Released by the Lions on Sept. 3 of this year, the 6-foot-4, 310-pound Thomas was signed by the Patriots 11 days later and has appeared in eight of their 14 games.

While, all things considered, it's not a major transition for a guy who walked on to a Div. 1 college program with no high school or even youth football experience to speak of, Thomas, who is listed as an offensive lineman on the Patriots' roster and plays special teams, has at times also assumed the role of short-yardage fullback.

"The more you can do, it helps you out," said Thomas. "They give you an assignment, you just try to execute it the best that you can and when your number's called, just be ready to go."

WR Tiquan Underwood



Football journey: Tiquan Underwood

By Mike Reiss
December, 3, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – There are things that happen behind the scenes that can make a big difference to a player. For receiver Tiquan Underwood, last week’s meeting with quarterback Tom Brady was one of them.

It was early Monday morning, around 2 a.m., and the team had just returned from Philadelphia. In a 38-20 win over the Eagles, Underwood had dropped a would-be touchdown catch and it would have been easy for him to get down on himself.

That’s when Brady stepped in as the two waited for their windshields to defrost in the players’ parking lot at Gillette Stadium.

“You go 10 weeks not being on an NFL roster and then you get that one moment you’ve been waiting for the whole time, and for it to be an unsuccessful play ...” Underwood said.

“Afterwards, Tom had some great words for me. He said ‘football is a mental game and guys are going to mess up and have mistakes. It’s part of the game and we’re not trying to mess up.’ He said as long as you don’t make it a habit and you continue to get better, you’re going to be all right. That was very encouraging, especially coming from a guy like that.”

That helped Underwood bury the dropped pass, and now he’s hoping to build on his surprising amount of playing time. Coaches seem high on him.

The 25-year-old Underwood shared his “football journey” with ESPNBoston.com this week:

When he first started playing football: “I was 7 years old, playing Pop Warner in Franklin Township in New Jersey. We were the Franklin Warriors. That was my first taste of football.”

What made him go out for football: “Living with my aunt and uncle, I was always watching it on TV. My uncle, Daikiel Shorts, played at Franklin High School and at Delaware State, and he was pretty good. So they signed me up.”

What positions he played: “I started as a tight end, and then moved to running back and quarterback. And then just quarterback from then on. In high school, I played quarterback and receiver and just loved playing offense. I played a little safety in high school, but I just love offense.”

Top memories at Notre Dame High School in Lawrenceville, N.J.: “I would just say the bond we had on our teams. We never lost a conference game. We lost in the playoffs every year, but it was a tight bond and that’s where I really learned it’s all about a team and not individuals. One of my close friends on the team was Rich Gunnell, a receiver who went to Boston College.”

Why he decided to attend Rutgers: “They were 4-7 my senior year of high school and people were like ‘Why are you going there?’ I wanted to stay home so my family could come to my games, and if I needed anything, it was a close drive home. And what better than to turn a program around than in your home state.”

Top memories at Rutgers, where he started 32 of 49 games and totaled 132 receptions, 1,931 yards and 16 touchdowns: “Louisville was No. 2 in the country and we beat them on national television, a night game. That pretty much put us on the map, from then on. To this day, when I tell people I went to Rutgers, they’ll ask, ‘Were you there with Ray Rice when they beat Louisville?’ So there were a lot of people watching that game that night.”

Expectations entering the 2009 NFL draft: “The draft process, you really never know. I got drafted in the seventh round (253rd overall by the Jaguars), but I didn’t have any expectations. When you don’t have expectations, you’re not upset about the outcome. To play in the National Football League, and put on that helmet and jersey, was a dream come true.”

Summing up his two-plus years with the Jaguars (13 games played, 8 receptions): “I was just a young receiver trying to find his way and step through the door. That’s what it’s about in this league. I’ve learned a lot on the business side and on the field as well. My first year, I was down there with Torry Holt and he taught me a lot. Coming here, some players took me under their wing – Deion Branch, Kevin Faulk, Wes Welker, a bunch of the receivers. I’m just trying to learn. The more you know, the better you’ll be. Also, the more you can do, the better off you’ll be. That’s what I’m trying to do, be consistent every day, and show that I’m a smart player.”

Released by the Jaguars and landing briefly with the Patriots: “Whenever you’re let go, no matter what profession you’re in, it’s always a downer. At the end of the day, when one door closes, another one opens. I was fortunate enough to get asked to come here in August, That was my first time here and I tried to make the best of the opportunity, playing against the Giants. It went OK and I was happy with that outcome and the Patriots giving me an opportunity after being let go.”

Getting let go by the Patriots and being without a team for the first 10 weeks of the season: “That was an experience. I was in Arizona at API [Athletes Performance Institute] just grinding away, working out, catching balls. I was out there with my receivers coach, Roy Green, who played for the Cardinals (1979-90) and Eagles (1991-92) and he would tell me every day it was going to pay off for me. He believes in me more than I believe in myself. I still text to him to this day; he was one of the first people I spoke to after the Eagle game last week. I have a friend here in Devin McCourty, and his brother in Tennessee. There are a bunch of guys from Rutgers playing on Sundays and I’d watch the games from a sports bar, keeping up on injuries. It was tough. Everybody’s story and journey is different. You have to go through something to make you appreciate it, and I’ll tell you what, I really appreciate playing football. I will never take it for granted again.”

Working out for teams while seeking a job: “I had a few workouts. It’s a crazy business and you’d see pretty much the same receivers on each workout. With teams having injuries, they need guys. You pack a suitcase, go there, and you don’t know if you’ll be staying or returning to where you came from. I wouldn’t say it’s a fun experience, but it was a good experience for me to have just to know that once you’re back on a team like I am now, don’t take this situation for granted. It gives you a great appreciation for NFL football and being on a roster.”

Favorite team growing up: “To be honest, I never really had one. At one point, it was the Tampa Bay Bucs because my best friend liked them. But I didn’t really have a favorite growing up.”

Favorite players growing up: “I’d have to say ‘Prime Time.’ [Deion Sanders], playing with the Niners and Jerry Rice, Ricky Watters. Then he went to the Cowboys with Troy Aikman, Michael Irvin and Emmitt Smith. My favorite players now, I’d have to go with Larry Fitzgerald. I looked up to him when he was at Pittsburgh breaking all those records. Then he did it in the NFL. Coach Roy Green sent me to Minnesota to work out with Larry this past summer, and to see his work ethic and the way he grinds every day, it was amazing to see and be a part of it. Now I know I have to elevate my work ethic to be a good receiver.”

Explaining his unique high-top fade haircut: “I started growing my hair out at the end of the season last year. I’m going to have a lower cut as I get older, so I figured I could grow it out now while I’m young and can do something different. I like it because it’s different and gives you personality. I came here and a lot of guys called me Kid ‘n Play or Fresh Prince. It’s pretty cool.”

Summing up his football journey: “I would just say, I’m not the biggest guy as far as weight. People would tell me I should play another sport, that I wasn’t big enough and stuff like that. I was always the underdog, no matter what level it was. I just try to work on an aspect of my game every day. I’m just hungry and I like that role. Nothing was ever handed to me, and I know what it takes to work for it, and that’s what I plan on doing.”

OL Sebastian Vollmer



Vollmer provides steady influence at right tackle for Patriots

By Christopher Price
August 16, 2011

FOXBORO — No team takes big bodies and turns them into NFL-ready offensive linemen like the Patriots.

Over the years, New England has taken former college wrestlers, linemen from out of the way colleges like Southeast Missouri State and players who didn't take up the game until high school and molded them into one of the most consistent offensive lines in the league.

The current group was honored on Tuesday with the presentation of the Madden Protectors Award, an award that "recognizes the accomplishments of the highest performing offensive line unit and their best-in-class ability to provide consistent, powerful protection," according to the press release. The Patriots were selected based on a combination of analysis by John Madden and fan voting.

A big part of that success is tackle Sebastian Vollmer. Entering his third season, the native German is one of those off-the-radar guys who've made it big under the tutelage of offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia. Vollmer didn't start playing football until he was 14, played tight end for a good portion of his college career and he wasn't invited to the combine.

But after the Patriots took him in the second round of the 2009 draft, he's become one of the best young tackles in the league. After a rookie year where he spent part of the season filling in at left tackle for an injured Matt Light, last season he started all 16 games at right tackle and was named to the Associated Press All-Pro Second Team as well as USA Today's All-Joe team.

This season, while the focus has been on left guard Logan Mankins and his contract situation and the emergence of rookie left tackle Nate Solder and how that all affects Light, the 6-foot-8, 315-pound Vollmer has spent the better part of training camp crushing opposing defensive linemen at the right tackle spot.

But when you ask him for a self-assessment, he defers to coach Bill Belichick.

"Obviously, it's a long road," Vollmer said. "We just started, and I'm trying to get better. Any evaluation, Bill has to make that."

Vollmer has had an interesting couple of seasons. After a stellar rookie year, he appeared to take a step back in 2010 in the eyes of some, despite the fact that he came away with a second-team All-Pro mention.

Part of that could be because he spent all of last season at right tackle as opposed to spending the bulk of his rookie season on the left side, according to Sam Monson, senior analyst for Pro Football Focus.

"Vollmer's interesting," Monson wrote in an e-mail to WEEI.com. "He was extremely good as a rookie, and not so much as a sophomore. It's tempting to jump to the conclusion of saying he's much better suited to the left side than the right (which as it happens I think he is), but he did well as a rookie on the right side too, with two of his five games there perfect pass protection games. In total, as a rookie, he gave up just a single sack and single additional hit as well as 11 more total pressures.

"Last year, he struggled much more, though he did end the season with five out of six good games — three of the six perfect pass protection games. He still allowed just a single sack, but allowed five more hits, and 31 more pressures. His toughest game last year by a distance was against Pittsburgh where Lamarr Woodley beat him for a hit and four more pressures over the game, but he was perfect in pass protection in the playoff game against the Jets, surrendering zero pressure."

With the return of Mankins at left guard and Light at left tackle, the Patriots were able to bring back four of the five offensive linemen they have rolled out there for most of the last six seasons. (Dan Connolly, who saw some action at left guard last season with Mankins out and later when right guard Stephen Neal got hurt, will presumably take over at the right guard spot going forward.)

As for Vollmer's thoughts on Solder?

"He's doing a great job — learning, working hard and doing what he's supposed to do," shrugs Vollmer.

While it figures to be a matter of time before Solder takes over at left tackle for Light permanently, the continuity that the Patriots have been able to establish the last few seasons up front can be a big plus for an offensive line.

"Personally, it's nice when you get your friends back. All of these guys have been doing this for a long time," Vollmer said. "It's always good to have these guys back. Definitely.

"I think it's good. I think we're a tight group. Obviously working out together, hanging out together. We're good friends."

And, of course, there's the Scarnecchia influence. Vollmer credits the offensive line coach as "one of the best coaches" in the game. Since joining the Patriots in 1982, Scarnecchia has spent all but two seasons (1989-90) in Foxboro, and has been New England's offensive line coach since 1999.

"Obviously, he's been doing it for a long time, and in my opinion, he's one of the best coaches there is," Vollmer said. "We're glad to have him and we take everything he says ... we do what he says and get better."



Vollmer's journey under the radar

By Jeffri Chadiha
Friday, August 5, 2011

At every step in his career, Sebastian Vollmer has been a quick study and standout player. The hype surrounding the arrivals of Chad Ochocinco and Albert Haynesworth in New England has obscured the fact that the Patriots have a few rising stars worthy of attention. One such player is right tackle Sebastian Vollmer.

Vollmer is not as recognizable as quarterback Tom Brady or defensive lineman Vince Wilfork, but he's quietly making his mark on the NFL. The problem Vollmer has is that few fans outside of New England actually have been noticing that. Vollmer is the best offensive lineman most people don't know anything about.

He's so good he was named second-team All-Pro last season after becoming a full-time starter in just his second season. Vollmer's anonymity kept him out of the Pro Bowl, though, despite the fact that he played on a team that finished 14-2. This is the way the 27-year-old Vollmer's brief career has played out. You have to be paying close attention to realize how big a difference he's made for New England's offensive line.

The nice thing about Vollmer is that his relative invisibility doesn't bother him one bit. He understands that linemen seldom generate headlines, and that players in New England speak to the media so infrequently it often feels like they're under a court order. At this stage, Vollmer is just appreciative of a career that has evolved faster than anybody anticipated.

"I try not to expect anything because you never know what will happen," Vollmer said when asked if he's surprised by his success. "I've always taken the approach that if you take care of the little things in life, the bigger stuff will come in the end."

It's hard to think anybody could ever miss Vollmer. He stands 6-foot-8 and weighs 315 pounds. He moves with the natural agility of a much smaller man, and he's a fast learner. You're talking about a guy who grew up in Dusseldorf, Germany, and didn't enter organized American football until he was 14. Before that, Vollmer spent most of his childhood playing soccer and swimming competitively.

The only reason Vollmer drifted toward football was that he missed the team dynamic he enjoyed during his soccer-playing days. He quickly discovered he had the size to dominate in the game and the determination to grow up in a hurry.

"There were a lot of things that I had to catch up on in those days, including the rules," Vollmer said. "I remember when I first started, I actually went to the library to get a book on terminology. I was trying to understand what it meant when they said it was third-and-10. I wasn't smooth at all."

Sebastian Vollmer has been tossing opponents aside since the beginning of his career. The beauty of football at lower levels is that natural ability can do wonders for one's confidence. In Vollmer's case, he became a tight end who rarely caught passes but excelled at manhandling opponents. When he made a German all-star team at the age of 16, he attracted attention from American college recruiters after the squad competed in San Diego.

Before long, Vollmer accepted a scholarship at the University of Houston and slid into a new role as an offensive tackle.

There were many nights in college when Vollmer -- who didn't speak any English when he came to the United States -- again had to hustle to keep up. He'd sit in his dorm room studying the alphabet and vocabulary words just to communicate with teammates and coaches.

"One of the good things about playing was that the terms weren't foreign to me there," Vollmer said. "All the playbook stuff was like learning English and the conversations on the field were short and simple. Now when it came to sitting in the locker room and talking about dinner plans -- that was a different story."

Vollmer wouldn't be where he is today if the Patriots hadn't been so thorough in their scouting. He wasn't invited to the NFL combine, and only caught the eye of Patriots offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia because Scarnecchia ran the pro day workout at Houston following Vollmer's senior year in 2009.

Vollmer actually was so uncertain about his draft stock that he didn't watch the event. When the Patriots called to say he was their second-round pick that year, he knew his work was cut out for him. "I knew it was a good thing, but I wanted to make sure I stayed there," Vollmer said.

That hasn't been a problem so far. He learned from veteran teammates during his rookie year and started eight games (five filling in for Matt Light at left tackle, three more at right tackle). The following offseason, Vollmer won the right tackle job and was part of a Patriots offensive line that allowed just 25 sacks.

Vollmer was so focused on improving that he didn't even know about the All-Pro honor when it was first announced. Patriots guard Stephen Neal alerted him later that morning when he told Vollmer to check the day's newspaper.

These days, Vollmer is back in familiar territory. He's honing his skills and perfecting his chemistry with fellow linemen while New England's bigger stars deal with interview requests. That's fine with Vollmer, because, as he said, "I'm not where I want to be and I won't stop until I get there."

Judging by how far he's come, though, it won't be long before people want more of his spare time.

OL Brian Waters

The Boston Globe

Pull of a guard

Great work ethic of Waters has influenced the Patriots

By Shalise Manza Young

November 21, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - Though he was signed by the Patriots just over a week before the first regular-season game of the season, Brian Waters's transition has been seamless.

And clearly, it's complete. How complete?

Asked during the week about his left knee, the one he hurt last Sunday night against the Jets and the one that limited him a bit in practice this week, and it was obvious: Waters is a Patriot.

"I don't even know what you're talking about. I have no earthly idea what you're talking about," the offensive guard said in a high-pitched chuckle one might not expect to come from a 320-pound man. "I'm focused on this week, trying to make sure that I'm prepared. So things that happened in the past, I have no earthly idea what you're talking about."

The answer couldn't have been written better by Bill Belichick himself.

The Patriots play the Chiefs, Waters's former team, tonight at Gillette Stadium. Of all of the veteran signings and acquisitions the Patriots made once the NFL lockout ended - and there were more than a dozen - Waters was by far the best.

Released by Kansas City after 11 seasons with the team, a stint that included five Pro Bowl nods, two All-Pro selections, and the 2009 Walter Payton Man of the Year Award, Waters came to New England Sept. 4, eight days before the season opener in Miami, and more than a month after being released.

Not only was he asked to learn a new offense, he also flipped sides, moving from his customary left guard spot to the right, filling the void left by Stephen Neal's retirement.

And he's been superb, the Patriots' best offensive lineman this season. The website Pro Football Focus has Waters rated as the fifth-best guard in the league, and according to its metrics, he's the third-best pass blocker at the position.

Ask anyone within the Patriots organization about Waters and his professionalism is always at the top of the list.

"He's really a professional, you know?" Tom Brady said Friday. "I'm just in the cafeteria and he's in there with his playbook open and going through all his calls and making sure that he knows everything that he needs to do. So to come from a different offense, a different place, and to really step in and contribute the way that he has, it really speaks a lot about him and what his character is. He's done a great job."

"He's a really good guy," fellow guard Logan Mankins said. "Good player, good guy to be around, great teammate. He's a pro's pro. He's here for one goal, and that's to win football games and play good football."

In the locker room during the week, Waters faced a slew of questions about tonight's game, and his feelings on facing the Chiefs.

"I'm sure I'll see some people I know [during warm-ups], and be able to say hi, but the biggest thing for me is like any other game is really getting focused and really getting myself mentally prepared for what's about to go on," Waters said. "I'll definitely have some sort of feelings. But nothing negative; it's a great opportunity."

Waters said it was a bit strange pulling on a different uniform for the first time, and while he's glad he got the number he had during his days with the Chiefs - 54 - he knows he is just borrowing it here. When it comes to the Patriots, Waters said, he knows 54 is Tedy Bruschi.

Since he hasn't been in the Kansas City locker room this season, and since Bill Muir, his line coach his final season there, is now the offensive coordinator, Waters said there was little inside information he could give to the Patriots.

Waters said he had no extra motivation because his time with the Chiefs ended amicably.

"There's no revenge factor here, there's not one of those things where there's some kind of anger or things of that manner," he said. "I have a great amount of respect for those guys and I love a lot of those guys personally, but I'm a Patriot now. I'm here to try to win football games and be a productive part of this team and that's something I'm going to take pride in. I always try to take pride in the job I do and this will be no different.

"Honestly, it was a mutual decision between both parties and I think that both parties are happy with the way it went. I know I'm excited about where I am and how I'm playing and the guys I'm playing with, and I think they're excited about those young offensive linemen that they have that are now really starting to grow. So I think it's ended up well for both parties."

Belichick doesn't often gush about players, but Waters is the exception.

"Brian has come in and really done an outstanding job for us," he said. "We got him, it was right at the beginning of the season, he certainly had to make a big adjustment from not being here in training camp. Fortunately, I think a lot of the terminology and things like that, there was some carryover.

"He's really worked hard, just doing everything that you would want a player to do. He's worked hard in studying his plays and being in his notebook and watching film and asking questions. He's very well prepared. He's a true professional and he really worked hard at his job. He takes a lot of pride in it. He's added a lot to our line and our entire football team and he's earned everyone's respect here.

"He's really made some outstanding plays, just individual plays that you don't see many other players at his position make. He's a high-quality player, a high-quality individual. Very unselfish, team-oriented, really tried to do things the way that the group's [doing them]. He's been a great addition."

Waters signed a two-year contract with New England. Despite his exceptional play, he will be 35 in February, so it's natural to wonder how much longer he'll play. He talks about wanting to be able to walk away from the game, and says his family will play a role as well.

"If we're able to have a successful year this year and in the offseason I decide it's time for me to go, then it'll be time and I'll be OK with it," he said.

So does that mean a Patriots Super Bowl win will send him off into the sunset? The chuckle comes out again.

"I'm not saying that. I never said that," he said, a smile overtaking his face. "I'm not even thinking that far out. I'm really happy about the fact that I'm in an environment where it really is in the now, work on the now, and that stuff will take care of itself."



Football journey: Brian Waters

By Mike Reiss

October, 8, 2011

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – There aren't too many "football journeys" that can match that of veteran guard Brian Waters. After all, how many can say they entered the NFL as an undrafted tight end and then went on to earn five Pro Bowl berths as an offensive lineman?

The 34-year-old Waters, of Waxahachie, Texas, has taken an unconventional route at various points in his career. In addition to his on-field success, he was named the 2009 NFL Walter Payton Man of the Year for his off-the-field community service.

Waters shared his journey with ESPNBoston.com this week.

When he first started playing football: “I started pretty early. I was 5 years old.”

Why so early: “I’m from Texas. Everybody plays football. That’s something you grow up in. Texas football is like a religion, you join in with everybody else.”

First position: “Center. I was overweight by a pound, so I couldn’t play one of the skill positions.”

Top memories as a TE, FB, LB and DE at Waxahachie High: “There are a lot. We were a very good team, only losing three games in my four years. We played in a lot of big games. The first time we played in Texas Stadium was huge. That was one of the first great moments.”

Why he attended college at North Texas: “It was a pretty easy decision for me. I wanted to stay close to my family, and the other part was being able to go to a program where I could establish myself. I came from a program where we had a few Division I prospects every year, and those guys were trying to go to the bigger-name schools. North Texas was just coming back to Division I, and I’m one of those guys who likes to root for the underdog.”

Other possibilities for college: “There was the University of Houston, Arkansas, UTEP, Texas Tech. Those were other programs where I had opportunities, but I didn’t think those would have been as great for me as going to a school where I had an opportunity to play right away.”

Top memories at North Texas: “Beating Texas Tech, in Lubbock, when we were 20-point underdog. That was probably the biggest win for the school.”

Going undrafted in the NFL: “I knew there was a likelihood I wouldn’t get drafted because I played multiple positions in college (tight end, defensive line), and we weren’t a very good program. In the draft process, and because of my size (6-3, 265), they didn’t know where to play me. Some teams were looking at me as a defensive end, other teams tight end, other teams fullback.”

Signing as a rookie free agent with the Cowboys in 1999: “It went fast, just [training] camp and a few weeks. It was a unique situation, playing with all those great Hall of Fame players I grew up watching. It was kind of an awe moment at first, but then reality kicked in right away that you had to earn your stripes. I played tight end and fullback. At fullback, they only carry one of those (Darryl Johnston at the time), and the numbers didn’t present themselves well for me.”

After being released by Dallas in September of 1999, joining the Chiefs in March of 2000: “That was the first workout I had in what was supposed to be a series of workouts with different teams. Gunther Cunningham was the head coach at the time, and he persuaded me after a two-hour conversation to work out along the offensive line, at center to be exact. He thought I could make the move, and he had done it before (with other players). It was the first time an NFL team showed that much interest in me and I took the chance on it.”

Cunningham and others who made a difference in his NFL career getting started: “It was a couple guys. Mark Murphy. Gunther. And John Schneider, the general manager in Seattle now, was a huge part of that process.”

After signing with the Chiefs, playing in NFL Europe for the Berlin Thunder in 2000: “I started and played every snap at center. It was definitely one of the great experiences for me.”

Top memories with the Chiefs (2000-2010): “That’s tough, because there were so many great ones. We had some great times. I think most of them for me were reveling in others’ accomplishments – Priest Holmes’ single-season touchdown record, Will Shields over 200 straight games started, starting off 9-0 one season and getting a bye in the playoffs. We had the game with eight rushing touchdowns against Atlanta.”

When he truly settled in as an offensive lineman: “The third year. My first year, I was mostly special teams. The second year, I started eight games, one at center, the rest at guard. But the third year, with the

full offseason to concentrate on my craft and understand what the job entailed, is when I really felt more comfortable.”

After being released by the Chiefs this year, landing with the Patriots: “I knew it wasn’t over. I had many options, but it was one of those things where you want to pick a place that you feel is right for you. I felt like this place was.”

What he’s learned about the Patriots: “Just a consistent program. They come to work every day. Seven days a week, guys are here, working, watching film, studying their playbooks. That’s something you grow to appreciate, being a veteran and coming to a team like that.”

Mentors and role models in his life: “Dante Wright, who is a great friend of mine and was my coach in college. He’s now a pastor of a church in Round Rock, Texas. And my grandmother was a great role model for me. She worked very hard, 40-plus years, doing the same job. It may have been tedious and not exciting, but she had to put food on the table to raise me and she took on that position without any hesitation.”

Favorite teams growing up: “That’s easy. Cowboys.”

Favorite players: “The reason I wear 54 is Randy White, the master. He was as tough as they get.”

Where the journey goes from here: “To be continued, hopefully. You hope it ends up in great fashion. I just take it year by year. It’s been a great run, even before I got here. This is just icing on the cake.”

WR Wes Welker



Wes Welker Has Spent Football Life Proving Doubters Wrong, From College Coaches to NFL Executives

by Jeff Howe
January 3, 2012

FOXBORO, Mass. -- The layout surrounding the practice field on the southwest corner of the Gillette Stadium campus is different from the fields where Wes Welker's football roots have been sewn.

Yet, between the painted lines, the ones that signify the transformation between a lawn and a football playground, it's all the same for Welker. His work ethic has always been incredibly intense, and it's wowed his teammates and coaches through every step of his journey, from the powerhouse program at Heritage Hall High School in Oklahoma City all the way to the NFL's model franchise in New England.

It's been for the better, as his teammates at each level have raised their games to follow his lead, and his counterparts in the NFL have compared Welker's passion at practice to some of the best players in the league at nearly every position. And, if possible, it's been for the worse, as Welker was actually called out for going too hard at Pro Bowl practice, which is comical criticism.

It would, however, be a mistake to think Welker's success -- an NFL-record four 110-catch seasons, a league-high 122 receptions in 2011, four Pro Bowls selections, to name a few -- derives solely from the practice field. Yet, that's where his work begins. Welker has been counted out so many times that he doesn't understand the purpose of downshifting gears. The next second he lets up would be the first.

There was a classic scene during Welker's rookie season in 2004 when he was at training camp with the Chargers, and it's a sight that no one had ever seen happen anywhere else. Welker got fed up about not getting any reps at practice, so he took it upon himself to learn the plays in his own way. He'd hover behind the huddle, listen to the play call, walk 20 yards in the opposite direction and run the route by himself behind the play.

Everyone took notice -- how could you not? -- and eventually, the coaching staff gave Welker a chance to run those plays with some actual teammates. Welker was impressive and made the team out of training camp. For a week. He was released after the regular-season opener when the Chargers claimed safety Clinton Hart off waivers.

"I liked Wes a lot," Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers said. "Obviously, we hoped that he was going to be here a long time. It didn't happen."

It still stings Welker. But every time he's counted out, he proves another person wrong.

'We Like Him, But...'

Rod Warner awoke on signing day in 1999, which signified the conclusion of one of the most frustrating stretches in his 39 years as a football coach. Warner went to his office at Heritage Hall High School for a last-ditch effort to lock down a scholarship for his prized player, and sent out 105 faxes to Division I programs to let them know Welker was still very much available.

It was a maddening process for the head coach who had seen Welker accomplish just about everything imaginable during a high school football career. In four seasons, Welker had 3,235 rushing yards, 2,551 receiving yards, 90 total touchdowns, 22 interceptions, 10 fumble recoveries and set the school's tackling record. He also set a record with a 57-yard field goal and kicked a 42-yard, game-winning field goal in a playoff game.

There were a number of times when Welker would make a series of plays, which would be capped off by a touchdown -- a rushing score, an interception return, a punt return, you name it -- and he'd have to stay on

the field to kick the extra point. As everyone lined up, Welker would take a step back, lift up his helmet and puke before driving the ball through the uprights.

"He never came off the field, and he never wanted to come off the field," Warner said.

Welker's talent actually created some hilarious exchanges, Warner noted. Heritage Hall was on the right side of a lot of blowouts, many of which were in hand in the second quarter, and Warner wanted to make sure they could still run some offensive plays, just to get the work in. So Warner would tell Welker to fair catch a punt out of fear that he'd just return another one for a touchdown. Welker hated the idea every time, so Warner would have to threaten to bench him for a series, and Warner recalled times when the two would be arguing with each other about the fair catch while the punt was still in the air.

Warner knew exactly what he had in Welker, but it was maddening to no end that college coaches refused to see the same thing. Welker's strong reputation made it so everyone needed to scout him, but the Division I coaches couldn't get past his size. They saw him make play after play, but they just couldn't get excited about a 5-foot-9, 185-pound frame with about 4.5-speed.

And then there were the camps, which were key in the recruiting process. The problem with those, though, was they played into the talents of the track stars. The helmets and the hitting took a backseat to the 40-yard dashes and games of two-hand touch. Welker's greatest talents as a ball carrier were his vision, anticipation and explosion through the hole, and the latter was the result of lateral quickness and awareness in space to break tackles. That stuff can't happen in two-hand touch.

That was the mistake -- they ignored his football ability because they weren't thrilled about him when his pads were off.

"It always frustrated me," Warner said. "It always frustrated me when coaches would come in and look at him, and they would watch film and say, 'Yeah, but I just wish he was 6-foot, or I wish he was a little taller.' They'd say, 'Well, if he's going to run that [speed], he needs to be 6-foot-2,' and I'm like, 'What?' Look at the film. He catches the pass or he returns the punt, and nobody catches him. How fast does he have to be?"

"It was just frustrating for guys to come in here, and they would just 'Ooh and ah,' and 'Oh, my gosh, look at that play, and look at that play. Well, we're not going to offer him [a scholarship].' It was frustrating. At that point, it was like, what would it take?"

"[Coaches] would kick the tires, and then they'd say maybe they could find somebody a little taller or a little bit faster, and then they wouldn't offer him [a scholarship]. And that's what really frustrated him, and his parents, and myself and our staff. They just wouldn't commit to him and believe in him, and he's had that problem his whole life. People just look at him and say, 'Really, you're an NFL player? Are you kidding me?'"

Welker never got a scholarship on signing day, but of Warner's 105 faxes, he got one lead from an old friend who was at Texas Tech, which believed it was about to lose one of its commitments.

But in case things didn't work out with Texas Tech, Warner broached the idea to Welker of signing with a Division II school, which could lead to something more promising down the road. Welker hated the logic and was convinced he could walk on somewhere -- Oklahoma State was an option -- and eventually make the team. But D-II? Might as well have been a four-letter word.

It never got to that, though. Texas Tech lost its player and invited Welker to work out the week after signing day. After the session, former Red Raiders head coach Mike Leach was finally convinced enough to offer him a scholarship. Leach, currently the Washington State head coach, had plenty of experience while scouting Welker, so that final workout was basically a formality.

"It was kind of tough to pull the trigger," Leach said. "When you watch his film, [Welker made] one play after the next. He's not real tall. He's not real fast. But he'd make play after play after play, and you'd say, 'Boy, that's a great play. If only he was bigger. Wow, what a great play. If only he was faster. Wow, he's a great high school football player. Oh, there's another one [somewhere else]. Well, he's real productive. If only he was bigger and faster. Well, look at this, but I don't know if he can make the transition.'"

The Natural

It took one team meeting for Leach to recognize something was different about Welker. Every year, Texas Tech would introduce its freshman by standing them in front of the upperclassmen and having them each say their name, hometown and position, among other things. Welker stood out in more ways than one.

"The biggest foreshadowing of [Welker's success] would be the first meeting when we had the freshmen in there," Leach said. "We've got these guys who are all-state, all-conference, they look like Greek gods. Some of them have really good track times. Then you have Wes Welker sitting there who is shorter than all of them. Some of those other guys are looking down, there's a certain amount of doubt in their eye. They're not sure. They're a little overwhelmed by college. This guy has his head high, this glare and look in his eye, total confidence. And just reading his face, you could tell there was no doubt in his mind that he was better than all of these guys. He was literally fearless and confident."

Welker was the starting punt returner and a backup receiver in his first game as a freshman, but he was the Red Raiders' featured slot receiver by the third game of his career. And the success never trailed off, as he set school records with 259 career receptions and 3,069 yards and 21 touchdowns, and he set NCAA records with 1,761 punt return yards and eight touchdowns. Welker also rushed for 559 yards and one score.

He was so good at everything he did, both on and off the field, that everyone in the program called him, "The Natural," a nickname Welker still redeems. There were the stories about him on the basketball court and in a one-arm pull-up contest that rivaled his highlights on game days.

But after four years, the questions from the next level re-emerged. Texas Tech's air-raid offense was conducive to some big-time stats, but Welker really started to emerge as a quality receiver during his time in Lubbock. What he lacked in straight-line speed, he made up for with his first three steps, which were as quick and explosive as anyone's.

Welker also began learning how to set up his routes. He can run one route four, five, six different ways, but he's always in position to catch the pass at the exact second when the quarterback wants to deliver the ball. Aside from that level of athleticism, it makes him more difficult to defend because of his unpredictability in the eyes of an opponent.

Still, he wasn't very highly regarded through the draft process. It was all of the typical stuff about his size and speed, but in 2004, spread offenses that relied on slot receivers weren't as prevalent as they've become in 2011, which also reduced the market for Welker's services. Leach's coaching staff was split over Welker's potential in the 2004 draft.

"I didn't think he'd get drafted," Leach said. "I thought if he got the right situation, he would make it, and he would excel. Then, once he made it, I thought he would excel, and he's done all of those things. I'm not prepared to say I was sure he'd be All-Pro."

Remember Warner's notion about playing Division II football? Yeah, well, Welker had the same type of response when Warner went over his potential avenues if things didn't work out in the NFL.

"He just looked at me," Warner recalled, "and said, 'Coach, it will work out. I will make it work out. I am going to play in the NFL, and that's it.' So there was never, for him, a Plan B. He never envisioned himself playing anywhere but the NFL, and he was going to make it happen no matter what it took."

Leach recognized the same attitude.

"It's almost like [Welker] expected it. I don't think he was really that surprised he didn't get drafted," Leach said. "He expected to make it and be a professional football player, but I don't think he was even that shocked that he didn't get drafted because he's always had a pretty realistic view. There was no doubt in his mind he could whip all of those guys, realistic or otherwise. Now, evidently, it's pretty realistic. I think he's come to expect it. Keep in mind, starting with high school and college and the rest, he's kind of used to that routine."

'Biggest Mistake Ever Made'

Marty Schottenheimer, the first NFL head coach to give Welker a chance, had an opportunity to catch up with the wide receiver in November prior to the Patriots' Week 10 victory against the Jets. As Welker's story has unfolded, Schottenheimer has also become known as the only NFL head coach to cut the slot receiver.

Don't think it doesn't still haunt him.

"I walked over," Schottenheimer said, "and said to him, and this is the truth, I said, 'Of all the players I've been involved in releasing, the decision to release you was the biggest mistake ever made that at least involved myself.' He kind of chuckled about it. Obviously, he's been a tremendous, tremendous performer. He's a classic example of great things coming in small packages.

"Every time I think of Wes, the first thought that comes to my mind is, 'I'm not very smart.'"

Welker watched the 2004 draft at home with his family and Warner, and when it concluded, he received a number of calls from teams that were interested in signing him as a free agent. Welker ultimately chose the Chargers and, by all accounts, had a great training camp, especially once he was called to run plays with the offense.

But Schottenheimer said the Chargers had a series of injuries and needed to shuffle the bottom of the roster to field enough players in Week 2, which led to the transaction he'll never live down. The Chargers claimed Hart off waivers from the Eagles and released Welker, who was flat-out ticked about getting cut after such a strong summer.

Schottenheimer wanted to add Welker to the practice squad, but Welker had no interest in returning to the team that he felt spurned by. Plus, the Dolphins offered him more money and a bigger opportunity to work his way up the depth chart.

"If we could look into the future as it were, we would have hoped that he would have been a part of Chargers history," Schottenheimer said. "But that's 20-20 hindsight. If you'd ask me if I could do it all over again, would we have [cut Welker]? Absolutely not.

"Of all the people I was involved in letting go -- and I can't really remember many others -- but I can guarantee you one guy I will never forget is Wes Welker. He has a unique ability."

The Dolphins, too, gave up on Welker in 2007, but the circumstances were different. He was a restricted free agent who drew serious interest from the Patriots, who would have had to surrender a second-round draft pick to sign him. But the Patriots knew the Dolphins had the rights to match the contract and retain him, while the Dolphins were equally fearful the Patriots would bowl him over with a contract they weren't financially prepared to match.

It was a gamble for both sides, so they compromised with a trade. New England forked over a second- and seventh-round pick in the 2007 draft to land Welker, whose career was set to skyrocket. The Dolphins, meanwhile, used the picks to draft center Samson Satele, who had two very good seasons before getting traded to the Raiders, and defensive end Abraham Wright, who never panned out.

History of Regret

Welker has a lifetime of experience in proving people wrong. Just look at the 104 faxes that weren't returned to Warner, or the 255 draft picks in 2004 that were used on other players, including 32 wide receivers (aside from Larry Fitzgerald, there isn't another wideout from the class who is anywhere near Welker's echelon).

The next step in Welker's career will unfold in the coming months, as the 30-year-old is in position to earn the most significant payday of his life when his contract expires after this season. The Patriots could use the franchise tag to pay Welker about \$9 million in 2012, or they could work out a long-term extension that could pay him an estimated \$10 million per season, which would be a reward for grossly outplaying his \$2.15 million base salary this season.

Welker, a Pro Bowler for the fourth consecutive season, just led the NFL in receptions for the third time in the last five years, and he was on fire all season. After tearing his ACL in the 2009 regular-season finale, Welker clearly wasn't back to full strength in 2010, but those close to him said he worked out harder than ever last offseason with his contract year in mind. He was undoubtedly motivated by it.

Welker wanted to prove two things -- that the knee injury wasn't going to derail his career, and that he deserved this upcoming contract. With career highs of 1,569 receiving yards and nine touchdowns, Welker accomplished both goals.

Yet the contract has never been a distraction this season. Numerous teammates say Welker hasn't ever brought it up, and he doesn't discuss it with the media much, either, simply noting he wants to remain in New England and will let his agent handle the business dealings.

That type of professionalism is admirable in this era, especially with Welker, who has proven to be indispensable to the Patriots' offense. Then again, Welker has been forced to learn one hard football lesson after another, so he's become numb to the doubters. At this point, Welker has grown to know things will work out in his favor, both on the field and in the negotiating room.

He's too small? Too slow? The knee? He's 30? Those aren't Welker's problems. They belong to everyone else.

The Boston Globe

Risk and reward

Cutting across the middle, Welker is fearless, peerless

By Monique Walker

November 13, 2011

Something has to be missing from the complex wiring of the brain to be a receiver who enjoys going across the middle.

The football equivalent of running into traffic can lead to some of the most jarring collisions, and Patriots receiver Wes Welker has been on the receiving end of more than a few.

Growing up, Welker acknowledges, he was a bit of a daredevil, and in many ways that hasn't changed.

"I don't think that feeling ever really leaves you," Welker said. "I enjoy it and try to put myself in a different type of mind-set, especially when I'm out there on the field. I do think you have to be a little bit crazy and kind of have the attitude of let's go out there and do this and not really worry about the ramifications of your body sometimes."

Welker is Tom Brady's primary target. With 66 receptions for 960 yards through eight games, he is on pace to eclipse Jerry Rice's NFL record for receiving yards (1,848) and finish just shy of Marvin Harrison's NFL-record 143 receptions.

With the New England offense motored by the passing game, opponents are trying to make Welker's time on the field physically miserable, and that isn't likely to change tonight against the Jets.

"I think people are starting to notice that if you bang him around, his timing gets knocked off a little bit, and you add pressure to Brady also," said Jets cornerback Antonio Cromartie.

Hazards of job

There are downsides to being a slot receiver, and the pounding week after week tops the list, but it is part of the job, said former Jets receiver Wayne Chrebet. After 11 NFL seasons, Chrebet was forced to retire after suffering a serious concussion in 2005.

But what he loved about being a slot receiver was the contact and the adrenaline rush of trying to snag a pass over the middle and get up field without being caught.

"I think you need a different kind of personality," Chrebet said. "I'm not saying it's a huge difference from other players but you have to have a screw loose a little bit to go over the middle. I think Wes is like me in that you enjoy it."

But Chrebet added, "It's not great for career longevity."

Welker is feeling the effects of increased attention week after week. Against the Steelers, safety Troy Polamalu tackled Welker by grabbing the receiver's helmet and twisting his head. The play didn't result in a flag or a fine for Polamalu, but Welker was left with a neck injury.

Seven days later, Welker was back on the field against the Giants. This time, he was clobbered by a hit he later said knocked the wind out of him. The past week, he has been limited at practice with a rib injury.

"It's a physical game, so it's the way it's supposed to be played," Welker said. "You've got to be ready for it and make sure you're being physical out there and playing the way you need to."

Preparation for a game means Welker must treat his body delicately during the week. He is a regular for a series of treatments and massages to help his body heal.

"I think it all depends on the player and knowing that I want to play for a really long time and I want to be out there every Sunday," Welker said. "In order to do that, you have to put in the time, get the massages, the eating right, the conditioning yourself, the weight training, and doing different things necessary to make sure you're ready to go on Sunday."

Maintenance is critical, considering the impact a game can have on a player's body. Welker, who is 5 feet 9 inches and 185 pounds, doesn't match up in terms of size with the average defender and, as a result, he is subjected to tackles that can generate anywhere from 2,000 to 4,000 pounds of force, said John Brenkus, host of ESPN's "Sport Science."

The collisions can be considered the equivalent of 35-mile-per-hour car accidents, Brenkus said. The pads absorb 50 percent of the impact, and players are trained to take hits in a way that minimizes impact.

Despite that, players don't come out of games unscathed, and a player like Welker may feel the effects a little more than others, according to Ralph Reiff, director and athletic trainer at St. Vincent Sports Performance in Indianapolis.

"It may have a little more effect on him than someone with a bigger body mass," said Reiff, who has not treated Welker. "There's this physiological or biologic process that occurs when you're repeatedly traumatized as your body gets repeatedly thrown to the ground, hit, and all the various effects of playing the game of football."

Throughout a game, a player's ligaments and muscles are in a constant state of flexing and moving after jarring hits, causing micro trauma that results in inflammation that can last up to three days, Reiff said.

"So think about that - from Sunday, you've got Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday before that inflammatory process starts to slow down and you feel a little bit normal, yet that process still happens as you're going through practice," Reiff said. "And that's quite honestly why some players get a pass for practice and don't get hit during the week, because their body handles that inflammatory process not as good as others."

Tolerating pain

The body can develop tolerance for pain and become desensitized to a low-level soreness, but the process of recovery doesn't change, Reiff said.

"The weekend warrior will go out, rake leaves, clean out the garage, play some flag football, and they'll be sore for three or four days and it's 'Oh my gosh, I can hardly get in and out of the car,'" Reiff said.

"You take a player in the National Football League and that's the way they might feel the first three days of training camp back in August. But then your body adapts.

"Your neurologic system adapts to that, but your biological system does not adapt. You cannot change that inflammatory response process.

"That's why players in the National Football League have access or seek out all these various remedies to help get them through that biologic process. That might be ice packs, cold tanks, massages, supplements, acupuncture, chiropractic care, stretching, or hyperbaric chambers.

"There's just a lot of different remedies that quite frankly all work and are all pieces of the puzzle, but they're all there in place to help a guy like Wes Welker get ready for the next Sunday."

While a big hit may be turned into a highlight, it is not always the jarring tackle that can lead to injuries. Chrebet said he learned how to take care of his body and realized there were other elements of the game that could take their toll.

"It's not just catching the ball over the middle - it's lining up and blocking linebackers or safeties," Chrebet said. "It doesn't stop with the plays when you get the ball in your hands. It's a different type of guy to do that game after game."

And the physical aspect is not always a negative, Chrebet said.

"I was destined to be a slot receiver from when I was a kid," he said. "I enjoyed the contact, I sought it out. Not to be weird or twisted, but it just made me feel alive out there. I didn't feel good when I wasn't hitting anybody or getting hit."

No time to think

Receivers who go across the middle must forget about the potential of getting hit and look for the ball, which presents another challenge. Brenkus has been a part of more than 350 tests with world-class athletes and many of them have examined football.

"I marvel at the physics of the game in that the margin of error is so incredibly slim," Brenkus said. "The average quarterback release time is .4 seconds, just the amount of time to blink an eye."

"The receiver has to be fearless and incredibly confident that the quarterback is not going to hang him out to dry."

"One of the things about going across the middle is that the quarterback is being obstructed depending on how far away you are. A quarterback can throw a ball 60 m.p.h., and at that speed, you don't see it until it's about 5 or 10 yards away. The reaction time is so low. It's like trying to hit a fastball at more than 100 m.p.h."

Mastering those challenges is what has helped Welker become an elite receiver.

Welker was slowed against Dallas and Pittsburgh, but against the Giants last week, he caught nine passes for 136 yards. The last time the Patriots played the Jets, Welker had five catches for 124 yards and that was while under the watch of standout Jets cornerback Darrelle Revis.

The Jets plan to continue being physical with Welker, because if he has room, he can burn a defense.

"If you don't put hands on him, it's pretty obvious what he can do," Jets linebacker Aaron Maybin said. "He can blow the lid off a defense."

"He's the kind of guy that he's so hard to tackle in space and he creates so many matchup problems for safeties and linebackers that it's important that you get your guys to get hands on him and try to throw him off his routes because a lot of their routes do depend on timing."

And if the Jets play physical, Welker will be ready.

"I think we've had a lot of physical matchups over the years where different things happen," Welker said. "I kind of know the way it's going to be played and what to expect and hopefully the referees do, too."



Wes Welker's boundless resiliency

By Jackie MacMullan
ESPNBoston.com

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- He could maneuver beyond almost anything, brushing away slights with the same ease that he shook off NFL defenders.

Wes Welker not only welcomed contact, he craved it. He didn't just embrace challenges, he invented his own, like the time in high school when he attempted an onside kick without informing his coach. Welker not only lofted the ball the allotted 10 yards, he also sprinted down and recovered it. As everyone in the stadium lauded Heritage Hall coach Rod Warner for his courageous call in the midst of a one-touchdown game, he looked incredulously at Welker and mumbled, "If you're going to do that, could you at least fill me in next time?"

Welker was fearless, a trait honed as an 8-year-old kid when he was torpedoed off a trampoline into the neighbor's yard by his older brother Lee and his friends, who were four and five years older and habitually tortured the little boy then nicknamed "Wuss."

Occasionally when they double-bounced him, Wes would clear the neighbor's fence in midair; other times, he'd fall painfully short. The goal, always, was to propel Wes into the neighbor's pool, which lay beyond the fence, some landscaping and a concrete path.

"We never did get him in that pool," said Clay Moss, one of Welker's tormentors. "I guess we're fortunate nothing went really wrong. I'm not sure we recognized the word 'resilient' at that age, but we knew no matter what we did to him, Wes would always come back for more."

Welker returns to the postseason Sunday when the Patriots host the New York Jets. It is a triumphant comeback for a player who returned from a career-threatening injury with astonishing swiftness and has mastered the art of disproving skeptics and shattering misnomers.

"It's bizarre how he continues to defy the odds," said his brother Lee. "He has such a strong, unshakable belief in himself you really shouldn't doubt him."

Despite leading Heritage Hall to a Class 2A Oklahoma state championship and compiling 3,235 career rushing yards, 2,551 career receiving yards and 90 touchdowns, not one major college program offered Wes Welker a scholarship before the official signing day.

Tulsa invited him for a visit, encouraged him to try on one of its shiny new helmets, then reversed direction the following morning after it signed another bigger, stronger, faster recruit, dismissing Welker vaguely with, "We'll get back to you."

He wound up at Texas Tech, breaking receiving records and earning the nickname "The Natural" for his multifaceted contributions, and still he was left off the guest list for the NFL combine. Nobody drafted him.

Eventually he signed with the Miami Dolphins and racked up more all-purpose yards in his first three years in the league than anyone in NFL history except for Gale Sayers. He was a Patriot killer, scalding New England with big plays, including a 71-yard punt return for a touchdown.

The Dolphins rewarded Welker by offering him an underwhelming one-year deal worth \$1.35 million.

Tom Brady studied Welker on film, went to vice president of player personnel Scott Pioli and asked, "When is this guy's contract up? He's our kind of player."

New England scooped him up in 2007 for the price of one second-round draft pick and one seventh-round draft pick. Brady discovered his new target was both meticulous and free-spirited, one of the most creative practical jokers in the locker room.

"No one works harder than Wes," Brady declared. "And no one has more fun than Wes. Trust me."

The connection between Welker and Brady was so strong it wasn't unusual for the two to exchange glances at the line of scrimmage and audible the exact same play. Other times, Wes hollered a read to his quarterback, and Brady dismissed him with a diatribe of unprintable words.

Welker didn't flinch. Never has. Not after the biggest hits or the most crushing disappointments.

In his first year with New England, Welker set two records: a franchise mark for receptions and the most spot-on imitation of the franchise quarterback, including the proper "hand on hip" pose and string of expletives that are rarely (if ever) exhibited when Brady is at the podium.

"He's been around me too long," Brady confirmed. "He's nailed my quirkiness."

Welker was Superman. That's what his buddies back in Oklahoma City concluded. Old "Wuss" was an NFL star, hanging with Brady, a fixture at the Pro Bowl.

He could sidestep anything -- except for what happened on Jan. 3, 2010, at Reliant Stadium in Houston, in a meaningless regular-season finale. He ran a simple slant pattern, turned to cut and his knee exploded like a pinata that met the barrel of a Louisville Slugger.

On the sideline, Welker shrouded his face with a towel to conceal his tears. No one had touched him.

"First off I was thinking, 'What's wrong with me?'" Welker said. "I knew, but I didn't want to believe it."

The anterior cruciate ligament and the medial collateral ligament were torn. He was done for the day, the season and maybe, just maybe, forever.

He called his parents from the locker room because he knew they'd be watching, worrying. Leland and Shelley Welker answered the phone, with brother Lee nearby. Their second son, the comedy king, the unflappable overachiever, broke down and wept.

"He was crying out of control," Leland Welker said. "Just devastated."

For two days, Wes Welker slumped on the couch, propped his leg up and ate boxes of Oreo cookies while media experts delivered sober epitaphs. He heard them say he would not play for a year. He heard them say he'd never be the same.

He had a visitor, and it was Tom Brady, who was almost a year and a half removed from his own ACL tear.

"You'll be back," Brady told Welker. "I'll help you."

After one more day, Welker sat up and tossed the last box of Oreos into the trash. It was time to circle Week 1 on the calendar, to have the surgery, begin the rehab, get on with all of it.

"I had made up my mind," Welker said. "I was coming back for the first game whether [the knee] was ready or not."

Leland Welker was relieved when he finally saw his son. He recognized the look. He saw it for the first time when Wes was 4 years old, playing soccer, chasing the ball from cone to cone like all the other little boys until one of his teammates scored a goal. The moms who coached Wes' team hugged the little boy, the kids high-fived him and the parents all cheered.

"At that moment, it was like this little light went on," his father reported. "It was Wes saying, 'Oh, so that's what you want me to do!'"

Little Wes tracked down the ball, stroked it with his foot and made a beeline for the center between those cones. The other boys trailed in helpless pursuit.

"OK," Leland said to his wife. "Here we go."

Persistence -- and pranks

When Wes Welker was 9 years old, he scored 16 goals in a soccer game -- against an undefeated team. He and Lee excelled in tournaments all over the nation, but the best competition was in the driveway of their

Oklahoma City home, where the brothers played ruthless one-on-one games that inevitably ended up with them throwing haymakers at one another.

When Clay Moss and the rest of Lee's gang came over, they played brutal indoor games of soccer and basketball, with hockey checks into an adjacent wooden storage area that were not only legal but encouraged.

"Mostly it was all against all," Moss said, "but once in a while it was, 'Give Wes the ball and destroy him.'"

Welker loved his brother and revered his friends, but they were not immune to his pranks. Lee and Wes shared a bedroom, and once after playing basketball all day in the rain, Welker took his soggy, smelly socks and placed them inside Lee's pillowcase. All night long, his brother tossed and turned, trying to locate the rancid smell. He washed his hands, changed his shirt, kicked the dog off the bed, but the odor persisted, all while his little brother giggled in the twin bed next to him.

Welker converted his soccer knowledge into football skills. He created space for himself on the field, understood angles and, of course, could kick the ball.

He nailed a 57-yard field goal for Heritage Hall, longer than the career best of Patriots Pro Bowl kicker Stephen Gostkowski.

"I will say I had a strong Oklahoma wind behind me," Welker conceded.

Once Welker lined up for a field goal and his holder, Paul Long, received a bad snap and frantically tried to corral the errant ball.

"I hadn't even put it on the tee yet and he kicked it out of my hands," Long said.

The kick was good. The legend grew. Welker and quarterback Graham Colton both had such a command of the game they routinely called audibles at the line of scrimmage that resulted in touchdowns.

Welker gleefully sent freshmen up the ladder to the equipment loft for phantom items just before practice, then removed the ladder, leaving them stranded.

"The kids respected him so much," Warner said. "I'd pull him aside and tell him, 'Now I'm going to jump all over you in a minute. You haven't done anything wrong, but I need these other guys to work harder.' He understood his teammates would think, 'Geez, if Coach will yell at Wes like that, I have to take it up a notch.'"

Welker was in on every play -- offense, defense, kickoff returns, punt returns. He went so hard he often vomited on the field in between series. Long recalled one occasion when Welker returned a punt 60 yards for a touchdown, then sprinted back to kick the extra point.

"We were about to snap the ball when he turned and threw up," Long said. "We had to move the spot a couple of inches. He was definitely a puker."

Pushing through pain

In the spring of 2010, barely three months removed from knee reconstruction surgery, Wes Welker was in California hunched over, on the verge of vomiting.

He was ecstatic.

Alex Guerrero, the man who oversaw Brady's recovery, was pushing Welker through the pain and the doubt.

Back in Oklahoma, his family fretted that Wes was pushing too hard, that his expectations were unrealistic. In May, Welker's girlfriend sent the Welkers a video from the West Coast of Welker in a harness fashioned by Guerrero, running full speed on the beach. He also made a series of mild cuts.

"OK!" Leland Welker exulted. "Here we go."

The Welkers flew out to visit on July 4 weekend. They observed their son's workout with Brady, which included a cornucopia of cones and bands and medicine balls of all sizes. The grueling conditioning session lasted an hour and a half. When Welker and Brady were finished, their bodies were drenched in sweat.

After lunch Brady and Welker were back at it, this time on an empty field at USC, where they ran hundreds of routes. After another hour and a half, they came over and talked with the folks a bit.

"I thought they were done, but they ran full speed 50-yard dashes, a half-speed 50, then another full-speed 50," Leland Welker said. "They did that 17 times."

By the time the NFL season started, no one was surprised any longer that Wes Welker was in uniform. The Week 1 goal had been met, even though it will be some time before Superman has regained all his powers.

"There was some hesitation, especially early on, when I tried to make the same move I made that day [in Houston]," Welker said. "I didn't have full confidence in it. But every day, week and month, that's gone away."

Deion Branch, another ACL survivor, said the knee is never the same -- only different.

"That's true," Welker said. "You learn to use your wits about you. You understand that maybe the extra yard isn't worth it."

It is a huge and necessary concession, to take care of your body without sacrificing any aggressiveness. That is the new mantra for a guy who has known only one speed his entire life -- warp speed.

Focused on and off field

Wes Welker's reckless abandon was a necessary evil. Without it, he might never have played college football and would not be wearing an NFL jersey.

There were plenty of college letters that came. Leland Welker saved them all in a thick, overflowing binder: USC, Florida State, Oklahoma State. But when it came time to actually recruit Welker, none of the big schools came calling.

The Welkers waited and hoped. One day the phone rang and the voice on the other end said, "Hi, I'm Bobby Bowden," but it was really Lee, calling from upstairs.

Coach Warner sent tapes across the country, imploring schools to look at Welker's unique skill set. Texas Tech coach Mike Leach was intrigued, but wondered about Welker's lack of size, speed and strength.

"We almost missed him, too," Leach said.

The Texas Tech coaches were split. Leach wanted to give the kid a shot. So did running backs coach Art Briles.

"To me, it was a no-brainer," Briles said. "On tape you watched him move from Point A to Point B with so much confidence, effort and intensity. He could do it all."

When Lenny Walls opted to attend Boston College instead of Tech, Welker was in. The Natural ran back an 80-yard punt against Texas A&M and broke one against Texas in Lubbock.

"Best practice player I've ever seen," said Briles, now the head coach at Baylor. "He doesn't take a step on the field unless it's full speed."

Welker set school records in catches (259) and yards (3,069), but the gaudy numbers don't tell the whole story. What impressed Leach most was Welker's ability to adapt and his grasp of the game's nuances.

"He was really good at communicating on the sidelines," Leach said. "I could say to him, 'Is this open?' and he'd tell me, 'No, but I can get this.' It is so valuable to have someone who can shed light on what is going to happen when you snap the ball."

Welker brought that skill set with him to the Patriots in March 2007. He joined the offseason program, worked harder than anyone on the field and played harder than most when the day ended. A snapshot of Welker enjoying the nightlife appeared in a local gossip column, and the following morning he was summoned to coach Bill Belichick's office.

"You haven't caught a pass, you haven't returned a punt, you haven't done anything," Belichick informed him. "Cool it."

"I got the message," Welker said. "I just didn't understand about things like the Inside Track," a Boston newspaper's gossip page.

But what Belichick didn't understand was focus and commitment would never be an issue with Welker. Branch prided himself on the copious notes he took in the Patriots' team meetings -- until he sat next to Welker and realized his playbook was even more detailed.

That preparation enabled Welker to develop the same chemistry with backup quarterback Matt Cassel when Brady went down with his ACL injury in 2008. Cassel and Welker became great friends and partners in prankster crime.

Now that Cassel is in Kansas City, the weekly digs are delivered across the country. When Welker had a couple of drops, Cassel was merciless. And when Cassel threw a pick, he knew a phone barb would be waiting.

"Put Wes, Matt and Larry Izzo in a room, and they are 'The Three Stooges,'" Brady said.

Izzo is gone now too, but he left with three Super Bowl rings. Welker doesn't have any. It's the final challenge that would mean everything. If not for an improbable David Tyree catch and Asante Samuel drop, he'd have one already. Welker tied a Super Bowl record with 11 receptions for 109 yards against the Giants in Super Bowl XLII, but those stats mean nothing.

"I don't think of that game too often," Welker said, "but when I do, it's just a reminder that we've got to do everything we can to take advantage if we get in that situation again."

For a moment, his eyes are gone, locked in elsewhere, and then you realize it's that look, the one he got when he scored 16 goals, ran a punt back 80 yards, torpedoed over a fence without an ounce of trepidation.

The look says it all: OK. Here we go.

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.”

LB Tracy White

The Boston Globe

He has special knack

Patriots' White gets kicks from getting there first

By Julian Benbow

September 24, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - The kickoff might as well be a starter's pistol.

Dane Fletcher is always dying to get downfield. So are Matthew Slater, Kyle Arrington, and Josh Barrett. Each of them trying to be the first to make a play.

"It's not just kick coverage," Fletcher said. "It's always a race to the rock."

The loser is almost always the poor soul returning the kick. The winner, more often than not, is Patriot Tracy White.

"The desire is I want to be the first guy," White said. "Put it like this, I want everything. I want it all. If I can get that tackle, I'm going to try to get there before you."

Slater has reviewed film more than a few times and come back shocked after seeing a 230-pound linebacker weaving like a police car to get to the football.

"Man!" Slater tends to say to himself. "Tracy's the fastest linebacker on this team!"

Over the course of his nine-year career, White has made special teams his specialty. He's racked up 115 special-teams tackles, including three in the first two games of this season. He finished with a career-high 18 last season, and is looking to add on tomorrow when the Patriots visit the Buffalo Bills.

"We were talking about it today," Fletcher said. "Who's going to get there in the Buffalo game? Obviously, I feel like I'm going to get more tackles than him this game."

Fletcher couldn't say it without laughing.

"Nah, he usually beats me."

Last week against the Chargers, White made two big plays on special teams. On the opening kickoff, Richard Goodman decided to bring it out from 4 yards deep in his end zone, and got clocked by White at the 20-yard line. In the fourth quarter, White honed in again on Goodman, who fielded the kick at the 1 and was leveled by White at the 13.

White is meticulous when it comes to studying opponents' tendencies. But the majority of his success comes from playing the game at warp speed.

"The experience that he has, the knowledge that he has of special teams, the guy's a great player," Slater said. "I think he's one of the best cover guys in this league, no doubt."

That being said, players don't dream of being standouts on special teams. And after leaving Howard University as the school's all-time leading tackler, White was looking to be a full-time linebacker.

"Coming out, everybody wants to play offense or defense," White said. "Special teams, I was put into that role when I first got in."

White's gift was his speed (he was clocked at 4.48 seconds for the 40 coming out of college) and his curse was his lack of size (6 feet, 236 pounds at the time, smaller than some running backs).

He was passed over in the 2003 draft, and landed as a rookie free agent in Seattle, where coach Mike Holmgren put him on special teams.

"That was my thing," White said. "I made plays on that. Each year, I'd still fight to try to get on defense, but the more and more the years went by, that's what people viewed me as."

Things work out differently for different players. Sam Mills was 5-9, 229. Scouts wore out the game tapes of the linebacker from his days at Montclair State in New Jersey, but scattered when they found out how small he was. He played 12 seasons and went to five Pro Bowls.

"He was Mighty Mouse," former teammate Rickey Jackson once said. "He'd hit you hard as he could every time he hit you."

At 5-10, London Fletcher of the Redskins is a two-time Pro Bowl linebacker. Giants rookie linebacker Greg Jones (6-0, 248) started this season as a special-teamer, but after Jonathan Goff was lost for the year with a torn knee ligament, Jones was elevated to starting middle linebacker.

White, however, has had to use special teams to leave his mark.

"If that's what I've got to do, I try to be the best at what I do," he said. "If they want me to play special teams, that's what I'm going to do."

White has played for five teams, and has a way of making an impression.

When he left the Packers in 2008, he left a crater in their special teams so deep that one fan website called it "The Curse of Tracy White."

If he viewed special teams as a slight before, he clearly understands his value now.

"I don't really mind now," White said. "If you've got a fast guy on special teams and he's got pretty good size, he can be a dangerous person if he becomes smart and knows how to recognize other people's schemes. That's what I did. I became smart at it, and the smarter you get the faster you play."

"Special teams, I've got to be the best. I want to be the best on every team I go to. I want to be that guy the other team says, 'We've got to stop him.'"

The Patriot Ledger

Dual roles for Patriots' White

By Glen Farley

Posted Aug 26, 2011

FOXBORO — Tracy White has discovered that being on the payroll at Gillette Stadium does have its perks.

On-the-job training, for instance.

"I wanted to come back here," said White, whose 18 special teams tackles in his first season with the Patriots ranked second to Matthew Slater's 21 last year. "I like everything that's going on around here."

"I've learned a lot from Coach (Bill) Belichick. Hopefully, when I'm done (playing), I want to become a coach myself — I'd probably start from high school, small college, or something like that — so I'm just looking and learning how he coaches the team, the way he goes about handling business and things like that."

"It's a learning process all the way around. I'm learning from him and the coaching staff. The coaching staff here is very smart so I'm learning about how they go about their business."

The contract he signed with the Patriots as an unrestricted free agent following the NFL lockout brought White back for his second year in New England and his ninth season in the business where he's been employed since 2003 when he broke in with the Seattle Seahawks as a rookie free agent out of Howard University.

Eight years and four teams later, he is still at it; not bad for a linebacker who more seasons (five) than not (three) has failed to register a single tackle on defense.

With 112 tackles in 110 games, it is on special teams where White has earned his keep.

"I guess (a special teams player is) what most teams have billed me as after probably my first couple of years in the league," White said. "I just took (to) it and my goal is to try to get to the Pro Bowl every year. I want to be the best I can be and try to help the team as much as possible."

Virtually from Day One, White has shown that ability on special teams. White registered nine tackles in 11 games as a rookie.

It is an ability the six-foot, 230-pounder has continued to show, even while bouncing from Seattle (2003-2004) to Jacksonville (2005) to Green Bay (2006-2008) to Philadelphia (2008-2009) before coming to New England in a trade involving draft picks last Sept. 5.

"Coming in (to the NFL), you always want to play offense or defense," said White, who with 500 stops became the all-time leading tackler at Howard where he was named Black College Defensive Player of the Year in 2001. "People overlook special teams, but throughout the years that's what teams have had me do so I want to try to be the best I can.

"I compete 100 percent all the time and I want to be the guy that gets all the tackles or (be) the first guy down the field. I want to be the best at what I'm doing."

Statistically, midway through the Patriots' preseason schedule, White has been one of their most productive players both on defense (eight tackles, five in their 31-14 win at Tampa Bay on Aug. 18) and special teams (four stops, three in their 47-12 win over Jacksonville on Aug. 11).

But then, it isn't as if White hasn't had his moments on defense in the past.

In the first of his two career starts, White totaled a game-high 13 tackles and a sack for the Seahawks in a 25-17 loss to the Arizona Cardinals at Sun Devil Stadium on Oct. 24, 2004. More recently, playing a reserve role, he registered two tackles, intercepted one Alex Smith pass and broke up another for the Eagles in a 27-13 win over the San Francisco 49ers at Lincoln Financial Field on Dec. 20, 2009.

"I miss (playing defense)," White conceded, "but whatever they ask of me I'm going to make sure I'm ready to do it. Just carry on from where the next guy left off so there's no drop-off from there.

"I'm working hard, just showing the coaches I can play both defense and special teams. I was brought here for special teams, but whatever they ask me to do I do. On defense, we've got a lot of (new) things coming in and whether it's being a backup or filling in for somebody, that's my job so I've got to be ready to do that."

So it shall be until he swaps his helmet and shoulder pads for a coach's whistle and clipboard.

"It's something I've always wanted to do," said White. "I don't want to do something I don't really like. I'm not a quitter, but I'd rather do something fun, that I like doing.

"I'm learning. Being here, I'm picking up stuff. I pick up on how (the coaches) go about business and I'm learning fast in what's a great learning environment."

DL Vince Wilfork

The Boston Globe

Play by play

Tireless Wilfork has been a workhorse for Patriots

By Amalie Benjamin

January 10, 2012

FOXBOROUGH - The exhaustion must come after he leaves the field, after all the snaps are behind him for the week or the month or the season. Vince Wilfork is eight years into his professional football career, eight years of wear and tear on a massive, 325 pound-plus body.

Eight years in, and he's playing more than ever.

"He's just amazing," fellow defensive lineman Kyle Love said. "I look at him and it's the fourth quarter, he's been out there the whole game and I can see the look in his eyes, but he's still pushing, fighting."

"It inspires me to play hard because I was always a guy like, 'I'm tired, I'm tired. I need a break, a rest.' I see him, he's not looking for somebody to come get him. He's just trying to play harder and harder every snap, so it just makes me want to play harder and harder every snap."

When asked if he ever notices Wilfork slowing down, linebacker Jerod Mayo said, "To be honest with you, I really don't. I've never seen Vince really tired on the field."

Wilfork, the Patriots' Pro Bowl nose tackle, has been on the field for a whopping 978 snaps this season, 86.2 percent of the team's 1,134 defensive snaps, according to Pro Football Focus. That's a significant increase from the last three seasons, in which he played 66.3 percent in 2010 (777 of 1,172), 58.4 percent in 2009 (510 of 873), and 63.3 percent in 2008 (614 of 970).

Wilfork is second in total number of defensive snaps on the team, 13 behind Kyle Arrington.

"You really don't see a defensive lineman playing as many snaps as he does, especially a man of his size," Mayo said. "So it's very impressive just to see the wind that he has. He knows things. He could tell me something that I can't see. He's just like having a quarterback out there."

In previous seasons, Wilfork was used more to stop the run, sometimes coming off the field in obvious passing situations. That hasn't been the case this season, with Wilfork playing 609 snaps as a pass rusher, 365 in run defense, and 4 in pass coverage according to Pro Football Focus.

In 2010, Wilfork played 425 snaps against the pass, 348 against the run, 4 in pass coverage. In 2009, it was 265 and 244 (one pass coverage), and in 2008, it was 291 and 323.

Wilfork said he hasn't noticed a difference between this year and last year in terms of how he's responded physically.

"I never look at it," Wilfork said. "I know I've played a lot this year, but I think everybody - even guys that have played 20 plays or 100 plays less than me - probably feel the same way as me. It's just a long season."

With a lot of snaps, Wilfork did get the smallest of breaks in the second half of the season: He played 495 of 568 snaps in the first eight games (87.1 percent) and 483 of 566 (85.3) in the second half.

Ultimately, it was his reliability, his ability to avoid injury, and his performance that kept him on the field as much as he was. He held up, and so he played.

"Vince had a good year for us," coach Bill Belichick said. "He played a lot of snaps last year compared to other years and he did again this year. He's had a lot of different responsibilities - playing inside, playing outside - and his playing time in general has been high."

More has been asked of Wilfork, in part, because the acquisition of Albert Haynesworth - part of a seemingly intimidating interior duo with Wilfork - never panned out. That led to an increased burden on Wilfork, as he has helped bring along Love, who is in his second season.

"The biggest thing was just earning the trust," Wilfork said. "You have to be able to trust the guy next to you on the field and myself being around here for eight years now, some of the calls I know like the back of my hand, so it's easy for me to kind of look to the side of me and realize if someone's out of position just to get them right.

"I didn't have to do much this year. A lot of guys took it upon themselves to actually know what they were doing when their name was called. That's been big for us this year, so it really hasn't changed my play at all."

Not that he ever has shied away from telling his teammates what they should be doing if he sees an issue.

"I'm pretty comfortable playing anywhere on the line and pretty comfortable playing with anybody that [Belichick] lines out there with me," Wilfork said. "And if I'm not comfortable I'll let that person know what they need to work on. I think I've earned that right to let the guy next to me know I don't appreciate him not knowing his plays."

That's why fellow defensive players flock to him. They know he'll be honest. And, more than that, they know he'll be on the field, on almost every snap, backing that up.

As for what Wilfork planned to do over the bye weekend? "Rest. My biggest thing is rest."

Makes sense for a man who said, "I'm planning on playing for a long time. I'm not ready to stop this year, not yet."

IMPROPER BOSTONIAN

Family Man

The private life of New England's toughest tackle

By Michael Holley

On an August night in 2001, two people who had never met—each of them unaware that the other existed—went online at about the same time with essentially the same thought. I'm not looking for anything serious. The website was Blackplanet.com, and neither 19-year-old Vince Wilfork (aka "heyhey75") nor 23-year-old Bianca Farinas ("miamib") went there thinking that he or she was clicking on destiny.

Bianca was in Homestead, about 30 minutes from Miami, on the site posting pictures and trying to keep up with friends in Gainesville. A mom, homeowner and holder of two jobs, she had been single for a year after ending a five-year relationship with the father of her 3-year-old son, D'Aundre.

Wilfork was in one of the University of Miami's computer labs, sitting near a fellow football player and peeking at what flashed on his teammate's screen.

"Hey, man. What was that?" he asked as images of young women appeared.

He found the site on the computer he was using and browsed through pictures, too. He was a defensive tackle, so everyone noticed his width, often overlooking that he stood 6' 2". He seemed to be focusing on the profile of an attractive light-skinned woman, nearly a foot shorter, who appeared to have Caribbean bloodlines. Seeking out women, online or elsewhere, was not usually his thing. While other guys chased girls, he was casting for other fish in the sea. Literally. His tall tales were about his 20-foot cast net and catching catfish and bluefish in Boynton Beach, his hometown, with his father and brother. As he sat before the computer, telling himself that he was only looking for a friend, he typed a line or two with his name and a buddy's number—he didn't own a cell phone—and pressed send.

He thought he was just sending an e-mail that night. What he eventually learned was that he had begun writing chapter one of what would become an odyssey: from South Florida to Vegas to New England, to the Patriots and one of the most successful love-business partnerships in all of professional sports. Along the

way, some heartbeats would flutter and others would stop; some rings would be won and others would be exchanged; some dreams would appear to be dashed and others would live in the name on a little boy's birth certificate.

But before any of that happened, there was a phone call.

The first one was from Bianca to Vince on Aug. 14, 2001. After that, there were phone calls. At least once a day, and sometimes more. They wanted to be friends, but they soon discovered they didn't want to talk to anyone else. Her father, Angel, a former boxer in Cuba, was her best friend. His father, David, a former high-school football star in Florida, was his. She inherited Angel's determination. He inherited David's No. 75, worn out of admiration for Hall of Famers Deacon Jones and Mean Joe Greene.

The oldest of three children, Bianca was used to taking charge and making things happen. She had been cooking for her siblings since she was a little girl—she did that instead of play with dolls— so she knew what she was talking about when speaking of chicken and rice or smothered pork. Vince had worked at a catering company, where the boss gave him permission to go in the freezer, sift among the steak, shrimp and burgers, and cook anything he wanted. That combination meant he was well over the 275 pounds he claimed to be when they first began to talk. He didn't have any kids, but he heard her talk about her son so lovingly that it made him love him, too.

All of that, and they still hadn't met in person.

The conversation was good enough. August became September and September became early October. Vince had made a habit of calling her before meetings and sometimes after. He'd check in before bed and when he woke up. When he didn't think he'd be available to take her calls, he'd leave songs for her to listen to on his voicemail. One of his favorites was Ginuwine's "Differences," an irresistible melody paired with lyrics that reflected how he was beginning to feel: "I put you first now/You made me/helped mold me/Turned me into a man/I'm so responsible/And I owe it all to you." They saw each other for the first time in mid-October, and the kid, who had just turned 4 in September, stared down one of the biggest and baddest 300-plus-pound linemen in the state.

"What's up, li'l man?" Vince said.

"Wassup?" replied the boy, still not sure what to make of Vince's presence.

The hesitation lasted hours, if that long. The next few times they saw each other it was, "Where we goin' today, Vince?" Soon after, in December, Vince had moved off campus and into Bianca's house in Homestead. He told his father to whom he told everything, and he thought it was cool. The person Vince didn't tell, out of fear, was his mother. He knew Barbara Wilfork, a 90-minute drive away in Boynton Beach, wouldn't be happy with the living arrangements nor the relationship itself. So he didn't tell his mom, which in turn annoyed his new girlfriend.

"Look, dude. This is ridiculous," she fumed one day. "You have two choices: Either you make your lies your truth or you make your truth your lies. If you tell your mama you stay on campus, go take your ass back to the dorms. Or you live here and, you know, be a man."

He nodded, but he didn't have the conversation. And then one day the cell phone Bianca bought for him rang. But Vince was in the shower, so his girlfriend answered.

"Who's this?" asked the surprised female voice on the other end of the line. "This is Vince's girlfriend. Who's this?"

"This is Vincent's mom. Can I talk to him?" Bianca happily walked into the bathroom and put the phone to Vince's ear.

While three-quarters of the Wilforks—Vince and his father and brother, both named David— didn't have an issue with Bianca, Barbara did. The men loved Bianca's food, her knowledge of sports, and her affinity for the soulful Luther Vandross. Barbara, though, had concerns. She didn't like that there was a "baby's daddy" who factored into the relationship, and she wasn't crazy about the age difference. Bianca assured her that her son's father wouldn't be a problem. She also pointed out that Vince had a 3.4 grade-point average while living with her, partly because she forced him to do his work so he could set an example for young D'Aundre.

Things were better after the talk. Briefly. The new concerns were more serious. David Wilfork, who was dad to all of them, Bianca included, was not doing well. It was early 2002. The elder Wilfork was in his late 40s, but he had diabetes and walked with a cane. His engaging personality sometimes hid how he was feeling. Asked how he was doing, he was likely to say, "If I was any better I'd be perfect."

He was a man who caught, cut and cleaned fish with his boys; who taught his younger son, Vince, to love the number 75 and appreciate the techniques of the defensive line; a father and friend who had so much respect from his then-20-year-old son that the son once said, "Everything he said to me, I believed every bit of it. My daddy was everything."

He'd tell me to run through a brick wall and I'm asking him how hard?

Which one? How do you want me to do it?"

David Wilfork passed in June.

Before he died, Vince slipped a University of Miami championship ring—won during Vince's freshman year—onto his finger.

"When I lost my father, everything stopped," Vince recalled recently. "I was devastated. It was kind of expected. He had been sick. When he told me he was dying, I kind of felt that it was time. It hurt me, but I kind of prepared. Still, I lost the best friend I had in life."

It was a sad time and an awkward one. Although Barbara obviously knew about Bianca, she hadn't met her in person. The first time she did, funeral arrangements were being made. Mr. Wilfork and Bianca had grown into friends in less than a year, just like Vince and Bianca.

"When it came time for Vince and his brother and his mom to go to the funeral home, they took me with them and I hated every second of it," Bianca said last month. "I was thinking, 'I shouldn't be here. It's private.' It was very uncomfortable. So for the first time in my life, I didn't say anything. I just sat there and listened."

She heard about insurance policies, wills, burial arrangements.

And if it was already a difficult time to begin building something with Barbara, the news she had was going to complicate things further. On the same day Mr. Wilfork was buried, Bianca got back home and took a pregnancy test. Positive.

"Well, I'll help y'all with this one," Barbara said when she got the news, "but no more after that."

Something transformative was happening with Barbara and Vince. They always had similar personalities, so similar that they often found themselves going round and round in hopeless arguments. But when Vince lost his best friend, he discovered a new one in his mother. They'd talk, go to the grocery store together, discuss games, and bounce around baby names. In fact, Barbara was going to have the honor of naming the child Bianca was carrying. Everything was put on hold in November 2002 when Barbara had a stroke. She was taken to Bethesda Memorial Hospital, the same hospital her husband was in earlier that year, in the same room.

"I'd walk in the room and look at her and it was like I was looking at my daddy all over again," Vince said. "Same hospital. Same room. Bethesda Memorial; I hate that place. I hate it to this day. I don't know why they did it that way. When I walked in there it was mama there, but I was seeing my daddy. It freaked me out."

By this time, with one national championship on his résumé, Vince was one of the best defensive linemen in the country. He was instinctive and smart, deceptively tall and fast. He was also heartbroken.

Despite having the talent to play in the National Football League one day, he was losing interest. He was told that his mother was getting better and in line for a release from the hospital. And then she passed in mid-December.

Bianca suddenly understood why it hadn't been wrong for her to be in the funeral home with the Wilforks six months earlier. She took over the job of separating insurance policies and getting affairs in order for Barbara, who was so focused on arrangements for David that she hadn't planned for herself. Vince was 21. As he thought about where to go next in the new year, a baby girl arrived.

"When she was born, that outweighed everything," Vince said. "It took a lot of weight off our shoulders and we said, 'We have our own family now.' I think she basically overpowered everything. It went from 'Why this?' and 'Why that?' to moving forward."

They saw their baby girl, innocent, alert and healthy, and they were reminded of how all things, joyful and sad alike, had unfolded in their lives.

They thought of the lives lost as well as their expanding young family. So they named the baby Destiny Barbara.

Marriage, at that point, was anticlimactic.

They considered themselves married when they moved in together in late 2001. Still, one month before the 2004 NFL draft (3-3-04, which Bianca has tattooed on her fingers) they decided to get married in Vegas. Bianca interrupted a magical run at roulette, exchanged vows with the man she loved, and then returned to her hot table. It was such a bizarre trip that even the Patriots called during it and asked Vince if he wanted to take part in a predraft workout.

He chuckled. "I said, 'I'm in Vegas. Plus, y'all don't draft players from Miami, no way. No thanks.'"

He went back to gambling, they returned to Miami with a profit, and a month later the Patriots drafted him. They were growing as a couple, too, learning to define their roles as husband and wife as well as mommy and daddy. They were so good at both that when Kennard McGuire first met them, he thought, "They're too good to be true."

McGuire, an agent who now represents Vince and about 30 other pro athletes, considers the Wilforks family. They vacation together every year, and his kids refer to the Wilforks as Aunt Bianca and Uncle Vince. All say they'd list each other on their emergency contact list.

Of all his clients, McGuire was asked, how many had wives and girlfriends as vocal as Bianca? "None at all," he said with a laugh. "It's refreshing from the standpoint that she has awareness and knowledge. I encourage them to be involved." Bianca's involvement entails informing the agent (and team) what the couple would and would not like to see.

"Whenever I'd speak with Patriot management, I'd inform them that she would be taking part in the call as well," McGuire said. "The first time I told them, they said, 'Really?' I'll say that it was never speaking out of turn. Her style can be intimidating. The delivery is not the delivery you would expect on those types of calls."

So, in other words, she wasn't opposed to calling "bullshit" on executives? "I think that's the exact word," he agreed.

It was the Wilforks who encouraged McGuire to pursue his dreams, leave his old firm, and start his own agency. He did, and he's grateful for their advice. Of course, they would know about dreams. They tried for months to have a third child. Bianca experienced multiple miscarriages before she had a successful pregnancy. They were so thankful for the fulfillment of their wish that they named their son, now 14 months old, David Dream-Angel. It's a name that acknowledges fathers, best friends, family and possibility.

One night recently, young David was being bathed in the kitchen sink by Vince. The boy was tired, but there was a moment when his brown eyes found his father's. They both smiled and said nothing. It was just one reason of many why the initial click was worth it.

DB Malcolm Williams



Williams will work it out

Pats DB throwback to spartan AFL era

By Steve Buckley

Sunday, January 1, 2012

Houston Antwine, the great defensive tackle for the old Boston Patriots [team stats] who passed away last week at age 72, lived for a time in an apartment building on Harvard Street in Cambridge, behind a First National grocery store that now does business as a Whole Foods Market [WFMI].

It was the mid-1960s, and, as I recall, Antwine was staying there because he had relatives who lived in the building, or maybe he was crashing in their apartment for the duration of the American Football League season.

He lived there for one year, or maybe it was five years. Not sure. But it was certainly a no-frills existence, a lifestyle from back in the days when a lot of professional athletes didn't have fast cars or live in tricked-out cribs. They were just working stiffs trying to make ends meet. For every Joe Namath in the old AFL, there were a dozen guys living paycheck to paycheck.

But even now, in the glitzy, high-tech world of 21st century big league sports, there are still some athletes out there who pay last month's bills with this month's paycheck, and with little left in the bank once the last invoice has been taken care of. Take, for instance, the recent travels of 24-year-old rookie defensive back Malcolm Williams, who rejoined the Patriots last week and yesterday was promoted from the practice squad to the 53-man roster.

Williams is one of pro football's many here-today-gone-tomorrow-back-here-again foot soldiers, the kind of anonymous, workingman player who is either on the field or out on the street, depending on the whims of his coach on any particular day.

Drafted by the Patriots in the seventh round of the 2011 draft, Williams, who played his college ball at Texas Christian University, had been biding his time on the practice squad until being activated for the Patriots' Dec. 11 game against the Washington Redskins. He made his NFL debut in the Pats' 34-27 victory that day, working on special teams. Four days later, he was released.

What did he do?

"I went home to look for a job," Williams said.

Home, to Malcolm Williams, is Grand Prairie, Texas. Turns out Williams' mother-in-law is employed at the local Walmart, and she was going to put him in touch with people who could get him some work.

Pouting about being cut loose from the Patriots was not an option. He and his wife, Jessica, have two young girls, 3-year-old Jady and infant Jordyn. In the post-Baby Boom era, that's a whole lot of family.

"I'm a hard worker," Williams said. "So I was going home to find some work."

What kind of work, you ask?

"Just anything," he said. "It didn't matter. I mean, I have enough money to get me over the year. But just always bringing in some income is a blessing. I'm one of those men who feels it's his responsibility to provide for his family. I have a wife and two kids, so I'm going to take care of them regardless. That's my first priority, so it really didn't matter where I worked.

"I just couldn't be at home, I'll tell you that."

The Patriots, meanwhile, went out to Denver and registered a 41-23 victory over the Broncos to clinch the AFC East championship. When it was over, Pats players paraded around the locker room decked in official championship caps and T-shirts commemorating their latest achievement; Williams, though, was back home in Grand Prairie, waiting to hear from Walmart.

But then the Patriots called. Come on back to Foxboro, they said. There's a job on the practice squad.

"When I saw my locker, it had an 'AFC East champions' T-shirt hanging in there," Williams said of his return to Foxboro. "And a cap. It was like they were saying, 'You're part of all this.' I was real happy to see that.

"It's a blessing. And it would be great if I could stay here and help us get all the way to the Super Bowl. But either way, I'm going to be working. If it's not here with the Patriots, it'll be somewhere else. I have to work. I have a family to support."

The late, great Houston Antwine and the rest of those hardscrabble Boston Patriots would have loved this guy.

RB Danny Woodhead



Patriots' fireplug Danny Woodhead a giant killer

By Karen Guregian

Friday, November 5, 2010

FOXBORO — Just about every game he's played for the Patriots [team stats], running back Danny Woodhead manages to do something that leaves you shaking your head in wonderment and awe.

Former Pats wide receiver Randy Moss had the same effect with his dazzling one-handed catches and mind-boggling plays. Only Woodhead isn't anywhere near the type of athletic freak Moss has been during the past 13 years.

Or maybe he is that same kind of freak. Only, he's half Moss' size. He's generously listed as 5-foot-9, 195 pounds, and has acknowledged to SI.com he's a "shade under 5-foot-8."

That's the reason you're continually left stunned, because this little big man keeps making big plays in a big man's game.

Woodhead doesn't see himself as being much different, or out of the norm.

"This is all I've ever known, being this height," the diminutive back said earlier this week. "It's just playing football for me. It's not something I really think about. I don't think I'm much different. Do I feel I can play the game? Yeah. But it's the ultimate team game, that's what it is. I'm fortunate to have great people around me."

Last week against the Vikings, Woodhead made a key third-and-12 conversion in the fourth quarter, taking a Tom Brady [stats] pass, avoiding a would-be tackler who could have taken him down short of the first down. Instead, Woodhead made a deft move and gained 16 yards to help set up BenJarvus Green-Ellis' second touchdown.

Running backs coach Ivan Fears believes Woodhead oozes that special something teams look for. It doesn't matter what size it comes in.

"We call those guys 'playmakers.' Those guys have that. That's why they're on the field," Fears said Tuesday. "If you go back to Kevin Faulk [stats] and think of the catches Kevin made throughout the years — one-handed grab in the end zone. Those guys have that ability ... Danny has the little knack about him. He knows how to make things happen when he has the ball in his hands. That's what attracted us to the guy. He hasn't let us down. Boy, he hasn't let us down one bit. Those guys — that's something they have. They have the ability to make a play when given the opportunity and those are the types of guys you win with."

The Patriots had scouted Woodhead out of Division 2 Chadron State and followed his path to the New York Jets [team stats]. So they had an idea of how special he might be, but he hadn't seen much time playing in the NFL — until now.

"It was kind of, 'Well, let's see if this really is true that this guy's as good as we think he is.' " Fears said. "We lucked out there. We lucked out and got ourselves a nice find."

In the five games he's appeared, Woodhead has carried the ball 36 times for 178 yards (4.9 average) with two touchdowns. Coming out of the backfield as a receiver, he's caught 14 passes for 136 yards. He's also been at Brady's side as a blocker and hasn't shied away from taking on behemoth rushers primed to take the quarterback down.

Are any of his teammates surprised he's been able to take on some mammoth football players without any hesitation or problem?

"Oh no, not at all," said Patriots linebacker Rob Ninkovich. "He's got that 'it' factor. He may be a little smaller than your ideal running back, but if you just watch him, you're not surprised by anything he does."

"I remember watching the 'Hard Knocks' show," Ninkovich went on about the HBO series which featured the Jets at training camp this fall. "I didn't even know him yet. And I was saying, 'Man, that kid is good.' He's got all the little things you want in a running back. Plus, he's got a lot of heart. That's all you really need. He's been a great pick-up for us."
