

**2016
NEW ENGLAND
PATRIOTS**



FEATURE CLIPS

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Chairman and CEO Robert Kraft



Robert Kraft steady at the helm

Patriots' owner has navigated franchise through 20 years of highs and lows

By Jackie MacMullan

January 15, 2014

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Robert Kraft is having company and he's got some tidying up to do. The owner has been away, and just days before his Patriots were to host the Indianapolis Colts at Gillette Stadium, his office is littered with unopened mail, gifts, items earmarked for charity and a stack of business correspondence.

The room is already cluttered with mementos and framed photographs of his extraordinary run as owner of the New England Patriots.

There's the framed picture of Tom Brady in the Tuck Rule Game, personalized by former Raiders coach Jon Gruden with the inscription, "It was a fumble!" ("I'm going to auction that off," Kraft says). There are shots of Kraft with various dignitaries, including his friend, former President George H.W. Bush, who, Kraft says, plans to continue his birthday tradition of jumping out of an airplane when he turns 90 in June.

The most prominently displayed photographs are those of his four sons and his wife, Myra, who lost her battle with ovarian cancer in July 2011.

Her death left him disconsolate, lonely and dispirited. His sons, who were initially deeply concerned about their father, say while the sadness of losing his wife of 48 years lingers, the veil of grief is finally lifting. Kraft, who will turn 73 in June, gives no indication he has any immediate plans to retire.

Two Decades Of Dominance

In the 20 years since Robert Kraft purchased the team, the Patriots are near the top of nearly every category associated with sustained success.

"After the love of my family," said Kraft, "there's nothing more important to me than winning football games. And I will do whatever I have to do to put this team in position to do that."

Next week will mark the 20th anniversary of Kraft purchasing of the Patriots, providing an occasion to sort through two decades of memories that began when he paid James Orthwein \$172 million for a franchise that had posted a dismal 19-61 mark (worst in the NFL) over the previous five years. At the time, the purchase price was the highest of any franchise in sports history.

Today, according to Forbes Magazine, the net worth of the Patriots is more than \$1.8 billion, second in the NFL only to the Dallas Cowboys (\$2.3 billion). Kraft has deftly molded the New England Patriots brand into an empire that includes the open-air shopping center Patriot Place, and he has done it with private funds.

He is one of the most powerful men in football, viewed as both a tender philanthropist and a ruthless businessman. In the past 20 years, he has been lauded as the man who saved the NFL and denigrated as the man who eviscerated the city of Hartford, Conn.

The success of his football team under his watch is indisputable. Since Kraft purchased the team in 1994, the Patriots have won more Super Bowls (3), more conference (6) and division (13) championships and more playoff games (33) than any other NFL team. Their sellout streak is at 216 and counting, with a lengthy waiting list of eager consumers raring to buy into the action.

While the team has reached dizzying heights, there have been some numbing lows, including the Spygate scandal and the incarceration of former Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez on murder charges.

True to the "Patriot Way" of leaving the past in the past, the team has successfully scrubbed itself clean of any Hernandez remnants. The Patriots initiated a program in which anyone could turn in a No. 81 Hernandez jersey for a different team jersey for free. It was a clever public relations maneuver that cost the team almost \$250,000.

Players have been ordered to refrain from speaking about their former teammate, who was one of Brady's favorite receiving targets.

The current Patriots roster, set to play the Denver Broncos for the AFC championship on Sunday, has earned its moniker as a plucky team that has defied odds as one significant player after another -- Vince Wilfork, Jerod Mayo, Rob Gronkowski, Tommy Kelly -- was lost for the season.

"This is a team with real mental toughness," Kraft noted. "I don't know what's going to happen, but it reminds me of our '01 group. We didn't have the best players, but there was a sense of togetherness that was special."

That team won the first Super Bowl in franchise history in surprising fashion. The 2013 team may or may not bookend that feat. So what has Kraft learned about the business in between?

"I've learned not to be surprised when unexpected negative things come along," Kraft answered in a wide-ranging interview last week. "Everyone is there for the good times. It's how you handle the difficult times that will separate you.

"It's like keeping a family together. Let's be honest: This is a sick business. [The NFL] is going for parity. Your games get scheduled in terms of how well you did. You draft according to how well you did. You're punished for excellence, in a sense.

"You all have the same household budget you can spend, so you have to be wise. You have physical injuries that happen that are acts of God beyond anyone's ability to predict. You have to be very, very artful in how you design the team.

"It's like managing a business portfolio. And in the bottom third of that portfolio, the bottom third of your team, you need to be looking for specials that other people don't know about. Players like [defensive tackles] Chris Jones and Sealver Siliga.

"We've had a lot of those. Our football people have done a great job. But you can't rest. Once you think you've got it knocked, look out."

Kraft was blindsided by the charges levied against Hernandez, who, upon signing a five-year, \$40 million extension in August 2012, kissed his team's owner, vowed to be a role model, then donated \$50,000 of his new contract to the Myra H. Kraft Giving Back Fund.

"It's the saddest, most unfortunate part of our history with the team," Kraft said solemnly.

It is one of the lone blemishes on an otherwise brilliant success story in which Kraft transformed a football doormat into a juggernaut.

Resuscitating a franchise

Kraft had his sights on purchasing the Patriots as far back as 1985, when he bought an option on a parcel of land adjacent to the team's stadium. Three years later he bought the stadium out of bankruptcy for \$25 million, which included the stadium's lease to the Patriots.

In 1994, Orthwein offered Kraft a \$75 million buyout of his lease so he could move the team to St. Louis. Kraft, who had tried in vain to purchase the Red Sox, refused.

He was among a who's who of groups interested in buying the Patriots that included Walter Payton, Donald Trump, Paul Newman, author Tom Clancy and Robert Tisch.

"I told Myra I was going to buy the team," Kraft recalled. "She asked, 'How much?' I told her, 'It's \$115 million, but it might go as high as \$120 or 125 million.

"Then I got out there and it was a take-it-or-leave-it price of \$172 million. I had to do it. You don't always get a second chance.

"Myra went cuckoo on me when I got back.

"It was one of the few times that we had conflict over a business decision of mine."

Kraft inherited coach Bill Parcells, quarterback Drew Bledsoe and 23 pieces of pending litigation against the team.

"I had trouble finding a Boston law firm that wasn't representing someone who had complaints against us," Kraft said.

Parcells era: 'Division within'

Parcells was a dynamic leader, but he resented Kraft's interference in his personnel decisions. He was enraged when Kraft and vice president of player personnel Bobby Grier drafted Terry Glenn in 1996 over his objections. That sparked Parcells' famous utterance, "They want you to cook the dinner, at least they should let you shop for the groceries."

Parcells and young Bledsoe led the Patriots to Super Bowl XXXI, but following the 35-21 loss to Green Bay, Parcells did not travel back to Massachusetts with the team and soon after was hired by the New York Jets.

"Sustaining success is so hard, and the one thing I learned you can't have is division from within," Kraft said. Both men have since expressed regret on how they handled their tenure together. "We have a great relationship now," Kraft said. "It wasn't so much Bill Parcells, but how he operated.

"We can only deal with people who are thinking long term. Bill was day to day. He'd go down to Jupiter [Fla.] and play his doo-wop music and decide whether he wanted to come back the next year.

"Well, we have a salary cap and we have [a cornerback] Ricky Reynolds and these other people who are waiting for answers and we need to know.

"Bill had already won his Super Bowl. He had his reputation, to be honest.

"He did a lot for this franchise. He taught me a lot on how to get ready for the NFL. I'm lucky I had him.

"But I learned you can't be good in this business continuously unless you are thinking long term. Most football coaches are only thinking about what they have to do this Sunday."

Enter Belichick and Brady

Kraft has tried to balance the all-business-no-sentiment approach of coach Bill Belichick by investing in personal relationships with his stars. When former linebacker Tedy Bruschi awoke in the hospital after suffering a stroke, Kraft was there, waiting.

One of the more emotional days of Kraft's tenure was when Belichick permanently replaced Bledsoe, a Kraft favorite, with an untested Tom Brady.

Robert Kraft stayed out of the way when Bill Belichick traded one of his favorite players, Drew Bledsoe, but made it clear the coach would be held accountable for the decision.

"I stayed out of it, but I weighed in," Kraft said. "When the head coach says, 'Tell me what you want me to do,' I say, 'I want to hold you accountable for this decision.'

"When we traded Drew, I wanted to make sure it was a place where he'd get his full contract value. I valued his loyalty. He gave our franchise credibility."

Kraft promised Bledsoe he would one day be feted by the Patriots. Last winter, he was inducted into the team's Hall of Fame.

In the meantime, Brady quickly established himself as one of the greatest quarterbacks of his generation, leading the 2001 team to the Super Bowl against St. Louis and the Greatest Show on Turf.

The Patriots stunned the heavily favored Rams by building a 17-3 lead off turnovers. Late in the game, quarterback Kurt Warner fumbled at the Patriots' 3-yard line and safety Tebucky Jones scooped up the ball and ran 97 yards for a touchdown, but it was called back on a holding call against Willie McGinest.

"When Tebucky [recovered the fumble and ran to the end zone], I said, 'It's all over!'" Kraft said. "Then they called the penalty and it goes back to the Rams and they score, and I thought of the ball going through Bill Buckner's legs."

Warner scored a rushing touchdown, then tied the game 17-17 with a touchdown pass to Ricky Proehl with 1:30 left. Commentator John Madden suggested the young Patriots should run the clock out for overtime.

Instead, Brady marched the Patriots 53 yards down the field with no timeouts and Adam Vinatieri kicked the Super Bowl-winning 48-yard field goal as time expired.

"I wouldn't even allow myself to consider we might win until the kick went through," Kraft said. "Then we had to rush down to the field and I forgot what we were going to say."

With red, white and blue confetti settling on the Lombardi trophy, Kraft told the assembled crowd, which had witnessed the first Super Bowl since the Sept. 11 attacks, "At this time in this country, we are all Patriots."

Two Super Bowl losses and a scandal

New England won two more championships in the next three seasons, then lost two Super Bowls to the Giants in 2008 and 2012.

The first diminished a 2007 undefeated regular season. The key play in the game was a throw under pressure by Eli Manning (who was nearly yanked down by Jarvis Green) to David Tyree, who held on by pinning the ball against his helmet.

"They could have called that [Manning] was in the grasp," Kraft said. "And if Asante [Samuel] holds on to the ball before that [on a potential interception], we take a knee, and it's ours."

"It hurt so bad. I'm into history and legacy, and if we had won that one we would have accomplished something that I think would be almost impossible to happen again. But for some reason it wasn't meant to be."

The 2007 season was also marred by Spygate, the scandal that cost Belichick a record \$500,000 fine after his team was caught videotaping the signals of Jets coaches. The team also was fined \$250,000 and docked a draft pick. It opened up the Patriots' franchise to an avalanche of scorn and ridicule.

"I asked Bill, 'On a scale of 1 to 100, how much did it help?' and he told me, '1'" Kraft said. "That was a tough time. I was mad. It could have ripped this organization apart. But we got through it."

Because of Spygate, the Patriots must endure criticism that they haven't won a Super Bowl without cheating. It is, Kraft said, a ludicrous notion.

"Spygate meant nothing," Kraft said. "Look how we've done. We've had the best record in the league since then. We've been to the Super Bowl twice since then."

Kraft said the loss to the Giants in Super Bowl XLVI is the one that still haunts him, in part because Myra had passed away before the 2011 season.

"That one was even harder," he admitted. "The team was wearing Myra's initials on their uniforms. I wanted that one more than '07. I wanted it for Myra."

Flirtation with Hartford

While Kraft is universally recognized as a shrewd businessman, there is one region in which his name will forever be mud. Kraft wanted a new stadium in 1999, preferably in downtown Boston, but the Massachusetts lawmakers were lukewarm in their support.

Kraft brokered a deal to move the team to Hartford which included a \$374 million waterfront stadium that would leave him debt free.

The tentative agreement fell apart when Massachusetts pledged \$70 million toward the infrastructure surrounding a new stadium in Foxborough. Kraft, citing concerns the Hartford group could not construct a new stadium in a timely manner, extricated himself from the agreement.

The backlash was venomous. When the Patriots went to the Super Bowl in 2002, the Hartford Courant's Jim Shea wrote, "The team is owned by Robert Kraft, the ethically challenged, double-dealing greedy little white rat -- no offense to rats -- who played us all in Hartford for fools."

Kraft likely would have experienced similar backlash from Massachusetts fans had he moved his team to Connecticut. The NFL, unwilling to lose its Boston market, also stepped in to ensure that didn't happen.

"If we moved to Hartford, according to our research, 97 percent of our fans still would have gone to the games," Kraft said. "They wouldn't have been happy, but they would have gone."

"People don't understand. I walked away from what would be \$1.2 billion present value. There was no risk for me. No debt. I would have been much wealthier with no financial risk if I had done it."

"It wouldn't have been like the Boston Braves moving to Milwaukee. Our stadium would have been a 1 hour and 15 minute drive from here. Most of the people who come and tailgate drive that far anyhow. But, it didn't feel right, so we didn't do it."

Unprecedented stability

Although many in Connecticut have never forgiven him, Kraft has stockpiled reservoirs of goodwill throughout the rest of country for his role in settling the NFL labor dispute in 2011. Former Colts center Jeff Saturday publicly thanked Kraft for brokering the agreement while Myra was battling cancer.

"Without [Robert] this deal does not get done," said Saturday, whose bear hug of the owner went viral. "He is a man who helped us save football, and we're so grateful for that."

Kraft is most grateful for the continuity that has become the hallmark of his franchise. During his tenure, he's hired only two coaches (Pete Carroll and Belichick), and had two starting quarterbacks in Bledsoe and Brady (Matt Cassel filled in following Brady's knee injury in 2008).

Kraft's son Jonathan is the heir apparent to this NFL jewel, but the father is not quite ready to abdicate his football throne. He is energized and excited about the Patriots' future.

"I love our locker room," he said. "When I lost Myra, they saved me. I spent a lot of time there. You can walk through on game day and feel the camaraderie."

He does not know if this New England team can win a fourth Super Bowl. He's not sure how much longer Brady will play, but predicts, "It's longer than you think."

By the looks of his cluttered office, Robert Kraft plans on sticking around to find out.



Kraftwork

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

By Peter King
February 1, 2012

On the last day of the 1993 NFL regular season, Patriots players and die-hard fans seemed resigned to losing their team. Absentee owner James Orthwein, a Missouri native who had bought the club two years earlier, intended to move it to St. Louis, which had lost the Cardinals in '88. "We were as good as gone," said Patriots linebacker Andre Tippett. But the fans wouldn't go down without a fight. Though they had the league's worst team (13--50 over four seasons heading into that game, against playoff-contending Miami) and worst venue (dumpy, no-frills Foxboro

Stadium), damn it, this was still their bad team and their crappy stadium. Before the game they burned empty cases of Budweiser in the windswept parking lots. (Orthwein was a great-grandson of brewing mogul Adolphus Busch and sat on the board of the St. Louis--based brewing company.) And once the game ended, victoriously, on a Drew Bledsoe overtime touchdown pass to Michael Timpson, the fans wouldn't leave. "Don't take our team!" they chanted. "Don't take our team!"

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

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

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

DECISION 1: Overspending for a bad team

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

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

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

"Was I scared?" Kraft said. "Yes, I was scared. But this was my shot. How many times in life do you get your shot to do something you desperately want to do? Logic said no. Instinct said yes. Also, things kept flashing through my mind. The Boston Braves had left, and no team ever replaced them. My sons were getting to an age where smart sons move to take good business opportunities [elsewhere], and I wanted my family to stay intact here. I figured this could be a good family business."

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

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

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

Pause. Fifteen seconds.

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

Pause. Five seconds.

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

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

DECISION 2: Hiring Belichick

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

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

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

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

In New England, Kraft had fired coach Pete Carroll on Jan. 3, but before the Parcells announcement. "I made sure we faxed in a request for permission that day to interview Belichick—when Parcells was still the coach," says Jonathan Kraft. When the Patriots' interest in Belichick surfaced, friends around the league called Robert Kraft unprompted to ask him what in the world he was thinking in pursuing the diffident Belichick, who'd made more than his share of enemies in a five-year 37--45 run with the Browns a decade earlier. One associate sent Kraft a tape of memorable and/or monosyllabic moments from Belichick's press conferences in Cleveland.

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

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

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

Which brings us to Tom Brady.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Head Coach Bill Belichick

The Washington Post

All football, Bill Belichick leaves his narrative to his friends and enemies

By Adam Kilgore
September 9, 2015

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Last week, Bill Belichick trudged behind a podium wearing shorts and a sleeveless New England Patriots windbreaker, gray stubble dotting his face.

The assembled reporters had another round of questions about the status of Tom Brady, the quarterback embroiled in the most recent controversy that swarmed Belichick's team. He deflected questions about Brady's status and the functionality of his team's offense without a determined quarterback. He discussed in detail the intricacies of choosing players for his practice squad. He refused introspection.

Belichick had risen from playing center at tiny Wesleyan University to the top of the NFL, along the way becoming celebrated for his brilliance and achievement but suspected of malfeasance and rule-skirting. He was asked what was the most important thing he had done over those four decades to evolve as a coach.

Belichick looked up from the questioner, gazed at the back of the room, and replied, "I don't know." He snorted. He stared. The room waited for him to say something else. He didn't.

Belichick has left it to others to fill in the blanks behind his gloomy facade, and the effects of his success — admiration, animosity, loyalty, jealousy — have created wildly divergent portraits. On Thursday night inside Gillette Stadium, the Patriots will open the season against the Pittsburgh Steelers, and Belichick will begin the defense of his fourth Super Bowl victory. He is 63 years old, the third-oldest coach in the NFL behind Tom Coughlin and Pete Carroll. Entering his fifth decade in the league, Belichick remains at the fore of NFL innovation. Defining him — and the roots of his success — remains elusive.

[The Patriots aren't dumb enough to have cheated against the Steelers]

People close to him describe a reliable friend, a voracious learner, an ardent student of the game, a man whose grim public demeanor hides sharp intelligence and understated humor. He engenders loyalty with both surprising kindness and utmost competence. "As a player, what more do you want?" former Patriots safety Lawyer Milloy said. "You don't want that fluffy [stuff]. He just wanted us to be focused on ball."

Belichick's detractors — and many within the league — suggest rule-breaking has propped up a brilliant football strategist. The SpyGate scandal remains a stain, a wound picked fresh this week by an extensive ESPN The Magazine story detailing the practice of filming and decoding opponents' signals. In 2007, the NFL fined Belichick \$500,000, but the scope and effectiveness of the scheme remain murky because of the league's rapid investigation and destruction of video tapes.

Supporters, associates and former players say Belichick has adapted with a wickedly dexterous mind and a curious bent. "Probably the story of his career, from my vantage point, would be his attitude toward learning," said Iowa Coach Kirk Ferentz, a Belichick confidante. Belichick once told his college economics professor that what he studied in class helped him stay under the salary cap. ("That's an application of marginalism," said Dick Miller, the professor.) His current defensive coordinator, Matt Patricia, was a rocket scientist before he became a football coach. Belichick seeks. He listens.

"It's really amazing when you think about it: He's been coaching longer than any player on this team has been alive," Patriots special teams captain Matthew Slater said. "That says something about his leadership, the way he learns. The way he views the game is very unique. He's been able to stay ahead of the curve because of the mind the good Lord has given him for football."

'Always moving forward'

For nearly three decades as a coach in the NFL, Belichick had divined creative solutions to complex problems, the skill that fueled his rise from playing center at Wesleyan to coaching at the top of the sport. On the day the Patriots arrived in New Orleans for his first Super Bowl as a head coach in late January 2002, he confronted a problem without precedent in his career: Milloy, his star safety, wanted a new hotel room.

At a walk-through practice, Milloy explained to Belichick that he had heard first-year defensive tackle Richard Seymour beaming about how spacious his room was. Milloy could barely squeeze luggage into his. What was up with a rookie scoring a bigger room than a veteran? “Really, Lawyer?” Belichick responded. Belichick was already trying to prepare a two-touchdown underdog to face the St. Louis Rams; he didn’t need another headache.

When Milloy returned to the team hotel after practice, a concierge greeted him with a key to a new room: “Big as hell,” Milloy recalled, and with a panoramic view of Bourbon Street, a Jacuzzi and, oddly, a treadmill in the corner.

At the Patriots’ team dinner that night, Belichick approached Milloy. “How do you like that room, Lawyer?” Belichick asked.

“It’s cool,” Milloy replied. “But I don’t know why they put that treadmill in there.”

“That’s because it was my room,” Belichick said.

Belichick grew up in Annapolis, drawn to football by the same innate pull that obsessed his father. Steve Belichick coached all over the country before he settled down as a Navy scout. He wrote a book, “Football Scouting Methods,” that became a bible among football intelligentsia. Bill followed his father on the road, where he watched Steve’s deathly serious attention to detail, and into coach’s meetings. Rick Forzano, a Navy assistant, would instruct 10-year-old Bill to break down film. Belichick would return with detailed notes, describing which receivers liked to run which routes on which downs.

“I hate to think what his IQ is,” Forzano said. “He looks beyond what’s happening.”

Forzano would later become the coach of the Detroit Lions, and he hired Belichick as a 23-year-old with one year of experience, a \$25-per-week assistant job with the Baltimore Colts. Forzano still called him Billy. Belichick came to the Lions as a special teams coach, but soon his duties expanded to wide receivers and linebackers. His voice quickly became valued in meetings. One coach would suggest adjusting the position of the strong safety, and only Belichick would identify why it might affect the defensive end.

“Bill’s always moving forward,” said Al Groh, an assistant alongside Belichick with the New York Giants. “He’s not just thinking about this season. What is distinguishingly unique for somebody who is very bright and on top is he’s a terrific listener. He’s interested in anybody and everybody’s opinion because out of that might come a good idea. That was the case even when he knew he wanted to do.”

In Cleveland, his first stop as a head coach, Belichick would surprise assistants by raising ideas they had mentioned a month prior. He contacts college coaches and visits campuses. Friends have noticed him drifting away from one conversation to eavesdrop on another.

In the spring of 2007, Belichick — a better lacrosse player than football player at Wesleyan — called Johns Hopkins lacrosse Coach Dave Pietramala to congratulate him on winning the national championship. They talked on the phone for an hour. Later, after an awards banquet both men attended, they met at a restaurant afterward and chatted for three hours. Pietramala realized Belichick had as many questions for him as he did for Belichick. They still talk or text weekly.

“The amazing thing to me with Coach, he’s always in search of a way to do things better,” Pietramala said. “I’m really taken back at how inquisitive he is about lots of different things. It doesn’t have to be in coaching. If we have a guest speaker, he wants to know, what did he talk about? What was good about it? For a guy who’s extraordinarily bright, extraordinarily successful, he’s always searching for a better way, a different way.”

The depiction stands in stark contrast to the label many have affixed to Belichick: cheater. The Indianapolis Colts expressed suspicion that the Patriots bugged the visiting locker room at Gillette Stadium. At the Super Bowl earlier this year, Don Shula called him “Belicheat.” Even before SpyGate, one NFL coach was asked how he killed time at league meetings. He replied, only half-jokingly, “Sit around and talk about how much the Patriots cheat.”

‘He knew everything’

Former players insist Belichick did not have to cheat, that his knack for detail and recall gave him all the edge required. Heath Evans, a former Patriots fullback, ran off the field following a kick return, during which he had executed a block. Evans had kept his man out of the play, but Belichick informed him he had taken an imprecise angle, the kind of infraction most head coaches may not spot days later on film, let alone in the cacophony of a real-time NFL game.

“He knew everything,” Evans said. “Literally. He knew every detail. There was instant accountability, every second of the day. Bill just knew everything. It was scary sometimes.”

One season during his tenure in Cleveland, Browns coaches met with Chicago Bears coaches to swap notes about teams in their respective divisions. “I swear, he knew more about Tampa than the Bears, who played them twice,” said Ferentz, then Belichick’s offensive line coach. “Their guys were looking at us like, ‘Holy smokes.’”

Belichick prepares for everything. During staff meetings, he asks questions about a tactic an opposing coach used a decade prior. During Super Bowl XLVI, in 2012, the Patriots’ headsets malfunctioned in the second half, leading to harmful miscommunication. And so, in the week leading into last season’s Super Bowl, Belichick stopped practice and shouted for the coaches to drop their headsets.

In today’s NFL, most coaches rise and become head coaching candidates by mastering a specific area. Once they become a head coach, they hand off one side of the ball to a coordinator. Belichick touches everything in the organization, from scouting draft picks to an offensive lineman’s hand placement. During practice, he can spot a fullback missing a block out of the corner of his eye, halt the drill and correct the mistake himself.

“It’s still mind-boggling how I sat there and watch that take place,” said former Patriots linebacker Willie McGinest, now an NFL Network analyst. “He would break down both sides of the ball and be instrumental in planning every phase of the game. Other coaches can’t do that. That’s just amazing to me, having been in the league 15 years.”

Playing for Belichick can be stressful. Evans would pass him in a hallway or the locker room, and Belichick would present a situation and play and ask him, “What is their linebacker going to be thinking?”

The strict standard also brought comfort. Players understand their role with uncommon clarity, and they trust Belichick’s detailed instructions will reap success. “Playing for Belichick was the most pressure-packed and most peaceful experience of my career,” Evans said.

“He’ll put it up on the board,” McGinest said. “He’ll say, ‘This is what’s going to happen. This is how they’re going to attack you. If you do X, Y and Z, you’ll be okay.’ And it seems like every single week, it happens. So it’s not hard to play in that system.”

The Belichick guys

Mike Whalen was still groggy when he woke up the day after taking a new job in 2010. After four grueling days, he had resigned as the coach at Williams to take the same job at Wesleyan, a fierce New England rival but also his alma mater. While at Williams, Whalen had tried to introduce himself to Belichick as a fellow Wesleyan alum, but Belichick brushed him aside after a perfunctory greeting. But hours after accepting the Wesleyan post, he checked his packed voice mail, and one of the first messages came from a familiar voice: “Hey, Mike, this is Bill Belichick, head coach of the New England Patriots.”

Whalen called him back, and Belichick gave him a simple introduction: “Glad to have you back. Anything I can do to help, let me know.”

Belichick has kept his word. He has spoken at fundraisers at Whalen’s request, counsels Wesleyan players interested in coaching and responds each time Whalen e-mails him. Whalen once asked him how he would handle playing at Trinity, a rival with a lengthy home winning streak. In the middle of his own season, Belichick replied and told him to ask the players how many of them had anything to do with the streak.

“A few of the seniors had played there once,” Whalen said. “It was virtually irrelevant to three-quarters of our team. It gives you a little bit of insight into how his mind works.”

Belichick shows the public only his grim side, saying little and revealing less. Those who know him quickly point out his understated sense of humor, his thoughtfulness and kindness toward people who supported him. He sent Forzano a signed picture after the first three Super Bowls he won. “He’ll be sending me a fourth,” he said.

Ray Perkins, the head coach who hired him to coach linebackers for the Giants in 1979, asked Belichick in 2013 to attend a fundraiser at Jones County Junior College, where Perkins had become head coach. Belichick agreed instantly, traveling to Ellisville, Miss., and telling football stories on stage at a banquet. "He talked for 45 minutes," Perkins said. "We had to drag him off the stage to get him to his plane."

Pietramala has seen Belichick play video games with his 11-year-old twin boys, then drop to the floor and wrestle with them. Last season, after one of Pietramala's players died suddenly, the coach asked Belichick for advice on how to handle his team. Belichick spent an hour on the phone with him.

"Not too many know him outside of the Gillette walls," Milloy said. "Because that's where he's always at. The thing about the perception is, I'll put it like this: Once you buy into the system, once you're a Belichick guy, you're a Belichick guy for life."

But his team always takes priority. The list of Belichick guys Belichick has cut ties with for the sake of the salary cap is long. McGinest, Seymour, Logan Mankins, Deion Branch, Mike Vrabel, on and on. It even includes the safety to whom he once gave his hotel room.

Days before Week 1 of the 2003 season, Belichick told Milloy the Patriots would release him if he didn't take a pay cut. Milloy refused. The Patriots waived him, and Milloy still chokes up discussing it.

Even as Milloy faced Belichick twice a season playing for the division-rival Buffalo Bills, they did not speak for three years. Milloy moved on to the Atlanta Falcons, who played the Patriots in the preseason's first game in 2006. After the game, Milloy mingled with former teammates on the field. He felt a hand on his shoulder pads. When he turned around, he was shocked.

"Hey, Lawyer," Belichick said. "Sorry for how everything went down."

Like that, his animosity dissipated. The gesture was small and unconventional, perhaps open to interpretation. But to Milloy, it had meant everything.

"It was perfect," Milloy said. "It was the Belichick way."



Persistent Bill Belichick grows into champion

By Jeff Howe

Thursday, September 4, 2014

Ted Marchibroda can't think of another NFL coach who has worked for a paltry \$25 weekly salary.

Then again, "Billy" Belichick always has managed to distinguish himself among his peers, both as a 23-year-old apprentice and a Hall of Fame lock who is entering his 40th coaching season. That milestone has been met with pride and applause by the football minds who worked closely with Belichick throughout his career, particularly as they watched him feverishly hone his craft during eight stops, including this 15-year tenure with the three-time Super Bowl champion Patriots.

"I don't think there's ever been a coach that got \$25 a week," Marchibroda said recently. "I'm very happy for him and very proud of the guy. To me, a guy like Billy deserves it. He has worked for it and has earned every bit of it. He took the chance, whether it was a chance or not, but he didn't get paid too much and decided to take it."

Breaking in

Belichick helped his father, longtime Navy coach and scout Steve Belichick, break down film for years and desperately worked his connections to break into the NFL upon graduating from Wesleyan. Marchibroda, who was hired by the Baltimore Colts in 1975, needed an assistant to do the film work after general manager Joe Thomas' cousin declined the job. Special teams coach George Boutselis recommended Belichick to Marchibroda, who was impressed enough to offer him the job after one interview.

"I decided to hire him because of the fact that I felt like, 'Well, if he runs into any trouble, we have his father as a backup,'" Marchibroda cracked.

Belichick logged every roll of film that crossed his desk, tallying Colts opponents' formations and plays based on the down and distance, time on the clock, score and hashmark, and he'd make a note of any plays the defense needed to practice. As the season progressed, Marchibroda noticed defensive players asking Belichick questions if their positional coach was unavailable.

Belichick also helped on special teams during practice and had the unenviable job as the turk, whose role is to tell players to bring their playbook to the head coach's office to be released.

And he was the driver. Marchibroda got a few free rooms at the local Howard Johnson hotel in exchange for Colts parking passes, so Belichick would shuttle hotel mates Marchibroda, Boutselis and offensive line coach Whitey Dovel to and from practice. They bought Billy most of his meals and slipped him extra cash on occasion. Steve Belichick once told Marchibroda he still had to claim his son as a dependent on his tax returns because of his uniquely low paycheck. But Bill Belichick recognized a priceless experience with three respected coaches, and he simply listened and processed every word he heard.

Marchibroda's staff turned a two-win team into a 10-4 outfit that ended a three-year playoff drought, and Belichick asked for a \$4,000 salary for 1976. Thomas declined, and Belichick joined Rick Forzano's Lions, who were willing to give him \$10,000.

Setting a foundation

Forzano knew Belichick from a four-year stint as the Navy head coach and hired the 24-year-old to assist on special teams and coach the receivers. But Forzano resigned after a 1-3 start and was replaced by Tommy Hudspeth, who transitioned Belichick to the tight ends in 1977. The entire staff was fired after the 1977 season, and Belichick hooked on with the Broncos after his only two years coaching offense, which he always has acknowledged to be significantly valuable to his development.

Belichick again assisted on special teams and defense in Denver, where he focused on the secondary under Joe Collier, the coordinator and architect of the famed Orange Crush 3-4 defense. Though Collier's 3-4 is different from Belichick's modern-day unit, it gave Belichick a first-hand look at another philosophy.

"Just about everything we were doing at that time, he soaked up pretty good," Collier said. "He was the early guy in the office and late to leave. . . . He fit right in with all the rest of the coaches."

Belichick again assisted with the film breakdowns, but he didn't overstep his bounds by piping up with new defensive schemes, even though Collier recognized those ideas were flowing. To this day, Belichick tells his players to "do your job" and not worry about others' responsibilities. Collier admired Belichick's grinding mentality.

"I could see his work ethic, how he is absorbing everything, how he is the son of a coach," Collier said. "And his ambition, you could see his ambition. He didn't want to stick doing what he was doing then. He wanted to advance. There was no question about it. Yeah, I could see he was going to be a success."

Launching a legacy

Giants coach Ray Perkins hired both Belichick and Bill Parcells in 1979, but the two new assistants met a few years earlier. Parcells, an Army assistant in the 1960s, used to exchange film with Steve Belichick because of the programs' agreement. Parcells then said he met Bill Belichick in the 1970s when his Vanderbilt squad was playing Army, whom Steve Belichick was scouting with his son.

Belichick joined the Giants to run the special teams and assist Parcells' defense. His responsibilities increased through the years as Parcells asked Perkins to give Belichick more time on defense. Belichick harnessed even more defensive authority when Parcells became the head coach in 1983, and he officially was promoted to defensive coordinator in 1985.

Still, Belichick remained infatuated with league-wide activity, which wasn't difficult to notice because the Giants coaches were confined to one small room. Romeo Crennel noticed Belichick's note-taking during offseason and draft prep.

But make no mistake: Belichick advanced because of his work with the defense. Parcels instituted the basic philosophy, which he picked up during his 1980 stint with Patriots coach Ron Erhardt and coordinator Fritz Shurmur, but Belichick led the group.

“(Belichick) put his own ideas in it and refined it, and we kind of modernized some of the coverages a little bit as we went,” Parcels said. “We always were able to, and this is much to his credit, just go forward with what we thought was necessary at the time, and he did a great job with it.”

Belichick earned more exposure after the Giants were 14-2 with the league’s second-ranked scoring defense in 1986, a season that culminated in a victory against the Broncos in Super Bowl XXI, and he soon started to turn down head coaching offers because he wanted to be set up with an ideal opportunity.

It came after the orchestration of one of the great stretches of defensive game plans in NFL history.

Belichick asked Parcels to switch his positional concentration from the linebackers to the secondary in 1989, which led to the hiring of Al Groh to coach the linebackers. Belichick’s thought process: To be a great defensive coordinator, he must have a great grasp of the defensive backfield.

The Giants generally were a 3-4 team with zone coverages, but they proved their matchup philosophy in the 1990 playoffs against the Bears, 49ers and Bills.

“Within the basic structure of your philosophy, you had to have the flexibility to play the game we need to play. Every opponent presents you with different issues,” Groh said. “At the heart of it all was Bill Belichick.”

The Bears, who visited the Giants in the divisional round, led the league in rushing attempts, and quarterback Mike Tomczak replaced Jim Harbaugh because of a shoulder injury. So Belichick’s plan was to play the whole game with an eight-man box that included some six-man fronts that still utilized 3-4 techniques, and the Giants rolled, 31-3.

They visited the 49ers in the NFC Championship Game and were tasked with stopping Joe Montana, Jerry Rice and a West Coast offense that ranked second in passing. Belichick designed a nickel game plan with man coverages that took away easy completions. The Giants survived, 15-13.

The Super Bowl was Belichick’s greatest trick as he prepared for the Bills’ K-Gun offense without the luxury of a bye week.

“If Buffalo had been trying to prepare themselves for the game by studying the previous two games, there was nothing that was going to relate,” Groh said.

The Giants used a 3-2-6 scheme with myriad zone coverages. Linebacker Lawrence Taylor became a down lineman while Carl Banks and Pepper Johnson played inside with a pair of safeties as outside linebackers, which increased their speed in coverage and enticed the Bills to run more with Thurman Thomas. The Giants offense complemented it all by controlling the ball for 40:33 in a shocking, 20-19 upset.

“I think we had a good defensive plan that was a little different, but it was tested because that was a close game and they didn’t have nearly as many opportunities as we had,” Parcels said. “We were big underdogs in that game. Just managed to pull it out.”

First opportunity

The Browns hired Belichick as head coach in 1991, and he immediately cleaned up a locker room that got out of hand under Bud Carson. Belichick implemented structure, a firm practice schedule and set rigorous expectations.

Ozzie Newsome, a Hall of Fame tight end who retired before the 1991 season to join the Browns front office, immediately recognized Belichick’s credibility. Newsome still had friends on the roster who relayed their appreciation for Belichick’s football IQ and teaching abilities by using past examples.

“He was very demanding on, ‘This is the way it is going to be. I’m coming off a Super Bowl. This is what it takes to win Super Bowls.’ Nobody had won a Super Bowl in Cleveland,” Newsome said.

Belichick finally got the Browns to the playoffs after an 11-5 season in 1994, but owner Art Modell made an unprecedented decision midway through the 1995 season to announce the team would relocate to Baltimore in 1996, which sabotaged the campaign and, ultimately, Belichick’s tenure.

"I know — K-N-O-W — that he got the appreciation of the job that he had to do when the move was announced, to be able to get that team to finish that season," Newsome said. "I don't think you can put a measure on how tough that was."

Belichick was fired after the 1995 season and joined Parcels' Patriots staff as the secondary coach in 1996. Parcels, Crennel and Groh all recognized an assistant coach with a greater perspective of the entire operation, and Belichick continued to make strides as the Jets defensive coordinator under Parcels from 1997-99. He also was mindful that he'd get one more shot to lead a team.

"Whatever the results were in Cleveland, they were certainly results that were below what he had hoped for in the beginning," Groh said. "So he had assessed then, 'OK, the next time I get my next chance, what are the things I'm going to change, how can I improve the structure of things, how can I improve myself in this particular role?' He made pretty good use of that time because he had a hell of a plan."

Second chance

Patriots owner Robert Kraft strongly considered hiring Belichick after Parcels bolted for the Jets in 1997, but Kraft decided to ultimately wash his hands from the Parcels era and went with Pete Carroll.

When given a chance to do it over in 2000, Kraft was all in on Belichick, who resigned as Jets head coach after a day because of the pending sale of the organization. After the Browns relocation, Belichick didn't want uncertainty.

Kraft recalled rave reviews from the Pats defensive backs in 1996, and the owner coveted Belichick's appreciation for the salary cap. During Belichick's interview, Kraft asked him about a key player, and the coach broke down a formula that illustrated why that player would be overpaid based on future production.

League and network executives pressured Kraft not to hire Belichick because of his dry media appearances, and Kraft also withstood the Jets' three-week standoff to release Belichick from his contract, but the owner identified what he wanted and remained persistent.

"I was patient and waited for him," Kraft said.

After a 5-11 season in 2000 and Drew Bledsoe's injury in Week 2 of 2001, Belichick rode Tom Brady the rest of the way. Belichick then sold the "one game at a time" mantra after a 30-10 Week 4 loss to the Dolphins by burying a football at practice.

"When you screw up and have concern about your job and all those things," Crennel said, "I think that eased some of the tension and allowed guys to focus on the next game."

Crennel, the Pats defensive coordinator from 2001-04, really noticed the players buying into Belichick's message after a tight, 24-17 loss to the Rams that dropped them to 5-5, their last defeat of the season.

Crennel was part of Belichick's two most historic game plans — Super Bowl XXV and Super Bowl XXXVI — and likened the prep work to his racquetball sessions with Belichick during the 1987 strike. Pinpoint the vulnerability (the Bills' impatience, the Rams' stubbornness, Crennel's backhand) and attack.

The result, a 20-17 victory against the Rams, spawned a dynasty that includes more Super Bowl wins (three) and appearances (five), division titles (11) and victories (163) than any team in the league since Belichick took the helm.

He is a disciple of many and gathered valuable knowledge at every stop along the way, but anyone who has worked with Belichick during the past four decades has recognized a level of success that is his own doing. After all, if anyone else did actually coach for \$25 per week, they probably didn't last 40 years.

"It's remarkable what he's done there," Parcels said. "The people in New England are lucky to have him."

Offensive Coordinator Josh McDaniels



LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON: COACHING IS IN THE FAMILY FOR JOSH MCDANIELS

By Ryan Hannable

Friday nights were a big deal for Canton McKinley High School, a big school in Canton, Ohio, which some called the high school capital of America.

The school was winning state and national championships left and right led by legendary head coach Thom McDaniels.

Standing behind Thom on the sidelines every game was a young boy.

"What's the call?" a trainer would ask.

"Toss to the right," the boy replied.

With no headsets back then, it was all hand signals, and Josh McDaniels knew the play before it happened. After all, it was his dad leading the way for Canton McKinley, and Josh was always at his father's side at practices, so he knew everything.

He watched film, he watched drills, he watched scrimmages, he watched it all — anything football related, Josh was there.

"I got to start to see that at a very early age when I started to go to two-a-day practices when I was 5 and really got to see that up close and personal. I was kind of a sponge at that point and I fell in love with the game of football through [my dad]," Josh said. "I knew real early in my life that this was probably something I wanted to do. I didn't know what level, but at some point I wanted to be a coach."

From a player at Canton McKinley himself, to playing in college at John Carroll University, to being a graduate assistant at Michigan State, to now being one of the best offensive coaches in the NFL — everything Josh did and still does now, he traces back to his dad.

STARTING HIM YOUNG

Thom is regarded as one of the best coaches in Ohio high school football history. In 1997, he was named national high school football Coach of the Year by USA Today while leading his Canton McKinley team to state and national titles.

He won 134 games at Canton McKinley from 1982-97 — the 1997 team went 14-0 and won both state and national championship titles. He then went on to coach two other high schools in the state before retiring.

Many of his players got major Division 1 scholarship offers, so big-name coaches were always getting in contact with him. Football was life in the McDaniels household and Thom's two sons, Josh and Ben (Rutgers' offensive coordinator), were always by his side.

"They both loved to watch film with me back then," Thom said. "It was 16-millimeter film and it was a big deal when I brought the projector home and let them run the buttons."

Thom's connections to college coaches are ultimately what led to Josh's career path.

Josh played quarterback for his dad at Canton McKinley and then went on to play at John Carroll University, a Division 3 school in Ohio “where he belonged,” according to his dad.

He didn’t play quarterback in college because a sophomore already had that position locked down. Ironically, it was current Patriots director of player personnel, Nick Caserio, so McDaniels made the switch to wide receiver and it worked out as he got regular playing time.

“He’s an incredible human being,” McDaniels said of Caserio. “I am very fortunate he befriended me when I went to John Carroll as a freshman. We played three years together, had a lot of fun, enjoyed a lot of success and handled some adversities as well playing together and became very good friends through the whole process.”

(McDaniels was the one who recommended Caserio to work for Bill Belichick and the Patriots. “I knew when I recommended him to Bill that he was the kind of person that would never, ever let you down, and he has definitely held his end of the bargain up,” McDaniels said.)

In the winter of 1998, Josh’s playing days were over, but the majority of his football journey was just beginning.

‘DAD’S INFLUENCE ENDS HERE’

With Thom coaching for so long and having a lot of contact with college coaches, he knew Josh would need to get a graduate assistant job if he wanted to go anywhere in coaching.

After sending out his resume, Josh only got one offer, but a good one at that — a graduate assistant job at Michigan State under Nick Saban.

“I knew that going and being a GA for Nick would be a great experience for him because Nick is extremely demanding and extremely tough and very detail oriented,” Thom said. “I thought it was a really good place for him to go and begin his college coaching experience and all that proved to be true. If you work for Nick you can work for anybody.”

“I remember taking him [to Michigan State] and telling him, ‘OK, you’re going to coach at Michigan State and you’re going to coach for Nick Saban. This is where your old man’s influence ends. There is nothing I can say and nothing I can do to help you after this point. Dad’s influence ends here,’ ” he added. “I think he knew that and I think he understood that. He worked real hard to do things whatever it was.”

After a few years at Michigan State, Josh got a job in the NFL with the Patriots in 2001 as a personnel assistant.

Josh served a number of roles in New England — personnel assistant, defensive assistant, quarterbacks coach and offensive coordinator before becoming a head coach in Denver for two seasons and then an offensive coordinator in St. Louis.

Then in 2012, McDaniels found his way back to New England, where it all began as the offensive coordinator under Belichick.

COACHING LIKE HIS DAD

Even though Thom coached teenagers and Josh is coaching grown men, Josh still uses a lot of the same communication methods. Josh is a big believer in connecting with players regardless of age and stature.

“I would say most of it — the way I communicate with the players, the way I kind of interact with them, I really want them to understand what I am saying,” Josh said. “If I need to say it a different way, I will. That is an important part of coaching and he was so good at it. He obviously had a little different types of kids, different varying levels of background, communication, intelligence, age — those types of things so you have to be creative at times. You have to find a way to connect with all your players.

“He was very, very good at that. It’s one of the things I try and do the best I can because we have obviously a lot of older men, but nonetheless you still need a connection and if you can connect with these guys at this level and they know you have their best interest at heart, then they are going to give you everything they have. That is an important thing to learn early as a coach and I was fortunate to learn it from my father.”

Josh doesn’t often reach out to his father for advice, but on occasion does, usually to get his opinion on dealing with a player or other off-field situation, rarely ever X’s and O’s.

"It's about managing people or it's about dealing with a situation or an issue with a player just because when you coach high school football, I did all of that on a daily basis because you're dealing with kids as they are growing up," Thom said. "They are maturing and becoming men. Most of the time he's already got the answer in his mind and he is just looking for affirmation from me."

Thom still tries to remain as involved in the game as he can from the afar like when he watches a Patriots game in person, Josh gives him an idea of what the game plan is and what to watch for from the opposing defense as a way for Thom to be able to watch the game from the stands with a coaches perspective.

"I'm able to watch the game plan unfold and I am sort of able to anticipate based on what they've done before and what the opponent presents I get to anticipate things that they'll do," Thom said. "That is great for me because it allows me to be engaged in the game and not just a spectator."

One of the most memorable moments for the two occurred during February's Super Bowl. The Seahawks scored with 4:54 left in the third quarter to go ahead by 10 points — 24-14, which took a lot of wind out of the Patriots'™ sails, but not for the McDaniels clan.

Thom and the rest of the McDaniels family were seated at the 35-yard line, just behind the Patriots bench, and it was then and there Thom and his son had a moment they will never forget.

"For whatever reason I looked down to the bench and he looked up at me and I gave him a thumbs up and he smiled as big as can he could smile and he gave me a thumbs up," Thom said. "It was never planned and not prepared for. It was like he was letting me know that he had the thing under control."

The Patriots went on to score two fourth-quarter touchdowns and held on thanks to a last-minute interception to beat the Seahawks, 28-24, and win Super Bowl XLIX.

"I'll never forget that, and he won't forget that either," Thom said. "He talked to me about it after the game. It was just one of those little two seconds on your life that was very meaningful to him and very meaningful to me. We both didn't know the outcome, but we knew what was going to happen."

COACHING RUNS IN FAMILIES

Like Josh learned from Thom, Belichick learned from his dad, Steve, which Thom said is a reason why he is always welcome at the Gillette Stadium facility.

During his first few years in New England Josh didn't ask Belichick if his dad could come out to watch a practice, but after he became comfortable, he did, and Belichick agreed with no questions asked. Thom recalled the first practice and his first meeting with Belichick when the coach told him he was welcome whenever he wanted.

"Josh told [Bill] later that he may have created a monster. When he said he's welcome anytime he's going to want to do that, and Bill said, 'No, I meant it. Anytime, anywhere he's welcome,' " Thom said. "I think [Bill] sees between Josh and I what he had with his dad and he's going to respect and honor that. I appreciate that so much."

The bond between a coach and his son is special, and Josh knows just how lucky he is to be able to have that with his father.

"I think it's probably I would say the most important ingredient in my upbringing," Josh said. "I got an opportunity to watch him do it. I fell in love with the game of football through him and watch him grind and coach, win and lose, and go through tough times, celebrate great victories and that type of things.

"This aside from faith and your family, this game has really become a huge part of our life. It doesn't consume us, it certainly isn't bigger than the two previous things I've mentioned, but it is an enormous part of our life. It defines a lot of our weekends. It determines a lot of our happiness and joy sometimes.

"As a son of a coach, all you want is for your dad to have success and for your dad to be happy. When you become one yourself, then you have a different understanding of the type of commitment he made his entire life to be a good teacher, good role model, to be a good coach, and there is no way I could have asked for a better father."

From the Friday nights at Canton McKinley to Super Bowl Sunday at University of Phoenix Stadium, the father-son bond has always been there and will never go away.

Defensive Coordinator Matt Patricia



Matt Patricia, Belichick's Rocket Scientist

By Tim Rohan
November 29, 2016

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — In 2004, when the Patriots were at the height of their dynasty, they put out word that they had an opening for a “coaching assistant,” an entry-level position. A Syracuse football grad assistant named Matt Patricia applied, was summoned to New England and found he would be interviewing with Bill Belichick himself. Belichick grilled Patricia on plays, schemes and terminology. He kept pushing for more detailed answers, probing deeper with his questions, putting Patricia under constant psychological pressure.

Patricia left the interview wondering, what just happened? He had studied aeronautical engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Firms such as Boeing, General Electric and Lockheed Martin had flocked to RPI to recruit bright minds like him. But this Belichick interview, Patricia would later tell his friends, was the hardest interview he ever had.

The Patriots sent Patricia home around midday, earlier than he expected, and he spent the trip back replaying the conversation in his head. He didn't know that everyone who works or plays for Belichick is at some point subjected to intense evaluation. Belichick needs to know that he can trust you, that you can deliver, and then maybe he'll give you some responsibility, and then some more, until, a decade later, you're his right-hand man running his defense. Patricia's phone rang. The Patriots. The job was his, but they wanted an answer immediately. He hesitated. Understandably, he told them he needed to consult his wife first.

The Patriots pulled the offer. If Patricia couldn't answer them then, they figured, he wasn't that committed. He wouldn't fit their culture.

Patricia freaked out. He called Nick Carparelli, a friend who had worked at Syracuse and also as the Patriots' director of operations under Belichick. Carparelli knew the organization well. He called a Patriots assistant and stressed how much Patricia really, truly wanted the job. The next day Belichick called Carparelli back. According to Carparelli, this is how the conversation went:

“What's up with this kid Matt Patricia? Should I hire him?”
“Absolutely, coach.”

“Is he going to flake out on me? Does he really want the job? Or is he going to leave midseason?”
“Coach, trust me.”

“Nick,” Belichick said, “if I hire this kid and it doesn't work out, I'm going to kill you.”

* * *

Belichick felt strongly because, the way he runs the Patriots, his coaching assistants serve a vital role. More than most NFL coaches, Belichick morphs his defense each week, tailoring it to stop that specific opponent, requiring endless amounts of preparation. The assistants study hours of film, write scouting reports and handle whatever work trickles down from the coaches. They do a lot of necessary but grueling grunt work.

Belichick likes hiring assistants young because they have a “clean mind,” says Mike Judge, a former Patriots coaching assistant, and Belichick can program them to think the way he wants. Josh McDaniels was selling plastics in Cleveland when Belichick hired him. Bill O'Brien had no NFL experience and was the offensive coordinator on Duke team that had just gone 0-12. Eric Mangini was a Browns ball boy and a public relations assistant.

When the Patriots brought Patricia in for an interview, his résumé wouldn't have caught the eye of many NFL teams:

- Bachelor of Science degree, aeronautical engineering, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
- Application Engineer, two years, Hoffman Air & Filtration Systems, East Syracuse, N.Y.
- Defensive line coach, two seasons, Amherst College
- Graduate Assistant, three seasons, Syracuse University

Patricia spent his first two years out of college working at Hoffman Air & Filtration, where he helped sales reps supply industrial blowers to wastewater plants. The sales reps loved him, called him brilliant, and so did his colleagues. He convinced them to use computers and input data in spreadsheets, and it streamlined Hoffman's entire ordering process. The market for selling blowers was competitive, says Jim Ward, Patricia's boss at the time, and the new computer system allowed them to "focus more on the strategic side of the sale. It gave us more time to think: What more can we do to position our products better?" Patricia became a rising star in the engineering world. General Electric and General Dynamics showed interest in him, according to his father, Ed. Westinghouse reportedly offered him a job maintaining nuclear subs and aircraft carriers, for a salary close to six figures.

Then fall came around, and Patricia smelled the fresh-cut grass of the local football fields and realized he missed the game. Through his RPI connections he got a job coaching the Amherst defensive line, for less than \$10,000 a year. He rented a room in another coach's apartment and rode his bike to the football facility up a hill each day, dodging passing cars, questioning his decision whenever one came too close...

When Belichick hired him as an assistant, Patricia felt indebted. He worked so hard and watched so much film that he often ended up sleeping at his desk at Gillette. At one point, he stashed an air mattress there for convenience. Patricia told one friend that defensive coordinator Romeo Crennel worried for his health. Boy, you've got to go home and sleep! Take a break. Relax a little.

But those nights reminded Patricia of his RPI days, when he pulled all-nighters studying for engineering exams, chugging Mountain Dew and downing Pixy Stix powdered candy to stay awake. Watching film, Patricia used the same note-taking technique he had developed at RPI. Engineering students were usually allowed to bring a page of notes to exams, and Patricia had a reputation for having arguably the best. "You'd look at it and it'd be like hieroglyphics," says Mike Mucci, another RPI engineer. "All these crazy equations."

"People talk about players, but a really good coach?" says Light. "That may be more rare than an elite corner or quarterback or defensive end."

Patricia's specific engineering discipline had also prepared him well for hours of meticulous film study. "[Aeronautical engineering] promotes a very structured, very rigorous, very systematic way of thinking," says John Tichy, a long-time RPI engineering professor. Building a rocket and getting it off the ground requires more precision than building a bridge that will stand in place. With the rocket, Tichy says, "every little last decision is delicate."

With that attention to detail, Patricia, a lowly coaching assistant, established himself as one of the smartest coaches in any room. When Belichick rattled off the daily practice schedule, Patricia organized everything down to the minute, in his head. When Belichick approached the coaching assistants with special "projects"—opponents' tendencies he wanted studied on film—Patricia juggled eight, nine, 10 of them at a time. "He'd be helping crack the code for that week's opponent," says Judge, the coaching assistant who worked alongside Patricia in 2005. "There were guys in the building that didn't see [a tendency on film] until he pointed it out."

Patricia told friends that, when he arrived, Belichick was still "a pencil and paper guy," writing film notes by hand. Patricia helped digitize the Patriots' film review system, just as he did at Hoffman. He ran a seminar teaching Patriots rookies the video system, gave older coaches basic computer training and showed the savvier coaches how to input data into spreadsheets, analyze it and incorporate the information into their weekly game plan.

Patricia told one friend that he saved Belichick "two to three hours" a day because the new system gave Belichick, a notorious film junkie, an easier way to study tape. Which gave Belichick that much more time to scheme and strategize for each week's opponent.

Belichick started taking Patricia on scouting trips, giving him a glimpse into his world. "[Matt] logged a lot of hours driving Bill around," says former Patriots lineman Matt Light, who is friends with Patricia. "[Bill] wanted him close because he saw the value in a guy like Matt. People talk about players, but a really good coach? That may be more rare than an elite corner or quarterback or defensive end. They're very difficult to find in this league."

* * *

Maybe Belichick saw a bit of himself in Patricia. Like Belichick, Patricia played football at a Division III school: Belichick attended Wesleyan, a private liberal arts college in Connecticut, and Patricia attended RPI, a private research college in Troy, N.Y., whose team mascot is the Engineers. Patricia and his teammates took calculus, physics and chemistry classes as requirements. They played home games on a humble patch of grass in the heart of campus, in the shadow of engineering and architecture buildings. Their rivalry games had trophies that you might expect from an engineering school: a pair of Dutch clogs, a surveying tool and ... a shot glass.

Like Belichick, too, Patricia wasn't an NFL-caliber athlete. He arrived at RPI listed as a 5'11", 200-pound offensive lineman, and he sat for his first two years and played sparingly his junior year as he tried adding weight. By senior year, he still only weighed 227 pounds. He platooned at guard thanks to his intelligence, work ethic, and strong will. In one game against Albany, when Patricia had trouble blocking a defensive lineman who looked close to 300 pounds, people approached offensive line coach Ray Moran telling him to sub Patricia out. Instead, Moran gave Patricia another chance. He ordered Patricia to cut block the defender every play, which meant diving at the man's legs to "cut" him down.

"You need to do whatever it takes to do your block and get him on the ground," Moran told Patricia. "You need to put your self pride aside. Or you won't play anymore."

Patricia cut block his defender the rest of the game, and the Engineers won, 41-7. The cut block became Patricia's signature move. His teammates gave him a nickname: Scissors.

* * *

After two years, in 2006, Belichick promoted Patricia to coach his linebackers, another sign Patricia was gaining Belichick's trust. The linebackers are usually the heart of Belichick's defenses, the players he gives the most responsibility. The group Patricia inherited included veterans Junior Seau, Tedy Bruschi and Mike Vrabel. Patricia's friends joked: What could he teach those guys? Seau and Bruschi were older than Patricia; and Vrabel was only a year younger.

Their linebacker meetings often got rambunctious, like a class of kids taking advantage of a substitute teacher. "We busted his balls, without a doubt," says Vrabel, who was notorious for his sarcasm. If Patricia made a mistake, they pointed it out. If Patricia got too repetitive, they complained. They even pressured Patricia to end meetings early, threatening to walk out.

"Listen up!" Patricia would say. "I'm trying to get something accomplished here!"

Sometimes Belichick sat in on the meetings "just to make sure everyone would sit there and really listen," says Jerod Mayo, who joined the group a few years later. "Make sure they would stay the entire meeting." Belichick observed, watched film with them and interjected at times. Taking grief during defensive meetings had been a rite of passage for him, too, when he got his break coaching Lawrence Taylor and the Giants' defense in his early 30s, working under Bill Parcells. Pepper Johnson, a member of that Giants unit, told Rosevelt Colvin, one of Patricia's linebackers, that the Giants had treated young Bill Belichick the same way. "We're leaving!" the Giants would threaten. "We're done!" "We busted his balls, without a doubt," says Vrabel. The Giants had treated young Belichick the same way.

In time, Patricia gained the respect of the room thanks to the thoroughness and quality of his coaching. He still pulled all-nighters studying film, looking for any weakness the Patriots could exploit. He dug up film from five years earlier that would prove useful. He used analytics before analytics was a trend. He broke down plays as finitely as he could: by formation, down and distance, spot on the field ... specific time in the calendar year. When the linebackers gave him lip, he'd joke, I could've been a rocket scientist, you know!

"He always had us very prepared," Vrabel admits.

Then Bruschi retired, Seau retired and Vrabel was traded to the Chiefs. And the Patriots started cycling in younger, cheaper linebackers—Mayo, Gary Guyton, Pierre Woods, Rob Ninkovich, Brandon Spikes, Dont'a Hightower, Chandler Jones, Jamie Collins. It became Patricia's job to ensure they filled their roles like Bruschi, Seau and Vrabel. Like other Pats defenders, Ninkovich (50) went from struggling journeyman to NFL stalwart under Patricia's tutelage. Photo: Matthew J. Lee/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

Like other Pats defenders, Ninkovich (50) went from struggling journeyman to NFL stalwart under Patricia's tutelage.

The younger linebackers listened with rapt attention as Patricia taught them their new game plan each week. The son of two teachers, he had a way of explaining complex ideas. He assigned some of them film-study homework and asked others to come in for tutoring sessions. He showed them how to read the smallest tendencies, like how the slot receiver's foot placement on the line can tell which way his route will go. Once, preparing for the Titans, Guyton recalls that Patricia held a seminar entirely on Chris Johnson draw plays, because the Tennessee running back had just burned another team on a long draw. Patricia showed a 90-play reel and kept pausing and rewinding the footage, pointing out all the keys.

After defensive coordinator Dean Pees departed in 2010, Belichick assumed most of the job's responsibilities, but he eventually he put Patricia in charge of calling the defensive plays. Two years later, in 2012, Belichick gave Patricia the defensive coordinator title, too, and then started giving him more and more freedom.

New players kept cycling in, and the Patriots kept winning, and Belichick seemed to have an epiphany. If he jettisoned players whose performance dipped, who were approaching a big payday, or who just didn't fit his culture ... Patricia could still take the remaining players and build a defense that would maintain a certain level of play. As Matt Light put it: "If [Patricia] can look at a rocket and figure out how the thrust is going to interact with the gravitational force, he can look at the opponent's scheme and get fairly creative, right?"

Working with Patricia in his ear, says Mayo, "was like having a cheat sheet for the exam."

On the Patriots' sideline, when the New England defense took the field, Patricia never seemed more than a few feet from Belichick's side. He was the one sporting the dark, heavy beard, the baggy red pullover and the backwards cap. Always with a pencil behind his ear. Casual fans saw him on TV and wouldn't know his name if not for the infographic. They joked that Patricia looked like someone Belichick had created in a lab, the perfect sidekick to Belichick and his hoodie look.

As the defensive coordinator Patricia made calls directly into the helmet of Mayo, the middle linebacker, like a command center beaming an astronaut directives. Patricia talked almost nonstop, conveying to Mayo various concepts to tell his teammates, rambling on about reads and adjustments, trying to cram as much information as he could before the mic shut off, in accordance with NFL rules, with fifteen seconds left on the play clock. When undrafted rookie Malcolm Butler intercepted Russell Wilson at the goal line to win Super Bowl XLIX, Butler credited Patricia for preparing him to expect a throw, when millions of people at home thought Seattle would run Marshawn Lynch. With Patricia in his ear, Mayo found most of what he said came true. "It was like having a cheat sheet for the exam," Mayo says. "Like having the answers for the test."

* * *

The New England defense is currently undergoing another makeover. Mayo retired in the offseason at age 29, and Belichick traded away Chandler Jones a year before he would become a free agent. Then at the trade deadline, Belichick dealt Jamie Collins, another impending free agent. Media reports suggested the Patriots were unhappy with Collins' habit of freelancing off the game plan. But whatever the case, in about eight months the Patriots lost their captain linebacker and their two best pass-rushers—the latter two by Belichick's choosing.

Now two-thirds into the season, the Patriots defense is still searching of its identity. It looks passive at times and seems to lack the firepower of years past, and the Boston media has begun criticizing Patricia. During a conference call last week, a local reporter asked Patricia if he felt "disappointed" in himself for not optimizing Collins or Jabaal Sheard, another pass-rusher whom the Patriots had just benched. Patricia bristled at the question and said it was a long season and he coaches the players he has available.

It is perhaps the most difficult task Belichick has ever given Patricia, his resident rocket scientist. Can he take those available players and build a classic Patriots defense by January? If so, New England will contend for its fifth Super Bowl title under Belichick. If not, the defense will be blamed for undermining Tom Brady and an elite offense. (The Patriots declined to allow Patricia to be interviewed for this story.)

At some point, too, other teams may try poaching Patricia for their head coaching jobs. They started calling last season. The Browns interviewed Patricia before hiring Hue Jackson. Not long afterward, Patricia had a conversation with his father, Ed, about the coaching carousel. He told his dad that he was content staying in New England. He had built a life here with his second wife; they had gotten married in Aruba, with Belichick and several other Patriots coaches in attendance. Patricia also had three young children to think about, all under the age of 6, and his in-laws lived nearby, close enough to help out as he ground through 18-hour days at Gillette obsessing over the defensive game plan.

His father agreed, and wondered why he would be in a hurry to leave Belichick's side. For all the coordinators Belichick has groomed and seen move on—McDaniels, Mangini, O'Brien and so on—none has yet been able to recreate the winning culture Belichick has in New England. A culture that churns out young, talented coaches, whose work, in turn, strengthens that very culture.

Patricia's father wondered aloud, "Where else can you go where every year you're in the playoffs, you're with top talent, and you're with probably the best NFL coaches to come along in a long time ... and you can learn from that guy?"

New England Patriots coach Matt Patricia follows passion from engineer to NFL head coaching candidate

By Kevin Duffy

on January 07, 2016 at 9:49 AM

Inevitably, Matt Patricia was going to move on.

The guy was too smart, too talented, too damn good at his job to stick in one spot for too long, even if it was a position in which he immediately excelled and, by all accounts, thoroughly enjoyed.

Well-liked, tireless, engaging and super passionate, Patricia had been the perfect hire years ago. He caught on quickly, taking just months — not the customary year or so — to adjust to how the organization operated. In the words of one former staffer, "there was never an ego with Matt; it was all about getting the job done."

"A good fit for our organization," another said.

But, according to someone with direct knowledge of Patricia's thinking, his departure had been considered a "distinct possibility" for quite some time. Another source was aware that Patricia had opportunities to leave. He just hadn't taken them.

Until....

Full disclosure: The sources are Jim Ward, Joe Markert, Dave Shanahan and Bill Fisher. You don't know them. Matt Patricia does.

And the organization was Hoffman Air & Filtration Systems in East Syracuse, N.Y., where Patricia worked for two years back when he was just a regular guy, long before he became a Super Bowl champion defensive coordinator with the Patriots, and long before he landed on the interview lists for multiple NFL head coaching vacancies.

OK, maybe it's unfair to say Patricia was just a regular guy, because nobody from Hoffman would characterize him as just that. But, among other descriptions, he was that. He was part of a tight-knit office, working his first job out of college for a highly successful company. He threw snowballs at his boss. He threw snowballs at other departments with his boss. He made million dollar sales. You know, regular stuff.

An aeronautical engineering major and the center on the football team at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Patricia graduated in the spring of 1996, then interned with the RPI football team for the fall season. It was off to the workforce in the spring of 1997, as Jim Ward hired Patricia to be one of eight or nine application engineers at Hoffman Air & Filtration.

"One of my favorite employees of all-time," Ward said. "I've been doing this 25 years."

Without getting too far down the engineering rabbit hole, Hoffman produced multistage centrifugal blowers, so Patricia had to A) Understand what the hell that meant and B) Sell the technology (the blowers/compressors), design the project based on plant size, bid the project, close the order, manage the order and startup the project.

Hoffman primarily sold to wastewater treatment plants; the company's blowers provided airflow, adding oxygen during the treatment process.

Patricia also worked on projects with coal-fired power plants, refineries, chemical plants for oxygen and nitrogen, boosters and landfills. He dealt with independent reps across the country — Florida, Texas, Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas. The job involved constant interaction with the reps because, as Ward said, "we're supporting them so they can sell our product."

"I mean, the reps loved him," Ward said.

"Matt was an engineer," said Joe Markert, who held the same position at Hoffman. "But he had a great sales personality."

Most of the work was done from the office, where Patricia and the other sales engineers sat in an open bullpen setup. No cubicles. This created constant chatter, as guys could shout out questions to the group when they worked the phones.

No shirt and tie was required. Business casual. And Patricia conformed to normal workplace attire; only later in life did he land a job where his direct supervisor truly did not care about dress code.

And this was Matt Patricia pre-beard, and immediately post-football, so he was a tad slimmer, although he was going through what every athlete experiences after retirement: Craving the same hearty diet minus the same workout regimen.

As for Patricia's trademark pencil behind the ear? He didn't pick it up at Hoffman. Nor did he drink coffee or coke, or Red Bull or Mountain Dew.

He started in 1997, pre-Google (founded in Sept. 1998), so when important questions arose, the group of sales engineers always had a sports almanac handy. They made too many miscellaneous bets to remember. Many were on sports, the answers in the almanac. Others involved random workplace occurrences. The wager was almost always the same. Not dollars, but Dinos.

"We would go down to Dinosaur Bar-B-Que — it's pretty well known — and you'd have to buy the guy's lunch if you lost," said Dave Shanahan, another former sales engineer. "We'd record it as a Dino."

Dinosaur and Mother's Cupboard, a double-wide trailer diner known for its outrageous portions, were the go-to spots when Patricia worked from the office, which was the majority of the time. The job required some travel, as Patricia would visit reps in the field. He'd also be on the road with Ward for trade shows. At least one of the trade shows was in New Orleans.

"I don't know if you've ever been out with Matt," Ward said, "but he knew how to have a good time."

Didn't affect his work, though.

"When we'd do trade shows and stuff, we'd all be hungover," Ward said. "He'd be bright-eyed, bushy-tailed. He had a very good recovery."

Patricia knew how to keep it light in the office, pranking co-workers on the pager system, which broadcast throughout the sales office and the adjacent factory. Other times he took a more direct approach.

"You could always count on Matt pegging somebody between the buildings with a snowball," Ward said. "And we had an engineering department in the back part of the building. We always used to like to just chuck snowballs up at the window and piss them off."

As Ward said, Patricia "made work fun." Markert took it a step further.

"If you didn't like Matt," he said, "you needed to get yourself checked out."

Markert called the clique of sales engineers the "clown club." A number of them, Patricia included, were not too far removed from college, and Ward, their boss, wasn't much older. Of course, it's easy to joke when business is good, and business was rolling at Hoffman. A sale of seven or eight centrifugal compressors — machinery manufactured next door, sometimes as large as six-feet tall and five-feet wide — could be a \$1 million order. There wasn't as much competition within the industry as there is today, and the Clown Club made for an excellent team.

The job was a standard 8-5, but they usually worked 50- or 60-hour weeks. Patricia "lived and breathed what he was doing," Ward said. His former co-workers describe him the exact same way his current employees do. Seriously, if we sync all quotes to the present tense, it's nearly impossible to distinguish what was said by his Hoffman buddies and what was said by the Patriots.

1). "You don't have to tell him twice how to do things. Matt's just the kind of guy who wants to grab as much work as he can, do as much work as he can."

- 2). "He's the kind of guy that he's got 10 projects going at once and then you're like, 'Hey, Matt. Can you do this and do that?' 'Oh yeah, no problem.'"
- 3). "He doesn't leave any stone unturned with anything. He covers everything you could possibly think of."
- 4). "He always brings new ideas for improvement, and he's never afraid to tackle a problem, no matter the magnitude."

Your answer key: No. 1 was Ward, his supervisor at Hoffman. No. 2 was his, um, supervisor in New England. No. 3 was Nate Ebner, who works under Patricia in the defensive backs division. And No. 4 was Markert, who once had a problem that Patricia fixed.

Markert had "way underbid" a wastewater treatment project in Mississippi. The contractor that won the bid was, in Markert's words, "ready to take us to the cleaners," and to make matters worse the rep for the contractor wasn't too fond of Yankees. Markert turned the project over to Patricia, who "somehow was able to befriend this guy and somehow make the project profitable."

The job required the fusion of technical knowledge and social skills, creating the ideal landing spot for a math whiz who, at his core, was just a regular dude.

"He just connected well with people," Ward said. "And people like to buy from people they like. When you combine his engineering expertise with his responsiveness and his personality, I think that's a winning combination."

Patricia predated the millennial generation, and he embraced the family environment at Hoffman. No one believed he was looking to jump ship immediately. But there was the thought that he'd leave because the opportunity for advancement at Hoffman was limited; it was a small company with young employees like Ward in management positions. According to Markert, Patricia did have offers within the field. He was talented, and he was sought after.

Additionally, Patricia had an aeronautical engineering degree, so Ward figured he'd eventually seek a job in aeronautics. Or maybe something more in line with the design side than sales.

As they'd come to learn, there was also a third reason for Patricia's potential departure.

Sometime before the fall of 1997, George Mangicaro, longtime head football coach at Liverpool high school, had a visitor at his office.

"I didn't know who he was, I don't know how he got my name, I didn't know where he was working," Mangicaro said. "But he came in and just had a love for a game."

He was Matt Patricia, and he was working about 10 miles east of Liverpool. He was inquiring about any openings on the Liverpool football staff.

Mangicaro had already filled out his staff for the season, but he listened to Patricia's credentials and welcomed him as a volunteer coach. He assigned Patricia to work with the varsity offensive and defensive lines, assisting Liverpool O-Line coach John Giannuzzi, who played behind current Patriots offensive line coach Dave DeGuglielmo at Boston University.

Working with Giannuzzi, Patricia taught blocking fundamentals and principles within the program's freeze option system, the same offense George DeLeone ran at Syracuse. Giannuzzi felt comfortable delegating responsibility to Patricia because, well, "he was really, really intelligent."

"Who knows how much he really knew?" Giannuzzi said.

Giannuzzi knew Patricia was an engineer, and like the guys back at Hoffman, he knew Patricia was serious about coaching. Why else would he be working as a volunteer assistant position coach for a high school team?

At Hoffman, Ward allowed Patricia to rearrange his schedule so he could make it to practice, which started when school got out. Ward said Patricia would "make it work," sometimes coming to the office on weekends.

He spent some nights and mornings volunteering at the Syracuse University program, trying to get his foot in the door. As ex-Orange coach Paul Pasqualoni told The Boston Herald, this involved everything from picking up players at the airport, running curfew checks in the dorms or setting up cones for on-field drills.

By 1998, Patricia had left Liverpool. He began volunteer coaching with the Syracuse Storm, a semipro team in the Empire Football League. And when we say semipro, we mean hardly professional at all. Players didn't get paid to play; they paid their way to play. These were ex-college and high school athletes who simply wanted to stay in the game.

Patricia worked with the Storm's offensive and defensive lines in the spring and fall of 1998. According to Bill Fisher, he "took it very seriously."

Less than two years into the job at Hoffman, Patricia began discussing his next step with his co-workers. The decision wasn't final, but he was leaning toward leaving the engineering field and trying his hand in coaching. He told Ward that he didn't want to be 40 or 50 years old saying, "God, I should have went after that."

"I didn't want to lose him as an engineer because he was a solid engineer and was really beginning to blossom and do well at his profession," Ward said, "but also when somebody says that's what they've always wanted to do, you've got to follow your dreams."

If it didn't work out, Ward told Patricia he'd take him back. And if Ward didn't have a spot, Patricia still had an aeronautical engineering degree to use. There wasn't monumental risk associated with leaving the company. As Shanahan pointed out, "there were all sorts of different things Matt could have done."

So Patricia worked at Hoffman through 1998. In '99, he became the defensive line coach at Amherst, a gig that paid \$8,000, according to The Herald. From there he went to Syracuse, and then joined the Patriots in 2004 as a coaching assistant, and then...

A decade later, Markert tells The Matt Patricia Story. He tells it multiple times each year to his kids, who someday must choose their paths in life. The message of the story is simple: "If you believe in something and you've got a passion for it, then you find a way to do it," Markert said.

But the actual details of the story are truly unbelievable: A promising young sales engineer/volunteer assistant high school offensive line coach wins a Super Bowl, designs and constructs one of the best defenses in football, and positions himself to perhaps someday take reigns as head coach of an NFL franchise.

Here's to whoever bet a Dino on that.

Offensive Line Coach Dante Scarnecchia

The Boston Globe

Patriots' offensive line revitalized thanks to Dante Scarnecchia

By Ben Volin
JANUARY 8, 2017

FOXBOROUGH — Bill Belichick always arrives for work before the crack of dawn. But he never has to turn the lights on at Gillette Stadium.

That is already taken care of by Dante Scarnecchia, the Patriots' offensive line coach.

"Six [a.m.] would be late for him. More like 4:30," Belichick said. "Oh, Dante's early. He beats everybody here. You have to pretty much stay here to beat him here."

At this time the last two years, Scarnecchia was doing what retired grandparents should be doing — putting his grandkids on the school bus, building woodworking projects, inviting friends over to the house.

But when the Patriots' offensive line fell apart at the end of the 2015 season, and the team and former coach Dave DeGuglielmo mutually agreed to part ways, Belichick knew there was only one person who could whip the offensive line into shape — the 68-year-old former US Marine Reserve who decided after the 2013 season that he had had enough of the grind.

Two years later, the grind pulled Scarnecchia back in.

"Dante, as I've said many times, is as good a coach as anybody I've ever been around," Belichick said. "I'd put him up there with Scott O'Brien, Nick Saban, guys like that. He does a great job, and it's great to have him back."

Scarnecchia declined to speak for this story, and has spoken very little about his return after two years of retirement, choosing instead to deflect attention onto his players. He last spoke during the Patriots' bye week in early November, and was asked if he felt refreshed during the off week.

"No, I don't," he said bluntly. "It's a grind."

"It's a lot of hours, but not my first rodeo. I knew what it was going to be like."

When asked about all of the praise he has received this year for turning around the Patriots' offensive line, Scarnecchia called it "terribly overrated."

"Every line coach in the league aspires for the same thing — continuity and players playing as hard as they can play," he said. "There's no magic to any of it."

But "Scar" seems to have brought his magic touch to the Patriots this season. A unit that was ravaged by injuries and inconsistency last year has been remarkably healthy and productive this go-around, and is a major reason the Patriots are 14-2 with a first-round playoff bye.

Doing things his way

The Patriots had 13 starting offensive line combinations last year in 18 games, and it wasn't just because of injuries. In two years under DeGuglielmo, the Patriots were constantly rotating guys in and out of games and into different positions, to cross-train them for versatility.

This year, though, the Patriots have had just three different combinations in 16 games, including the same offensive line over the past 11 games. That consistency has helped turn Marcus Cannon into an All-Pro at right tackle a year after Patriots fans wanted to ship him out of town. It helped turn youngsters David Andrews, Shaq Mason, and Joe Thuney into a formidable interior unit. It helped the Patriots rush for 1,872 yards and 19 touchdowns. And it kept the Patriots' quarterbacks clean, as they were sacked just 24 times all season, fifth fewest in the NFL. Last year the Patriots allowed 38 sacks, 14th most.

"I think there are some people in the organization that like the idea of bringing guys in and out of the offensive line. When Dante wasn't there they tried to push for that, and that [stuff] doesn't work in the offense," said three-time Pro Bowler Matt Light, the Patriots' left tackle from 2001-11. "Those are the kind of things that Dante knew, and he wouldn't allow it. He wouldn't care if God came down and said, 'Hey, you've got to rotate some guys in and out so they can play multiple positions and some experience.' He's got tried and true methods of coaching that just never change."

The Patriots speak reverentially of Scarnecchia, who will turn 69 just nine days after Super Bowl LI in February. He came to New England with former coach Ron Meyer in 1982 as a special teams and tight ends coach, and after joining Meyer in Indianapolis for the 1989-90 seasons, returned to the Patriots in 1991. For the next 24 seasons, Scarnecchia coached special teams, tight ends, and the offensive line, and was a defensive assistant for two seasons. He worked for Dick MacPherson, Bill Parcells, Pete Carroll, and Belichick, and even for himself for eight games in 1992 when Scarnecchia was named the interim head coach.

Tom Brady recently called Scarnecchia "the best offensive line coach in the NFL." Team broadcaster Scott Zolak said Scarnecchia deserves votes for Patriots MVP this season. Rookie guard Ted Karras called it a "privilege" to be coached by Scarnecchia and loves hearing Scarnecchia's old John Hannah stories. Offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels called Scarnecchia "a tremendous asset."

"He's been a tremendous mentor of mine, and he's certainly made a huge difference and impact on our group up front, and on our offense, and on our team," McDaniels said. "I don't think his value can be understated."

Scarnecchia's impact could be felt from the start. In organized team activities last spring, Scarnecchia worked his players hard (as much as rules allow) and would not allow poor technique to slide. In training camp, the linemen carefully lined up their helmets on the field after practice — all in order, facing the same way. The details matter, Scarnecchia hounded them.

"Even back in OTAs he was showing us that each and every day was going to count," backup tackle LaAdrian Waddle said. "We always talk about, 'Don't dip your toe in the water, dive in that mud.' So that's what we're doing, and it's paying dividends now."

Belichick praised Scarnecchia's organization, communication skills, preparation, and ability to teach fundamentals. Scarnecchia arrives at Gillette well before any other coach to get a headstart on his "lesson plans" for the day — the film he plans to show to his offensive linemen, the techniques he wants to teach — and Belichick praised Scar's ability to solve problems and think on the fly on the sideline during games.

"He's like the sixth man — there's the five linemen and the coach," Belichick said. "He has a lot to do with their continuity and their performance. They're all shareholders. I don't know if there's one majority stockholder."

No playing favorites

It couldn't have been easy for Scarnecchia to give up free time with his wife and grandkids to return to the grind of working for the Patriots. But Belichick said Scarnecchia has "a lot of energy," while Nate Solder said his coach seems like the same guy from before retirement.

"There's a lot of very similar things from what I remember. We do all the same drills, we go about our business the same way," Solder said. "It's a part of his blood, his DNA, the way he goes about coaching."

If Scarnecchia misses retirement, he doesn't show it. He has coached football since 1970, and won three Super Bowl rings with the Patriots the last decade, but he called this year's four-game experiment with Jimmy Garoppolo and Jacoby Brissett "as great an experience as I've ever had in coaching."

"I think Jimmy really showed what he can do," Scarnecchia said. "And Jacoby, he just earned nothing but huge respect around here given what he did in two games. So for me, personally, as a coach that's something you want to see every week. I was really lucky to be here for that."

And the offensive line isn't just thriving because of consistency. Dan Koppen, the Patriots' center from 2003-11 and a Pro Bowler in 2007, said the offensive linemen are forming a better pocket around Brady than they did last year. The best pockets are both deep and wide, yet last year the pocket was narrower.

"Last year with [DeGuglielmo], you saw a lot more vertical sets, and that pocket was sort of caving in on the outside because those tackles weren't building width into their sets like they are now," Koppen said. "You saw the tackles

basically going straight back all the time. Now he's got those tackles understanding when they can go wide in their sets and when they can't. You can see it in their hands, their body position, where their weight is. You can put on the tape from this year and last year, and the difference is remarkable."

And Cannon has been Scarnecchia's pet project. A talented but inconsistent swing tackle for the first five years of his career, Cannon started a career-high 15 games in 2016 and per Pro Football Focus allowed just two sacks and 27 total pressures on 555 pass blocks, earning the second-highest passing grade among all right tackles this season. Belichick said Cannon is in great shape this year and has worked hard on his technique, and he earned second team All-Pro honors.

"Marcus is a great example of how [Scarnecchia] develops talent and players," Koppen said. "Regardless if you're a No. 1 draft pick or undrafted, there's no sacred cows in that meeting room. No one's on a different level, and he treats and coaches everybody the same."

And the Patriots are certainly happy to have their wise offensive line coach back in the fold.

"He's in extremely early every morning and does everything he can to help us prepare for the day, for the opponent, to get his guys to improve and make progress, and I think that it rubs off on everybody," McDaniels said. "He makes us all better."

Safeties Coach Steve Belichick



Bill Belichick's son, new Patriots safeties coach, wants to be just like his dad

Mike Reiss

May 2, 2016

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- The oldest son of New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick settled into his chair Monday for his first official interview as the team's new safeties coach, and soon enough, there would be humor.

Steve Belichick, who paid his dues from 2012 to 2015 as an entry-level coach with the team, was asked about the challenges of sharing the same last name with one of the greatest coaches of all time. He laughed under his breath before looking up at the crowd of 15 to 20 reporters around him.

"This is one of them," he said of the intense media interest.

Elsewhere around the Patriots' media workroom, other assistants were engaged in interviews, but few, if any, had drawn the overflowing crowd that Belichick did.

He took it all in stride, perhaps a bit nervous for his first official media responsibility as a Patriots coach, yet striking the right mix between humility and humor that had some reporters buzzing afterward about the next generation of Belichicks in the coaching ranks.

What has it been like working for Bill Belichick?

"Obviously, I love my dad, he's my role model, my idol," the 29-year-old Belichick said. "I want to be just like him and I have since I knew what an idol was. It's rewarding for me to be able to see him more and learn from him more, because I've been away from him for high school and college."

Donning a gray Rutgers lacrosse sweatshirt to support his alma mater leading into next weekend's Big Ten tournament, Belichick playfully paid homage to the hoodie that his father has made famous.

"It's a good piece of clothing. I think everyone should have a hooded sweatshirt in their closet," he cracked.

That led to laughter among reporters, as did Belichick's response when asked if he has long-term goals to become a head coach one day: "I just hope to be here at the end of the day."

But if there was one thing that stood out more than anything from Belichick's 15 minutes answering questions from reporters, it was how seriously he takes his craft.

For example, when asked about what type of work he did the past four years as a low-level coach, he said simply, "My responsibilities were to help us win. If that was breaking down film, that was breaking down film; if that was throwing interceptions to defensive players to make them feel good, that's what I do. I'm here to win."

Sound familiar?

Belichick said he first remembers falling in love with football when he was 4. He had played at The Rivers School in Weston, Massachusetts, where he was a three-year starter at linebacker and fullback/tight end and also the team's long-snapper (a skill he learned from his late grandfather). Belichick ultimately went on to Rutgers, where he played lacrosse for four seasons before walking on to the football team as a long-snapper in preparation for a career in coaching.

He explained that he has always liked being part of a team, which means "having to put your personal success on the back burner for the betterment of the team, all to get to one goal."

Working 18 hours a day as an entry-level coaching assistant over the past four years certainly qualifies, and now that he's been elevated to a position coach, Belichick said, "It means everything to me."

That he's working under his father makes it even more special.

"I followed every single thing that he's done, and I've watched everything he's done, and he's the best that has ever done it -- he's my idol, he's my role model and he is my standard. So I just watch my dad," he said.

The Providence Journal

The education of Stephen Belichick

By Mark Daniels

Oct 3, 2015 at 11:36 PM

FOXBORO — Bill Belichick sat there and watched the game film, his eyes glued to the screen.

After each play, he'd mark the down and distance and note what stood out to him on both sides of the ball. He'd turn to the player next to him, pointing out responsibilities on each snap and what he thought should be done in certain situations.

It was just like preparing for any other game. But the future Hall of Fame coach wasn't breaking down film of the Patriots' next opponent. Instead, he was watching film of high-school students, particularly games involving The Rivers School in Weston, Mass., with his oldest son, Steve Belichick.

Related content Who can beat the Patriots? And who almost definitely won't? Donaldson: Fantasy football decision by NFL might not be a keeper No Patriots game this week: Test your knowledge in our bye week quiz "We'd talk about some keys that the other team would have. Like formation or various other tendencies — stances and splits and things like that," Bill Belichick said.

Every week during the season, the then-Rivers School coach Darren Sullivan would send Steve home with game film and eagerly await the results.

"He and his dad would go and watch the previous game's film together," Sullivan said. "We would give him copies and they would sit down together and break it down. Stevie would go over it with his dad, come back and have some ideas about the next week's opponent and that kind of thing. He would also watch film on his own."

Bill Belichick was 10 years old when his father, also named Steve, would have him break down film of Navy opponents. The elder Belichick revolutionized football scouting similar to the way his son would revolutionize coaching and game planning.

As they say, like father like son.

Learning how to break down film has long been a rite of passage in the family. Bill Belichick taught his son about formations and plays when Steve was in elementary school. His childhood also included trading cards and playing Madden NFL, but when his father was involved, it was all used as a tool for teaching the game.

"I mean, we've kind of been talking football back to football cards. Occasionally a video game and stuff like that, since he was in the single digits for sure," Bill Belichick said. "But he's kind of done that his whole life."

Now 28 years old and in his fourth season as a coaching assistant with the Patriots, Steve Belichick continues to follow in his father's legendary footsteps.

THE GRIDIRON was his playground.

Steve Belichick was four years old when his father took his first head coaching job in Cleveland. He was 13 when Bill Belichick was hired as head coach of the Patriots in 2000. As he grew up, he watched, listened and learned — like his father did when he was a boy — and spent summers at training camp.

"He's grown up around the facility, around the players, around the team," Bill Belichick said. "He's seen it from a coaching end as well as player end when he played in high school and college."

Like his father, Steve Belichick played lacrosse and football in college. And like his father, he was known more for his IQ than his athletic ability. When people noticed his last name on a jersey or a roster, lofty expectations followed. He had to live up to the challenge in high school and later at Rutgers. He impressed various coaches and peers along the way.

You won't find many backup long snappers breaking down film in college football. You probably won't find many future NFL draft picks going to these long snappers for advice, either.

But that's what happened during Rutgers' 2011 season.

After playing lacrosse for the Scarlet Knights for four seasons, Steve Belichick walked on to the Rutgers football team. On a team that featured eight future NFL draft picks, he helped defensive players break down film, just like his father had shown him.

Among those who he helped were future Patriots Logan Ryan and Duron Harmon.

"He did his job as the backup long snapper, but he was also like an assistant coach—esque," Ryan said. "That's where he showed off a little bit of his coaching skills. He showed us how to break down some film and showed us how to use that stuff years ago. He was a huge help."

"He was helping me in college getting ready for games," Harmon added. "He would tell me what he saw from their offenses, what I can be on queue for, what I should try to remember. You could tell that he was going to be a coach in college. You could already tell."

Scarlet Knights head coach Greg Schiano would give Belichick "projects" — like running the scout team, watching tape or putting together film clips. Bill Belichick called it "a great experience" that also turned out to be advantageous for the Patriots.

"I'm sure that he learned a lot through Coach Schiano as I have through all my conversations with Coach Schiano," Bill Belichick said. "And just the way he ran the team and things he did to prepare the team and so forth. Stephen and I have talked about those things as well. I've got some good ideas from some of the things that they did at Rutgers."

PART OF BEING a Belichick is the ability to stay composed. It's about taking a deep breath, staring across the sideline and having the confidence that you can outmaneuver the opposing coach. It's one of the things that's made Bill Belichick great.

Sometimes it's also about taking a deep breath and blocking out the noise. Steve Belichick learned that early. There were many times during Rutgers lacrosse away games that he heard it. Opposing fans tossed insults his way about the Patriots and his father.

"Every time we went on the road or Bill was at a game, everyone knew who Stephen was. He'd hear it from the stands," former Rutgers lacrosse coach Jim Stagnitta said. "There'd be hoots and hollers all the time. That just never really bothered him. When you spend time with him as you do with his dad, you learn he doesn't get rattled very easily. They're very steady when it comes to that."

Steve Belichick also dealt with trash-talking spectators in high school. But it wasn't fellow teenagers he had to worry about. It was the parents in the stands who behaved the worst, taunting the teenager.

"Surprisingly not with the kids. More so with the parents," Sullivan said. "But he was pretty stoic and handled it very, very well. I don't recall any times where he lashed out. He just handled it."

Sullivan, who also taught Steve Belichick in his modern world history and U.S. history classes, saw a young man who embraced his name and legacy. At The Rivers School, he'd often be seen wearing his grandfather's dog tags. On the field, he embodied a selfless, emotional leader as a senior captain, one who offered to sit out his final high-school game to give playing time to other seniors.

"I'm not surprised he's a coach, let's put it that way," Sullivan said.

The respect he garnered from teammates in high school and college carried over to Gillette Stadium. And this isn't a story about being nice to your head coach's son. Bill Belichick casts a large shadow, but Steve Belichick's worked hard to create his own identity.

"I think Steve's not necessarily trying to allow himself to be put under that umbrella," said Brendan Daly, the Patriots defensive line coach. "He's trying to do his own thing. He's working hard at the craft, get better every day and develop himself as a coach. It's fun to see."

ASK BILL BELICHICK about working with his son and he'll smile and tell you it's "awesome."

Seeing Steve grow as a coach has been special. It also brings him back to when he was in his 20s, trying to make a name for himself. He first cut his teeth as a special assistant with the Baltimore Colts in 1975, a year out of college. His father's connection with Colts' special-teams coach George Boutselis earned him the opportunity, but it was up to the young coach to make the most of it.

With each season, Bill Belichick was given more responsibility. He remembers what it was like to gradually gain trust from coaches and players around him.

"It's great to see him on a daily basis and to see him grow and develop as a coach," Bill Belichick said. "I certainly think back to my time at that age and what that meant to me, each day, each week, each game, because you don't have very many of them at that point. Each year, how much growth and knowledge you absorb. And then being able to put it into application, you know, the second, third time around after you've gotten it."

Steve Belichick started to rise through the ranks long before he joined the Patriots in 2012. When his father was hired, he started out in training camp as a ball boy. During the summers throughout high school and college, he progressively did more, working in the scouting department and taking on more "projects."

In practice he's glued to linebackers coach Patrick Graham, but it's behind the scenes where he's making a name for himself. This offseason, the Patriots had him work out players before the draft. One of those was third-round pick Geneo Grissom, the defensive lineman from Oklahoma.

"At first glance, I was like, 'Dang, he's young. He's really young,' " Grissom said.

But the two hit it off. Young players often turn to Steve Belichick to learn the ropes inside Gillette Stadium. He teaches them how to study, watch tape and about the terminology.

"He has a great understanding of the game. He's really relatable," Grissom said. "He's really great with players like myself or in my position, rookies. Being able to just kind of help us and guide us through on this process."

He's also "progressively" taken over the defensive scout team. Inside the building, he handles paperwork for defensive coordinator Matt Patricia, writing up scouting reports. Like he did in high school and college, he studies film. He'll break down plays from opposing teams and put together highlight packages for the coaches and players. "Instead of somebody telling him, 'Put these plays together on a tape,' now he can go to the tape, find the plays that we need and use them and create them himself and say, 'Hey, I did this. What do you think of it?'" Bill Belichick said. "That's where he's really thinking ahead for you. It's great to see that and great to be able to experience it first-hand with him."

The Patriots head coach wouldn't say whether he thinks his son will become a head coach.

"I don't know. At this point, when I was at that point in my career, that wasn't ever something I really thought about," said Bill Belichick, who was just beginning to climb the coaching ladder with the New York Giants when he was the age his son is now. "I just thought about trying to do a good job for the team that I was with, whether that was the Lions or the Giants or whoever it was. I think he's kind of in that same mindset."

"He's unselfish. He works hard. He does whatever he can do to help our team. I think that's the most important thing to him rather than worrying about where he's going to be 15 years from now. I don't think that's really too high on the radar."

One day at a time. Steve Belichick's a chip off the old block.

WR Danny Amendola

The Boston Globe

For Danny Amendola, playbook isn't the only good read

By Julian Benbow
NOVEMBER 02, 2015

The first time Sarah McLaughlin and Maura Bradley looked at the library in Robert Frost Elementary School, they saw its untapped potential.

They were making the leap from jobs in Boston Public Schools to the small school in Lawrence. McLaughlin had been the principal of the Dever-McCormack Lower School in Dorchester before taking on the role at Frost Elementary. Bradley was the principal at Mission Grammar School in Roxbury before becoming McLaughlin's assistant principal.

They looked at the school's library — what should have been an oasis of learning tools and information for the children that had seemingly been neglected — and saw it as a symbol for a fresh start.

"We came here and it's a wonderful facility and they have this beautiful library," McLaughlin said. "But the library wasn't being used for library purposes."

There were books, McLaughlin said, but not a lot.

"It was quite sad that kids couldn't access it," she said.

Bradley went looking for ways to rejuvenate the library, and she came across a program run by the charity of Patriots wide receiver Danny Amendola.

'He had a whole lot of eclectic interests in all sort of reading different kinds of stuff . . . It wasn't all about sports. It was about a wide range of things.'

Willie Amendola, on his son Danny's reading habits when he was a young child
Quote Icon

As part of his Catches for Kids foundation, Amendola partnered with Scholastic Highland Street Foundation to promote literacy by creating reading rooms for schools in the Boston area.

The first one they opened was the Frost Elementary School last May. The library was stocked with new books. The walls were splashed with a fresh mural. Bean bag chairs dotted the room, turning the once seldom -used space into a hangout spot.

Amendola visited the school, read books to the second grade class, signed autographs. He told them his favorite page-turner as a child was R.L. Stine's Goosebumps series.

"The idea was just spreading positive growth within the community and within the school system," Amendola said. "It's all based on doing well in school and pursuing whatever you have dreams of."

It injected new life into the school's library and reenergized the children.

"Getting this reading corner and getting the mural and getting this huge influx of books from Scholastic actually kind of allowed us to kick-start the library back into existence," McLaughlin said. "Kids get a chance to be in the room, pick out a book, lay down and read. Literally, it's transformed."

"That reading area being redone was what we needed to say to people, 'Of course we want to use the library for kids to read.'"

This year, McLaughlin said, kids are in the library for hours.

"It's more than just having a room full of books, but creating an environment where it's easy, it's fun, and it's not just going into a room and reading books, but you can actually go into a cool room with bean bag chairs and stuff like that where you can actually relax and be happy and have a positive vibe."

Well-rounded

Growing up with teachers for parents, Amendola understood the importance of reading.

Danny's father, Willie Amendola, was a health, physical education, and social studies teacher as well as a longtime football coach in Texas. His mother, Rose, was a substitute teacher.

They still remember taking Danny to book fairs when he was little.

"He had a whole lot of eclectic interests in all sort of reading different kinds of stuff," Willie said. "Like all little kids when it was the day to buy books, he got excited about it, but his stuff was kind of not your typical stuff, kind of. It wasn't all about sports. It was about a wide range of things."

As much as he was drawn to sports, Amendola loved arts and music.

"He's a really good artist," Willie said.

Amendola still draws and paints. His home is decorated with artwork he created. Willie and Rose wanted to make sure Danny cultivated all of his interests.

"My family was big on if you didn't take care of your school work, not only could you not play sports but you wouldn't make the most of your opportunities," Danny said.

"It was just more or less instilling the desire to be successful and to try to be the best you can at whatever you're doing. So it gave me a different outlook and maybe kind of explore and develop a foundation."

The ideals that helped him in the classroom helped him on the football field. He caught 204 passes for 2,246 yards and 15 touchdowns at Texas Tech, but what his former coach, Mike Leach, remembers most about him was his discipline and IQ.

"He was a smart, instinctive guy, picked things up quickly," Leach said. "He's just a real disciplined, committed guy. One thing with Danny is he's always had a certain amount of tunnel vision. On whatever his task is, it's 100 percent focus out of him and I think it's paid off for him in the classroom, paid off for him in the NFL, and all the rest."

It was something that was instilled in him, Amendola said.

"It was just the way that I was taught," he said. "Constantly learning and constantly trying to get smarter, whether it be in the classroom or on the football field."

Community ties

Having the chance to pass that lesson along to children in Boston schools is important to Amendola.

He was born and raised in Texas, but his roots are in Boston.

His father was born in Newton and graduated from Scituate High School. He played football at Northeastern before moving to Texas for graduate school at Sam Houston State University and staying there to teach and coach football.

His family would come back to Massachusetts during the summer to visit relatives.

"Boston's always been a second home to me," Amendola said. "Now, I consider it my home just as well as anywhere else. All my family's up here and it's been a blessing to come back and play football here."

He also has a chance to leave his fingerprints on the community. The reading room at Frost Elementary was the first of two he opened last year. The other was at Taylor Elementary School in Mattapan. The plan is to open eight reading rooms in schools and community centers around the city.

It's about more than just books. It's about opening up children to all the possibilities.

"You get to paint your own picture," Amendola said. "It's different from watching a cartoon or a movie or a TV show where the picture is painted for you. You can paint your own picture."

McLaughlin saw the influence of Amendola's contribution as soon as he left. Over the summer, a group of teachers worked to clean up and restore the rest of the library.

When the students returned in the fall, McLaughlin saw the looks on their faces.

"There was kind of this, 'What happened in here?'" she said. "They love it."

"It's very exciting to have someone come and visit your school, but beyond that, I think it actually was the push we needed to show people, 'Yes, the library should be used for this purpose.' Kids love it. They've treated it so nicely. They love being over there. They consider it like a treat.

"We're grateful. It got the ball rolling on this is what we should be doing with kids in that space. It made it such an easier way to start and get a lot of buy-in from the staff."

C David Andrews

The Boston Globe

Patriots' David Andrews has unique mentor in Dan Reeves

By Jim McBride GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 25, 2015

FOXBOROUGH — They can be found on refrigerators, albums, and desks across the country.

Replica trading cards featuring young athletes wearing their favorite uniforms and playing their favorite sports. Keepsakes for proud moms, dads, grandmas, grandpas, and assorted other extended family members.

Dan Reeves has one. And the retired NFL coach is pretty proud of it. It's of a young football player near and dear to Reeves's heart — and it's even autographed: "Hold on Uncle Dan, I'm coming."

The signer? Patriots rookie David Andrews, who watched Reeves's Atlanta Falcons teams as a kid growing up in Johns Creek, Ga.

"That's a memory that really sticks out," said Reeves, whose brother-in-law was Andrews's grandfather. "When I was coaching the Falcons [from 1997-2003] he gave me that bubble gum card. It had his picture on it and he was in his pads, no helmet, but he had his pads on, holding the ball, snapping it."

It's a memory Andrews recalls fondly, too.

"Yeah, I do remember that. You know, he never got to watch me play growing up because [the Falcons] were always either on the road or they had practices when we had games," said Andrews. "So my Little League team had trading cards made up and I signed one. I know he still has that. Pretty funny story. He always says, 'You said you were coming but I didn't hold on.' He always jokes about it. But he did enough in his career."

Andrews has come a long way from those Little League days. These days he's in the big leagues, playing center for the Patriots. He may have seemed like a long shot to have an impact on the reigning Super Bowl champions when he arrived in New England as an undrafted free agent in May. But Reeves saw it coming.

"Well, I'm not surprised because it's something he's dreamed about all of his life," said Reeves, who arrived in Dallas as an undrafted free agent in 1965 and amassed more than 3,600 total yards over an eight-year career at running back. "When he got that opportunity, he immediately moved [to New England] and wanted to be there every day and wanted to do everything he could to prepare. He's worked extremely hard. That's the way he's gotten to where he was at Georgia and that's the way he's gotten to where he is in New England. He's a very dedicated young man."

It was at Georgia where Andrews was able to refine his skills as a center and where Reeves was able to make up for all those missed Little League games. Andrews started every game over his final three seasons with the Bulldogs, and it was during that stretch when Reeves started to realize the 6-foot-3-inch, 294-pounder had a chance to play on Sundays.

"I watched the quarterback at Georgia from the sideline and the end zone and I'd watch David. And in the three years I watched him there he never made a bad snap," said Reeves. "That's incredible — when you figure you go from under the center to shotgun. And they do the same thing in New England. He's very comfortable in that system. He's been doing it a long time."

David Andrews (60) started in the Patriots' season opener vs. the Steelers.

Andrews smiled at Reeves's recollection of his performances, saying, "I think I might have had a few [bad snaps]." But added, "I've played center since the seventh grade, so I had a lot of practice and I try to be consistent with it."

Consistency has been the key for Andrews, who has stepped in and played every snap through the first two weeks of the season for the Patriots. With starter Bryan Stork and top backup Ryan Wendell on the shelf, it looks like Andrews will be entrenched in the middle of the offense for the foreseeable future.

Reeves said another component to Andrews's success is his intelligence — an important trait for a center.

"[Centers are] like the quarterback for the five offensive linemen," said Reeves. "They make all the calls. He and the quarterback have to be on the same page. I know they do a lot of communication at the line of scrimmage in New England."

Andrews ended up in New England after working out for Bill Belichick before the draft. It was a workout that obviously left an impression.

"It was an awesome experience," said Andrews. "I just went there and tried to show that I deserved a chance and it all worked out."

Reeves said no guarantees were given to Andrews.

"Coach Belichick was very honest with David," said Reeves. "He told him he wouldn't draft him but if he was a free agent they would be interested in signing him. So I wrote Bill and told him how much I appreciated his honesty and for giving David a chance. I told him he wouldn't be disappointed because he's such a great young man."

You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone in the organization disappointed in Andrews's play.

"I think that David has done everything we've asked him to do since he came here," said offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels. "He's been accountable to his job, dependable each day . . . And he's played very tough, and he's a smart player."

Andrews lacks prototypical size for an offensive lineman but is deceptively quick and athletic — he can get to the second level. He is very appreciative of the tips he picked up from his favorite former NFL coach.

"He gave me a lot of advice," said Andrews. "Especially as I started getting older and started to understand how the game was supposed to be played. Definitely a very unique contact to have. He's a great mentor. A great mentor for football but also a great man. So it's kind of a two-dimensional thing."

As exciting as the journey has been for Andrews and Reeves, there were some anxious moments along the way — specifically roster cut days.

"The fact that he was getting to play an awful lot, I felt good about that. You know the way it is, it's hard to find offensive linemen," said Reeves. "It's unusual for a rookie, a kid, to come in and play that much in the preseason . . . To think about where he is now. Coach Belichick does a tremendous job. He knows exactly what kind of players he wants, offense, defense. To see that David was someone he was interested in as a free agent, to give him that opportunity is pretty special."

Andrews said the bond between the two is still strong and he still seeks Reeves's advice.

"Not many people in my family know what it's like to play in the NFL," he said. "So he's kind of the only one I can bounce things off or someone who might understand what it's like, so it's definitely cool."

Reeves hopes Andrews will be bouncing things off him for years to come. For now, he's just enjoying the ride. "This has been a dream of his since he was little, so it's been great to see," said Reeves. "You hear stories like these but to be involved with one personally . . . It's just great."

TE Martellus Bennett



Martellus Bennett Wants You To Be What You Really Wanted To Be When You Grew Up

Alex Knapp
October 18, 2016

Martellus Bennett is an entrepreneur, a filmmaker and a musician. He's the Chief Creative Officer of The Imagination Agency, which produces books and interactive apps.

On the side, he plays a little football as tight end for the New England Patriots. He came to the stage at the FORBES Under 30 Summit straight from football practice to talk to the assembled crowd about finding meaning in your work.

He began his talk by wondering why on Earth kids would pick boring jobs to be when they grew up. "On the playground, I was a Kung Fu astronaut!" he exclaimed.

So the part of school where adults encourage kids to dream of being lawyers, doctors and veterinarians never interested him. "Why would I want to deliver mail to dogs?" he asked. "(That's what I thought veterinarians did when I was a kid.)"

But even Bennett grew up, and went to pursue his NFL career. Until he had a particular moment. Everyone evaluates their life at one point, he said. A time when you ask yourself, "Am I living the dream? Or am I living my dream?"

"I remember that day for me, March 14, 2014. That was the day I had my child," he said. "Well, I didn't have it. My wife did. I never believed in love at first sight until I saw my daughter."

He talked about his little girl with what was clearly a lot of pride. "She likes ninjas and she also likes dresses. So she's my princess and she's a ninja and she likes to kill zombies – so I feel like I'm doing awesome as a dad."

But raising her has also made Bennett ask himself, "How can I help her dream and to achieve her dream? That's what we do as adults, right?"

"But do we really do that?" he continued. "Or do we hang them on a thought that's safe and secure?"

"I love football. You get to stiff arm people and stomp on people and they cheer for you!" he said. "But when I was a kid, I wanted to be Randy Moss and Tim Burton. I wanted to make movies people loved. I want to be the black Walt Disney."

He continued by talking about how he has read hundreds of books to his daughter. Books that he loved. But also books with a problem.

"None of the characters I saw looked like my daughter," he said.

So he decided if nobody was going to make a book with a character who looked like his daughter, than he would. So he did. Starting with a book. Then an animated movie. Then an interactive app. And now a whole business. And it's a business he hopes to share with his daughter and family in a way he can't with football.

"Football's not who I am; it's what I do. I enjoy it. When I put on that helmet I'm like a transformer. I'm kicking ass and cashing checks," he said. "But it's hard for me to share it with my family. It's all about me. But I can share creativity with them. I can teach my daughter how to create."

He ended his talk with an exhortation to the crowd to have their own moment. To do what they want to do and live their dream.

"I ask you," he said. "What do you want to be when you grow up? The world is your playground. Let's play."

RB LeGarrette Blount



LeGarrette Blount's found his home

By: Adam Kurkjian
Sunday, January 25, 2015

FOXBORO — Virtually every stop along the way, trouble or disappointment has followed LeGarrette Blount in some form or fashion.

However, when he's with the Patriots, there's none of that to be found, just a lot of rushing yards and touchdowns. In a way, the Pats are almost a safe haven, a place where coach Bill Belichick gets all the good from Blount and none of the bad.

But there's been some bad. Plenty of it, in fact.

When Blount was a senior at Taylor County High in Perry, Fla., the running back was a non-qualifier by NCAA academic standards, so he didn't enroll in any of the big-time college programs he was hoping to attend.

After he kept his nose clean at East Mississippi Community College, Blount ended up at the University of Oregon. He played well, but his career in Eugene was pockmarked by bad decisions. He was suspended multiple times by then-coach Mike Bellotti for various team rules violations.

Then, of course, was "The Punch." Following a 2009 loss to Boise State, Byron Hout of the Broncos reportedly yapped to Blount, "How's that for an (butt)-whoopin'?" Blount took a swing, Hout hit the ground and it made national headlines.

Blount was labeled a thug. Then, during this football season with the Pittsburgh Steelers, he was deemed more of a cancer.

During training camp, Blount and fellow running back Le'Veon Bell were arrested on marijuana charges. Then, after Blount jogged off the field when the clock was still running during a 27-24 win over the Tennessee Titans, Steelers coach Mike Tomlin decided to cut Blount, even though Pittsburgh was in the middle of a playoff push and it left limited depth behind Bell.

Said Pittsburgh offensive lineman Maurkice Pouncey in an Associated Press story: "We've got our star running back (Bell). That's probably a good thing for our team that happened. At the end of the day, if there was someone that was a cancer who ended up leaving on his own, that's a blessing."

But Blount knows how he's been viewed, knows his flaws. He is aware of his perception, not a victim to it.

"It's had its ups and downs," he said. "I've had good times and bad and I've embraced them all. I'm enjoying every second of this."

A sound structure

Alan Hall, now the assistant director at the San Jose Academy and Preparatory School in Jacksonville, Fla., was Blount's offensive coordinator at East Mississippi. Hall said Blount wasn't the type of person he was portrayed as after "The Punch."

"He wasn't one of those guys who went out looking for trouble," Hall said. "He went to class, went to practice, then went to the dorm."

What Hall believed helped Blount was a regimented set of rules to follow.

"I know LeGarrette does well when there's structure," Hall said. "You let him know that this is what I expect and you're going to do it my way, I want you to do it as hard as you can, he's fine. If he's out there wishy-washy in no-man's land, just going to show up and it's kind of 'laissez faire', not so much."

At New England, there perhaps isn't an organization with a more structured environment with a coach like Belichick who ensures it.

Still, while at East Mississippi, there were signs that foretold Blount's future discontent in Pittsburgh, where he grew weary of having to share carries with Bell.

"(Blount's college decision) came down to Oregon and Florida State," Hall said. "The deciding factor — where Florida State dropped the ball — was they told him they were going to sign another junior college back in the same class as him so that they could share the duty. They walked out and got on the plane and went home and I knew it. That was the worst thing you could say to LeGarrette. LeGarrette's got to be the focal point of whatever it is that you're doing."

In a good place

However, all that negativity disappears when Blount appears in New England. A year ago, he set the franchise record with four touchdown runs in a postseason game against the Colts. In last weekend's AFC Championship Game win, he added another three to give him a Patriots career record of seven, along with 148 yards rushing on yet another franchise mark of 30 carries.

Although the Patriots tried to re-sign Blount last offseason, he ended up taking the bigger contract with the Steelers. After he was cut, he came back to Belichick.

Said Blount of why he likes the Patriots coach: "Bill is a straight shooter, 100 percent honest and he wins a lot of football games."

It goes back to the structure Hall mentioned. Blount knows where he stands with Belichick at all times.

"Me and him are really close," Blount said. "He's a personal guy. He keeps everything 100 percent honest with you. That's probably why we click so well."

Belichick holds Blount in high regard, as well. Earlier this week, when asked whom he could compare Blount to, Belichick couldn't. He described his unique skill set as a 6-foot, 250-pounder that can move like a smaller back with almost a sense of wonder.

Now, on the precipice of Super Bowl XLIX, Blount hopes to continue to make things work. He knows where he's been. He knows what he's done. He knows what he's been called. Moreover, he knows where he is.

"I can tell you," he said, "that I'm in the best scenario I could possibly be in right now."

QB Tom Brady



Brady, Belichick are a perfect match

An odd couple on surface, Patriots' quarterback, coach were made for each other

By Greg Garber

Originally Published: January 7, 2015

Bill Belichick and Tom Brady have become almost unimaginably successful and rich and famous - and, in terms of their shared history, inseparable.

But the secret of their unprecedented partnership is the two or three hours they spend together each week, far from the public view, scheming in a drab meeting room under Gillette Stadium. Most NFL head coaches operate like CEOs, delegating the messy, monotonous details of game planning to underlings. And yet in their 15th season with the New England Patriots, Belichick and Brady, along with the other quarterbacks, meet every Tuesday - technically the players' day off. They sit in the flickering semi-darkness and break down coaching videos with something that approaches a forensic fervor. They scout the weekly opponent, doing their diligence, searching for weakness, strategizing on how to best exploit it.

"Bill's done his homework by then, and he tells them what the secondary will be trying to do to them, the linebackers, the defensive front," explained owner Robert Kraft, who has sat in on some of these meetings. "The two of them go back and forth about where the best opportunities are.

"Oh, yes, it can be lively."

Today's videos are awash in color, but their world is starkly black and white, a simple, logical function of down and distance.

Back in late September, after losing to the Kansas City Chiefs 41-14 in a Monday night game, the Patriots found themselves 2-2. The media jackals, sensing weakness, wondered aloud if their ridiculous run was coming to an end. There were even whispers that friction had developed between Belichick and Brady.

Bill O'Brien, head coach of the Houston Texans, remembers laughing out loud at the time. He spent five years in those offensive meeting rooms in Foxborough, Massachusetts, neatly spanning the team's last two Super Bowl appearances, and he understands the crackling dynamic as well as anyone. That accrued knowledge was an important factor in the Texans' 9-7 record this year, an improvement of seven victories from the previous season - three more than any other team.

"I was kind of immersed in things here, but I heard some of that," O'Brien said recently, laughing again. "Don't believe all that stuff you read. These are two competitive guys who work really well together. There is no ego there.

"Bill actually coaches Tom two, three times a week. He appreciates Tom's intelligence and toughness. And vice versa."

In 28 seasons of football - from high school to college, arena football to NFL Europe and the NFL - quarterback Kurt Warner said he never once watched film with a defensive coach. Warner was the MVP of Super Bowl XXXIV for St. Louis, but he was on the opposite sideline when Brady snatched away the game and that award two years later against the Rams in New Orleans.

"They complement each other incredibly well," said Warner, an NFL Network analyst. "If Brady struggles, Belichick keeps him in the game with great defense. In those games when the defense is exposed, Brady picks up Belichick with his great play.

"I think they make each other better - and they're both pretty good to begin with."

More, if it is possible, than the sum of their considerable parts.

On the surface, they are an odd couple: Belichick in his sideline gray hoodie, bangs plastered to his forehead, Brady sporting a GQ-worthy wardrobe (and world-class coiffure) after games. But parse their public words, and they seem to finish each other's sentences. Those close to them say that winning is virtually the only thing they care about.

The bottom-line, quantity/quality numbers: Together, Belichick and Brady have won 160 games - 44 more than the Dolphins' Don Shula and Dan Marino, who are next in line since the AFL-NFL merger in 1970, and 53 more than Pittsburgh's Chuck Noll and Terry Bradshaw. Their record is a staggering 160-47, a winning percentage, .772, which is ahead of the Raiders' John Madden and Ken Stabler (.756), Chicago's Mike Ditka and Jim McMahon (.754) and the Colts' Tony Dungy and Peyton Manning (.753).

"I feel like I have a good player-coach relationship with Tom," Belichick said in a 2011 interview with ESPN. "We talk regularly during the week about what's going to happen, how we're doing it, and then we review what did happen and move on to the next stage."

Earlier that same year, with the Patriots headed to their fifth Super Bowl in 11 seasons, the quarterback also sat down with ESPN.

"Coach comes in and says, 'These are the things we need to do to win,' and he's right damn near 100 percent of the time," Brady said. "It's, 'This is what we need to do, and this is how you're going to do it, and if we don't do it, we're going to lose.'"

Brian Billick, former Ravens head coach and now an NFL Network analyst, marvels at the Patriots' continuity and consistency of structure.

"Tom Brady is an extension of Bill Belichick, and Belichick an extension of Brady," Billick explained. "The offense and defense is totally integrated - not only structurally, but philosophically, too. I don't know if we've had a relationship like this ever in the league."

"The wealth of knowledge, their database is unparalleled. Imagine their frame of reference - 'Remember six years ago when the Dolphins tried a four-wide blitz on second-and-long?' Six years ago? Are you f--ing kidding me? I can't remember yesterday. The synergy between head coach and quarterback, it's stunning."

Their shared experiences have evolved into a collective memory, a vast encyclopedia of X's and O's, an iCloud embedded in their brains. At a critical juncture in New England's Week 15 victory over Miami, Brady surprised the Dolphins with an uncharacteristically unbridled 17-yard run.

"He did a good job of seeing that in the pass rush," Belichick said afterward. "It's something we've talked about this week. He made a big play on that last year against them."

'Absolute, maximum position'

Their fathers both adored the game of football and, in a very short time, so did they.

William Stephen Belichick was always underfoot, a fixture in the film room, at the U.S. Naval Academy's football facility in Annapolis, Maryland, where his father, Steve, was a scout and assistant coach for 33 years. The boy was 8 when Navy halfback Joe Bellino won the Heisman Trophy and 11 when quarterback Roger Staubach also captured college football's top individual prize.

Over the years at Giants training camp, where his son was an assistant for a dozen years, Steve would tell stories over a scotch or two about Young Bill, a Mozart-ian prodigy, asking technical questions about linebackers' run-support responsibilities or a running back's blitz keys.

Thomas Edward Patrick Brady Jr. was born into a Bay Area family of rabid 49ers fans. The boy was 4 years old, wearing a tiny No. 16 Joe Montana jersey, when he witnessed Dwight's Clark's "The Catch" in person. Later, he'd join Montana as a multiple Super Bowl champion and MVP.

Belichick probably saw something of himself in Brady as he rose from the No. 199 pick in the 2000 draft to No. 1 on the Patriots' depth chart in the narrow span of 17 months - intelligent, driven and committed to the process.

For 27 consecutive years, Bill Polian ran the Buffalo Bills, Carolina Panthers and Indianapolis Colts. But after working six Patriots games over the past two years as an analyst for Sirius XM Radio, he has an even greater appreciation for the duo.

"Week in and week out, in every facet of the game, they're the best-coached team in football," said Polian, an ESPN analyst. "With respect to situational football and matchups, they do that better than anybody."

"And as much as it is Tom operating the offense, it's also Belichick and the coaching staff putting those guys in the absolute, maximum position. Especially in Foxborough, you almost have to play a perfect game to beat them. Give them even an inkling of daylight - and they'll grab it."

Running back Jonas Gray was cut three times in one year, but when Stevan Ridley tore two knee ligaments earlier this season, Gray was activated from the practice squad. He carried 37 times for 201 yards against the Colts, becoming the first NFL rusher in 93 years score his first four career touchdowns in a single game. The next week, after oversleeping and missing a Friday practice, Gray didn't get a single snap as the Patriots hung 34 points on the Detroit Lions' No. 1-ranked defense.

"A lot of teams just do what they do," said Ty Law, a Patriots cornerback from 1995-2004 and a five-time Pro Bowler. "They say, 'We'll stick with our bread and butter.' Outside of Brady, they don't have a bread and butter. They always adjust to what the other team does on both sides of the ball."

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Law said, Brady isn't in the business of stroking the egos of diva receivers.

"When you have the star wide receiver with big numbers, most quarterbacks feel obligated," Law said. "They want to make the big guy happy. They force the issue - and they lose games."

"Tom, he'll throw it all over the field. Always to the open guy. For Tom, it's about winning. It's way more important than stats."

As Rodney Harrison, a Patriots strong safety from 2003-08, is quick to point out, making friends isn't Belichick's first priority, either.

"I think a lot of coaches do things for public perception because they're afraid of getting criticized," said Harrison, an analyst for NBC's "Football Night in America." "And that's why he's had so much success. Bill doesn't give a crap what people outside the locker room think. Whatever he thinks is in the best interest of the team, that's what he does."

Suspending their disbelief

Kraft is widely viewed as one of the best owners in professional sports. He knows that reputation rests largely on the successful marriage of Belichick and Brady.

"The coach and the quarterback share a lot of stuff," Kraft said on the last day of 2014, from a yacht cruising the Caribbean. "The main thing is they are obsessed with every minute detail. Obsessed."

Amidst all the accolades this season is one that might have gotten lost in the sauce: The Week 16 victory over the Jets earned Kraft his 250th win (in his 368th game), tying him for the fastest owner to 250 with the legendary George Halas.

It was Kraft who was impressed when Belichick served as the Patriots' defensive backs coach under Bill Parcells in 1996. It was Kraft who parted with a first-round draft choice as compensation for Belichick's services when he abruptly stepped down as the New York Jets' head coach - after one day with the title - following the 1999 season. And while Kraft does not take credit for drafting Brady, he has managed to keep him happy and in uniform.

"Look, there have been situations over the past 15, 16 years where the coach and the quarterback could have gone another way," Kraft said. "I worked hard to keep them together. I've learned in my other business that continuity is critical to success. That's the underlying factor in what we've achieved."

Their rare skill sets and willingness to experiment gives each of them the confidence to suspend his disbelief of the other.

"When you respect and trust someone, you're willing to go outside the box and change things," Harrison said. "They care for each other so much, on a professional level and on a personal level. They've become stubborn in their belief in each other."

And 15 years into their relationship, the two are still clearly motivated by former failures.

As Parcells' wizard of defense for the Giants in the 1980s, Belichick controlled the movements of Hall of Fame linebackers Lawrence Taylor and Harry Carson and helped the team win two Super Bowls. But as the Cleveland Browns' head coach from 1991-95, Belichick was 37-45, including 1-1 in the playoffs, and was left behind when the franchise moved to Baltimore.

Brady was never a stand-alone star at Michigan. He arrived as the seventh quarterback on the Wolverines' quarterback depth chart and struggled to find playing time. He even shared the job during his senior year with Drew Henson - who would later play professional baseball and football, neither with much success. To this day, Brady can spit out the names of the six quarterbacks taken ahead of him in the 2000 draft, including, incredibly in retrospect, Giovanni Carmazzi and Spergon Wynn. As a rookie, he was the Patriots' fourth-string quarterback, behind Drew Bledsoe, Michael Bishop and John Friesz. But in 2001, when Bledsoe was injured against the Jets in Week 2, Brady became the starter.

Today, Belichick and Brady are full-fledged peers, intent on wrecking opponents, sometimes even to the point of embarrassment.

Their biggest challenge? Keeping the other honest and engaged.

"He's a hard guy to coach, because he's so well prepared," Belichick said in 2011. "He's seen all the tape. He's studied the film. You really have to know what you're talking about when you talk to him, because if you tell him something that's not quite right, he'll say, 'Hey, what about this game 10 weeks ago, when this happened and that happened? We can't do that.'"

"It really forces you as a coach to be well prepared to make sure that you can really give him information that is helpful - not things that he's already seen. You can't B.S. your way through a meeting with Tom Brady. I'll tell you that."

'No one works harder'

Troy Brown, who caught a critical pass in the game-winning drive of the Patriots' first Super Bowl win, says that Brady is as competitive as any player he has ever seen.

"He'd lose a game of trash-can basketball - and he'd get upset," said Brown. "Belichick hates to lose, too. It's always the team first and everything else second."

Kraft remembers a golf tournament outside Boston when he was paired with Brady.

"We needed a putt on the 16th to take our first lead," Kraft said, "and he just dialed into that laser focus that he has. Eighteen feet. Yeah, he sunk the putt."

Harrison respects Brady's work ethic as much as his competitive drive.

"The best player has to be the hardest-working player, and that's what you have with Tom Brady," Harrison said. "They call him a pretty boy, with the mansions and the model wife, but he deserves those things. At the same time, no one works harder, or longer, than Belichick."

Brown, a Patriots receiver from 1993-2007, said as a result players feel accountable to both men.

"You feel you need to do a little bit extra for them," said Brown, an analyst for Comcast SportsNet New England. "No matter how much praise they get, you say, 'We need to do the same thing all over again.' Everybody feels that."

If any former player has a reason to hold a grudge, it is Lawyer Milloy, a strong safety who made four Pro Bowls in seven years as a Patriot. Belichick banished him to Buffalo when he wouldn't agree to restructure his salary before the 2003 season. But he remains in awe what his former team has accomplished.

"The one constant in the last 15 years of Patriots success, all this talk of dynasty, is Brady/Belichick," Milloy said from his Seattle home. "It happens once in a lifetime, and you really can't explain it."

"They just get each other."

Said Kraft, "To have these two guys working together, winning games for the people of New England ... it's pretty cool."

They are separated by 25 years and a sense for fashion, but that's about it. Down and distance - so, what are you seeing here?

"He can recognize things, he can anticipate things, manage the clock, manage personnel, down and distance, formations, a lot of moving parts going on at the same time," Belichick said of Brady in 2011. "He's able to sort them all out, put them together and do the right thing for the team."

"It gives you a lot of ability as a coach to put responsibility on him to take advantage of certain situations because he's able to process it and manage it, not just himself but to get the team to do it."

He might have also been talking about himself.



Given the way he prepares, Tom Brady won't be slowing down anytime soon

Why Tom Brady should be getting more MVP consideration

BY GREG BISHOP

Thu Dec. 11, 2014

The sports therapy center sits adjacent to Gillette Stadium, 500 feet to the northwest, inside a shopping plaza, next to a hair salon. It's a nondescript location but no ordinary rehab facility. There's a VIP entrance, a personal chef and a brain fitness room. The company logo is splashed everywhere: tb12.

It's a November Monday morning in Foxborough, Mass., and the center's owner, Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, has already received treatment and spoken to his neuropsychologist via Skype. The day before, he obliterated the Lions, topping 300 passing yards for the 63rd time, tying Dan Marino for No. 3 on that list. Perhaps he celebrated with ice cream, though his would have been made from raw ingredients, mostly vegetables -- he favors an avocado base with cacao mixed in to mimic chocolate. "Tastes great," Brady says later, not all that convincingly.

The flat screen in the lobby is tuned to SportsCenter; next to it are jars of whey protein and knee braces for sale. Brady is away at the stadium, deep into his routines by now. Forget, for the moment, the supermodel wife, the movie cameos, the designer clothes. That's celebrity camouflage. That's Brady and that's not Brady -- not as it relates to football. His career is built on, defined by and prolonged with routine, even if his life is anything but that. This scrolls across ESPN's ticker: 7 STRAIGHT FOR BRADY, PATRIOTS.

The center is run by a 49-year-old California native with a master's degree in traditional Chinese medicine. Teammates describe Alex Guerrero as Brady's Mr. Miyagi. They say he knows the quarterback's body better than Gisele Bündchen, Brady's wife. "I do have my hands on him a little more than she does," Guerrero says, laughing.

He is Brady's body coach and business partner, and he's one of the main reasons Brady has been able to transform what looked like a lost season into another star turn in a Hall of Fame career. In late September, after a 27-point drubbing by the Chiefs, the more foolish NFL observers suggested that Brady could be near the end. That he should retire. Instead, he's on track for the fourth-best passer rating (100.2) and the third-best interception percentage (1.4%) of his career, with what one might fairly describe as one of the least intimidating sets of wide receivers he's ever had. And how he did that -- with a diet that made him lighter, workouts that made him (relatively) faster and marked improvement in throwing on the run -- speaks directly to his work with Guerrero, and to the center they opened together more than a year ago. It has the Patriots 10-3 and Brady positioned to make another run at the Lombardi Trophy, which has eluded him since 2005.

The two men met through Willie McGinest, the linebacker who played 15 seasons with Guerrero's help. Initially, Guerrero fixed Brady's aching right shoulder. Then it was a sore calf and a damaged groin. Other than one freak injury, a torn left ACL in '08, Brady has not missed any time since he started with Guerrero, about 10 years ago. He is 37 and in his 15th season, and he wants to play into his 40s. Like 45. Like 48. When teammates ask how long, he simply says, "Forever."

"You'll hear people say, Football doesn't define me," says Guerrero. But that's not Brady. "Football isn't what Tom does -- football is Tom. This is who he is."

Let's start here: Brady is a quarterback whose daily schedule, both in and out of season, is mapped clearly into his 40s. Every day of it, micromanaged. Treatment. Workouts. Food. Recovery. Practice. Rest. And those schedules aren't just for this week, this month, this season. They're for three years. That allows Brady and Guerrero to work in both the short and long terms to, say, increase muscle mass one year and focus on pliability the next. "The whole idea is to program his body to do what we want it to do," says Guerrero. "We don't let the body dictate to us. We dictate."

"God, what if LeBron James trained how I trained?" Brady asks. "He really could play forever."

Sports accelerate the aging process, especially football, which often leaves gladiators, once powerful and sculpted, with shredded ligaments, broken bones and scrambled brains. Yet quarterbacks seem to age more slowly than other players. Based on touchdown passes, nine of the top 10 signal-callers this year are 30 or older; six are at least 33. For Brady to play this well for so long isn't simply a matter of built-in aggression (although he has that) or extra film study (although he does that) or of avoiding big hits and running only when necessary. The secret to his longevity is more encompassing. "Everything," says Guerrero, "is calculated."

Guerrero describes a typical vacation day, in the offseason: Brady wakes up, works out, has breakfast with Gisele and their two kids, hangs at the beach, naps on schedule, surfs, works out again. He goes to sleep early, eats well and for the most part avoids alcohol. The in-season portion of his regimen is designed to run through Super Bowl Sunday; if New England's campaign ends in a playoff loss (excluding that 2008 season, he has missed the postseason just once), Brady completes every drill, every throw, anyway.

That's their system. From the outset the principles made sense to Brady, who had spent the early part of his career like most athletes. He'd worried about injuries after they happened. He'd focused on rehabilitation as opposed to preventative maintenance. He was, he says, guiding a plane 30,000 feet into the air without having prepared for mechanical trouble. He would stick his elbow into an ice bucket after training sessions because that's what people did. "It's systematic," Brady says. "I was part of that system. You're in it for so long, you're fearful of change. You always got in the cold tub, so you continue to."

Guerrero challenged all of those notions. He showed Brady how the muscles in his forearm had, through lifting weights, become short and stiff and how that led to soreness when he threw. Together they worked to make those muscles longer and more flexible -- "more like rubber bands," says Brady, "so I can throw thousands of footballs and not worry."

In essence, after the ACL recovery, Brady placed Guerrero in charge of the second half of his career. "God, what if LeBron James got what I got? What if he trained how I trained?" Brady asks. "He really could play forever."

A Brady story: Charity football game for disabled children, circa 2009. Brady's charity. He's the quarterback. Fourth quarter comes, and he implores his teammates -- guys like retired tight end Christian Fauria -- to pick up the pace. Gotta catch that! Finish the route! So Fauria runs harder, pulls a hamstring and looks at Brady. "Calm the f--- down," he says. "You're the quarterback for both teams."

Brady can eat all the vegetable ice cream he wants, but what drives him, what pushes him to play forever, existed long before. Brady is new age in approach but old school in composition.

"I played with a bunch of quarterbacks: Kurt Warner. Marc Bulger," a former teammate says. "They didn't match Tom's intensity. Not even close."

He's competitive, but to state it that plainly diminishes the level of obsession he has to win. Like in 2005, when a vicious hit to his left shin in Week 14 against the Bills left Brady unable to walk. He played the next week, against the Buccaneers, and suffered a sports hernia that left his testicles at least three times their normal size. He played four more games, including the playoffs, with a bad shin and awful swelling down below. His backup at the time, Matt Cassel, tells this story, setting up the easiest of punch lines. "So, yeah," he says, "Tom Brady has big balls."

Brady has refused to cede any reps in practice, even handoffs. He told Cassel and Brian Hoyer (a Patriot from 2009 to '11), "That's how I got my job." When Rodney Harrison played with Brady, the safety showed up at 6:40 a.m. to lift weights. "Good afternoon," Brady said to him. So the next day Harrison showed up at 6:30. "Good afternoon." Then 6:20. Then 6:10. Then 6. "Good afternoon" each time, until Harrison finally said, "Screw you, Tom. I'm not coming in any earlier."

"I only played one year with him," says tight end Cam Cleeland, a Patriot in 2002. "I still remember his paddle from camp." He means Brady's table-tennis paddle, the one chipped and frayed around the edges, broken from abuse. "I played with a bunch of quarterbacks: Kurt Warner. Marc Bulger. They didn't match Tom's intensity. Not even close."

Brady's throwing coach, Tom House, once tutored Nolan Ryan, the Hall of Fame righthander. Ryan was 42 when he started working with House, back when the ace said he wanted to pitch another year or two. He didn't retire until he was 46.

House operates within what he calls four "windows of trainability." The first two windows focus on developing athleticism as young players (from age six through the late teens) learn sports and gain strength. The third window, which lasts through the late 20s, is for skill acquisition. Everything thereafter -- the fourth window -- is skill retention, skill maintenance. That's when athletes can slow the aging process. Or try to.

House and Brady work to refine less than 2 percent of the QB's overall skillset. That's it. The upper end of the upper end. Early on they ran Brady's throws through a three-dimensional motion analysis, studying his movement patterns (length of stride), timing (shoulder and hip separation) and the mechanical variables (eye level, release point). That provided a baseline.

After Brady's subpar 2013 season -- subpar by his standards, anyway -- they looked at ground-force production: how to shift his feet more quickly to create more torque and to boost his spin on shorter throws and his distance on longer ones. One exercise they added, the Fogel drill, forces Brady to shuffle his feet for 30 seconds while simulating throws to dozens of targets. This makes Brady plant and pass faster. It has helped his balance and led to gains, even at 37, in his ability to deliver on the move.

"Tom is pushing back the aging process," says House. "There's no reason he can't do at 45 what he did at 25."

Brady started with House two years ago, shortly after the death of Tom Martinez, the quarterback guru who developed his mechanics in the first place. For years Brady carried a page of notes from Martinez in his wallet. He eventually transferred those reminders -- hips closed, elbow high -- to his BlackBerry. When Martinez died in 2012, after years of kidney and other ailments, Guerrero says it had a "spiritual impact" on Brady.

Hold up. Spiritual? Has anyone ever described Brady that way? "Our method relates to being physically fit, emotionally stable and spiritually nourished," says Guerrero. "Emotional stability allows you to have spiritual awareness. I always tell him and Gisele they're the most spiritual nonreligious people I know."

There's something else that Guerrero and Brady remind each other of all the time, a philosophy of sorts. It could also be interpreted as spiritual.

"Balance in all things."

Namaste.

Like Brady, Tim Hasselbeck entered the NFL as a quarterback in 2000. At the combine that year he watched video of Brady, saw him with his shirt off, the 40-yard dash that started in slow motion. "Nothing special," he thought. "Pretty standard."

Hasselbeck went undrafted out of Boston College, played overseas and bounced around the NFL before becoming an ESPN analyst. Brady? He won his first 10 playoff games. He hoisted three Super Bowl trophies in his first four seasons as a starter and was named MVP in two of those games. He was league MVP twice, in 2007 and '10. Obviously not "pretty standard."

"This guy is year-round," Brady's trainer says. "No plays off. No days off. Everything is purposeful."

And yet the career arc hasn't been perfect. Since that hot start Brady is 8-8 in the postseason, including two losses in the Super Bowl to the underdog Giants and two to his greatest rival, Peyton Manning, in AFC title games. The back

end of his career has been defined, in many ways, by his ability to win without continuity among his offensive personnel (when Pro Bowl guard Logan Mankins was traded in August, it was accepted as the Patriots Way) and, largely, without star receivers (outside of Wes Welker, his wideouts have had a combined two Pro Bowl nods). His wife alluded to the latter in 2012 when, after the second Super Bowl loss to New York, she responded to a heckler with, "My husband cannot f----- throw the ball and catch the ball at the same time."

"What he's been able to accomplish there is nuts," says retired fullback Heath Evans, a former teammate turned NFL Network analyst. "There are always new linemen, new receivers, new position coaches. Change is constant."

Except change is only one constant for the Patriots. Brady is another. Coach Bill Belichick is a third. The fourth constant is success: In an era where, Brady notes, "everyone is meant to be equal," New England has had 14 straight winning seasons, the third-longest streak of the modern era. Those who associate Brady only with the rotating cast that he throws to or that blocks for him miss an important point. His support system -- his parents, his three sisters, his various personal coaches -- has remained consistent. "They're almost like his glam squad for football," says Fauria.

Same team. Same coach. "Invaluable," says Brady. "For us, too," says the Pats' owner, Robert Kraft. "He's like my fifth son."

The week after the Patriots fell to the Ravens in the 2013 AFC Championship Game, Brady showed up for workouts with his trainer, Gunnar Peterson, a Band-Aid still on his arm from some game scrape. "This guy is year-round," says Peterson, who has worked with the likes of Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis, and who took on Brady after the ACL tear. "No wasted movement. No plays off. No days off. Everything is purposeful. And that includes the people around him."

Balance in all things, as Brady says.

He has countered that fire with lighter moments that have made him more relatable to teammates who made less money (or didn't marry supermodels, which is basically everyone). He didn't just gift his offensive linemen Uggs boots, he gifted everyone on the team.

He didn't just watch pranks and laugh. He engaged in them. He won them. He used to sit by the door to the quarterbacks' meeting room and knock Cassel's food out of his hands when he entered. The backup responded by filling Brady's Nikes with a chocolate protein shake. Brady then had the tires taken off Cassel's car, putting three of them in his locker and hiding the fourth -- at which point Belichick put a stop to what he called World War III. But Cassel had learned two valuable lessons. The first: Brady can be one of the boys. The second: Don't mess with guys who make more money than you.

Evans describes Brady as the "most humble superstar I've ever been around," and if that sounds convenient, he isn't saying that about Drew Brees or Shaun Alexander, superstar former teammates who happen to be two of his better friends. Brady's preparation, how he works, bolsters the way his teammates view him. He was maniacal. Still is.

He meets with Belichick three times a week to talk over the gameplan -- every coverage, every hot read, every play. He summons his backups an hour before the Saturday team meetings and goes over the entire call sheet, typically between 100 and 110 plays. Twice. He asks the QBs to arrive an hour early on gameday, too, then goes over everything again. Twice. "He has a great memory from all that," says Bill O'Brien, once Brady's offensive coordinator, now the coach of the Texans. "He can remember from eight years ago: left hash, toward the lighthouse, third play of the game. ... We'll look it up. He's always right."

If every player is competitive, and most quarterbacks are meticulous, here's what makes Brady different: that approach, where traditional Chinese philosophy and advanced sports medicine meet a quarterback willing to try anything in order to play forever. The avocado ice cream approach to football, basically.

Take that diet. It's seasonal, which means he eats certain things in the winter that are considered "hot property" foods, like red meat. In the summer, when it's time for "cold property" foods, his diet is mostly raw. He subscribes to the 80-20 theory -- but it's not 80 percent healthy food, 20 percent unhealthy. It's 80 percent alkaline, 20 percent acidic. The idea, he says, is "to maintain balance and harmony through my metabolic system." That's why teammates always see him with hummus, raw snack bars packed with nutrients and what one teammate calls "that birdseed s---

." This is the same guy who once ate Christmas breakfast with the Evans family and quietly picked all the sausage out from his omelet.

Brady is faster and stronger. "But given where I started," he says, "I wouldn't say that's some great accomplishment."

Take his sleep patterns. Brady struggles to unwind after games and practices. He's still processing, thinking about what's next. So they added cognitive exercises at night to destimulate his brain, allowing him to get to sleep by 9 p.m. and wake up without an alarm.

Take his workouts. Brady does them on land, in sand, in water. He hardly ever lifts weights but works mainly with resistance bands.

Then there's the brain resiliency program. Brady underwent a battery of tests and a neuroscan a few years back, then had a program created to work out his brain the way he worked out his body. The various exercises help Brady to more quickly process information between plays, read defenses and make adjustments. They assist with his memory. They increase his peripheral vision and how far he can see downfield. "The body is a whole system," says Brady, "and that includes the brain. I'm lucky I haven't had many concussions -- maybe one I can remember. I'm training for if that happens. I'm building resiliency and staying sharp. I feel like that's really where my edge is."

"If we can keep his processing speed this high," says Guerrero, "then I don't care if he's 48."

The by-product of all this: Brady is faster and stronger than on the day he was drafted. He doesn't care if you believe that. "I am," he says. "I'm more durable, too. But given where I started, I wouldn't say that like it's some great accomplishment."

Brady is on the phone. It's Tuesday morning, two days after the Patriots lost 26-21 in Green Bay. The streak is over. The playoffs loom, the top seed in the AFC is within reach. Brady and Guerrero have already gotten in a workout. Back to the routines.

For years, as Brady made football his singular obsession, everyone asked what he planned to do afterward. He never really knew. He wanted only to play football, to win championships. He never considered flying airplanes or running car dealerships or whatever it is athletes do when they no longer pursue what once defined them. He thought only about football and family. The closer he gets to 40, the more Brady tries to simplify, the more he relies on his routines. He doesn't have many hobbies. He likes to surf, but he's terrible at it. He likes to golf, but he forced himself in recent years to take it less seriously, which made it less fun. Hoyer watched Brady against the Packers, and he points to all the f-bombs captured on camera, the way he head-butted Rob Gronkowski, how much every play still meant.

"Since I met him, he married a supermodel, made millions of dollars and became internationally famous," says Troy Brown, another former teammate. "But I don't think he's changed that much."

Well, maybe a little. Brady is active on Facebook now, a new development. He recently posted his old résumé; under additional, he'd written, "Guided football team as starting quarterback to 1998 Big Ten Championship." He posted pictures of former backup Ryan Mallett carrying his pads.

He still wants to play forever, but he's come to realize that what has enabled him to play at such a high level for so long is what he wants to do after football too. That's why he opened his sports rehab center just over a year ago, why he recruited so many teammates to come by. (About half of them have, which perhaps has contributed to New England's improved roster health this season.) He still remembers the doctor who told him his knee would never be the same after the ACL tear, that he wouldn't be able to run around with his kids. "Which was all bulls---," he says. "That knee feels as good as my other knee."

He won't need a résumé for his next endeavor, only his body of work and his actual body, how it has held up over time. "I used to joke with Alex," says Brady, "one day, we have to go on the road. We have to teach people. This is what people really need to know."

He is presented with a scenario: Brady and his body coach/business partner on stage at some convention hall, dressed in white robes, packed crowd, merchandise tent, clothing and videos for sale, books jammed with testimonials for the quarterback turned life coach. "I don't know about the robes," Brady says, laughing, "but we do talk about it."

DT Alan Branch



Branch operations

By: Adam Kurkjian

Sunday, November 23, 2014

FOXBORO — Alan Branch makes his NFL living in the trenches. As a 6-foot-6, 325-pounder, that's pretty much expected.

The other things the defensive lineman has been able to do with that frame, though, are completely unexpected.

For all the skills he brings to his current position, it may have been the last aspect of his athletic ability that initially drew big-time attention to the Albuquerque, N.M., native.

At Cibola High, he played everywhere from lineman to linebacker to tailback to quarterback, even. On the basketball court, he played both on the perimeter and the low block. He even became a skilled breakdancer among his friends' crew.

The scholarship offer he received from the University of Michigan — where he eventually attended and played for three years before entering the NFL draft — didn't come from anything he did on the defensive line.

Then-Michigan coach Lloyd Carr and defensive coordinator Ron English attended a basketball practice and, as Branch's boyhood friend Jude Roybal describes it, "Alan became the fastest, highest jumper that we'd ever seen."

Branch stole the show when he did a two-handed reverse dunk. Carr and English were sold.

Said Branch's football coach at Cibola, Ben Schultz: "They watched him do that and they said, 'We're signing him.'"

"Well, that's accurate," Carr said. "It was quite a visit. I don't remember if I had already seen his film before we went down, but there's two things that I saw Alan do that left no doubt about his ability to be an outstanding athlete. The basketball, the dunk, he was probably 260 (pounds) then. To see a guy that size who had wonderful explosiveness in terms of jumping and his hand-eye coordination —he was an excellent basketball player.

"In football, the thing that impressed me was they put him in at tailback and handed him the ball and he had a run that was 60 or 70 yards. It was hard to believe what you were seeing. He was quite a talented guy."

That explosiveness and versatility has served him well in his road to success in the NFL, constantly defying the stereotype of a big-bodied space-eater.

Perhaps Ray Rodriguez, his basketball coach at Cibola, put it best.

"I used to describe him as a sports car in a diesel truck body," Rodriguez said.

A multifaceted force

Carr knew what he had in Branch and identified his best position as a defensive tackle. Still, even in college, Carr saw numerous possibilities for Branch's skill set.

"We felt right away with the way he ran, he'd fit any defensive scheme in the country," Carr said. "He was one of those guys who could have been an outstanding offensive lineman as well. I'm not sure he couldn't have been a tight end. But he was a guy that we recruited from the beginning as a defensive lineman."

Branch saw limited time as a freshman, but grew into an All-Big Ten performer as a junior in 2006. From there, he decided to make the early jump to the NFL.

"You hate to compare players," Carr said. "But let me just say that Alan was as talented as any defensive front player that we've had here."

Long wait to get his shot

When Branch broke into the league as a second-round draft pick of the Arizona Cardinals, he played sparingly with just three starts in four years. However, when he signed with the Seattle Seahawks after being released in 2011, Branch flourished under Pete Carroll's aggressive system, making 31 out of a possible 32 starts in two years with 63 tackles and four sacks.

"Pete saw me the year before against Seattle when I was in Arizona, when I finally got the opportunity to be on the field and showed people what I could do," Branch said. "I knew all I had to do was get on the field and people could see what I could do. Unfortunately in Arizona, they didn't give me a chance, and I couldn't do anything from there not being on the field. I definitely took advantage of it in Seattle."

However, after a year with the Buffalo Bills, with whom he signed as a free agent in the 2013 offseason, Branch was cut in August after being arrested on a DUI charge. Those close to him describe the incident as out of character.

"He's not even really a drinker, so I was more curious than anything at first," Roybal said. "I just tried to play more of a supportive role."

"We were all shocked," Schultz said. "I was shocked. My text to him was, 'Alan, I'm here for you. Whatever you need, I'm here for you.' He didn't respond, but obviously he's gotten it back together and he's moving on."

Branch considers the matter over and done with.

"I definitely take everything that came with it because I was in the wrong," Branch said. "But I'm not even living in that past mentality anymore. I've got a fresh chance of being on a new team, and that's where I'm at now."

And where he is now, playing for Bill Belichick, who craves diversity with the amount of different fronts he presents from week to week, Branch fits in well.

"I've played in a hybrid 3-4. I've played in 4-3. I've played in a 3-4. I've been in almost every system," Branch said. "I feel like I've got knowledge in every system. It's most of a mentality change in my play more than my physical play. I feel like after practicing a couple weeks at a certain position, I could play any position on the defensive front."

In last Sunday's win over the Colts, Branch made three tackles and helped the Patriots defensive front limit the Colts to just 19 yards rushing on 17 carries.

He didn't throw down any reverse dunks or run for any 70-yard touchdowns, but it was an impressive showing, nonetheless.

DL Malcom Brown

The Boston Globe

Patriots top draft pick Malcom Brown is intentionally grounded

By Ben Volin GLOBE STAFF MAY 11, 2015

BRENHAM, Texas — Malcom Brown was a 6-foot-2-inch, 306-pound behemoth as a sophomore at Brenham High School back in 2010. And he was about to face the wrath of Margaret Agnew, a sweet little lady with a Texas twang who stood about a foot shorter and weighed nearly 200 pounds less.

Brown had moved in with the Agnew family that year. Growing up 20 miles outside of town, he wanted to live closer to school to make it easier to attend football practices. He also craved a loving family structure. His father was killed in a car crash when he was 4, and his mother, Barbara, struggled to provide for Malcom and his three brothers.

But Malcom was nowhere to be found that June day in 2010. He had attended Brenham's graduation to watch his older friends walk, and got separated from his group. Day turned to night and the Agnews hadn't heard from Malcom. They were worried sick.

When Malcom finally returned home that night, Margaret Agnew got very stern with him. He had to check in with his family and be more responsible.

"Malcom, it doesn't matter what anyone else does. You are responsible for you," Margaret told him. "You can't blame it on anybody else. 'I'm responsible for me.'"

Margaret added, "He really took that in. We didn't ground him or anything, because he never went anywhere. I think just the talking to was enough."

Brown's life begins anew when the Patriots introduce him to the media as the team's latest first-round draft pick. A humble, easygoing kid from southeast Texas who never had visited New England before arriving Thursday, Brown has lived up to his football hype every step of the way.

He earned five-star prospect status as a hulking nose tackle in high school, dominated Big 12 competition for three years at the University of Texas, and left school early to become a first-round draft pick.

Now the Patriots envision him wreaking havoc in the middle of the defensive line as Vince Wilfork's replacement. Former Colts president Bill Polian called Brown "the steal of the draft."

"We could tell as a freshman he would be a first-round draft choice, and no one thought he'd stay past his third year," said former Texas coach Mack Brown (no relation). "The day he walked on the field, he was a man."

But Brown's meteoric football journey may never have come to be if not for the embrace of the Agnew family. Margaret and Craig Agnew — Brown's defensive coordinator at Brenham — taught him about love, maturity, and responsibility.

Feeling at home

As a senior in high school, Brown defied his coaches and refused to give up his cellphone during a meeting. When he had returned to the Agnews' home, Margaret had placed all of his clothes and belongings on the front porch, a sign that he had to follow the rules or get out.

Lesson learned.

“They took care of me,” Brown told the Austin American-Statesman last fall. “They taught me how a family is supposed to be.”

Now only 21 years old, Brown is a self-described “old soul” — married to his college sweetheart, Faith, and raising two daughters (4-year-old stepdaughter, Rayna, and babyayah, 9 months old). Brown doesn’t drink, and his Texas coaches never had to worry about him running around Austin’s 6th Street getting into trouble. When he’s not playing football, Brown likes to fish, play video games, watch vampire movies, and play the role of daddy.

“He wants four total, which I think that’s a testament to how much he loves kids,” Faith Brown said. “He does a really good job — when it’s football time, it’s football time. When it’s school time, it’s school time. When it’s family time, it’s family time. He’s just really good at getting into those roles when he’s supposed to.”

The Patriots didn’t draft Brown because he’s a mature family man, of course. They drafted him because, simply put, he’s a beast.

He was virtually unblockable as a four-year varsity nose tackle at Brenham, menacing many quarterbacks in his path, including Johnny Manziel. He’s now 6-2 and 320 pounds, but more of a pass rusher than a typical anchor-down nose tackle. Type Brown’s name into YouTube, and watch him chase down a wide receiver from behind, 31 yards down the field.

“I used to like to let the college coaches come watch us do conditioning because he would win every sprint,” said Glen West, Brenham’s head football coach. “And I’m not talking about linemen. He would win the sprints against everybody, because he ran so hard.”

Mack Brown recruited Malcom Brown hard as a sophomore, and by his junior year Malcom had committed to be a Longhorn.

“It became obvious as a sophomore, if he stayed away from the injuries and stayed motivated and stayed out of trouble, that he had definite potential to be an NFL player,” Craig Agnew said.

The motivation part was tough at first. Brown didn’t have a strong male role model in his life as a child, and he lacked direction. He actually quit the varsity football team as a freshman, but West and Agnew convinced him and his mother to give it another shot as a sophomore.

“I went to Coach Agnew and said, ‘This kid’s got something special. He’s a smart kid, he’s just had a bad environment,’ ” West said.

Brown grew up in Washington, a rural town about 20 miles outside of Brenham. Agnew and his son, Tyler, would drive Brown home from games every Friday night, then pick him up early on Saturday morning for practices. Eventually they thought, “Why doesn’t Malcom just stay over on Friday nights?”

After a few weeks, Brown wanted to stay over on Saturday nights, too, so he could attend church with the Agnews on Sunday. Then he wanted to stay over on Thursday night, too, so he could get to the football team breakfasts on Friday mornings.

Before his junior season, Brown told his mother and his uncle, Gerald, that he wanted to live with the Agnews full time.

“It wasn’t like we made him do anything. He asked if he could stay with us, he asked if he could go to church with us,” Margaret Agnew said. “His mother has some difficulties, and we were just really happy to help him out. If she’s there, she’s momma. We just try to fill in the gaps.”

Quick to impress

The changes in Brown were immediate and noticeable. He turned into an A-student and made the honor roll as a senior. He spent his weekend nights hanging with Tyler Agnew around the house instead of running around town. He went on vacations with the Agnews to their ranch in New Mexico, or to visit Margaret's family in Dallas.

"Definitely saw Malcom mature," said Tim Cole, a linebacker at Texas and lifelong friend of Brown's. "When you don't have a father, you know right from wrong but sometimes you make mistakes. Malcom and Coach Agnew had a special connection. I think that really helped him mature his mind-set in life and school and things like that."

He also dedicated himself to football. While recruiting Brown, the Texas coaches told the Brenham coaches they were worried that Brown, already 306 pounds as a sophomore, would eat himself out of his potential.

"He instantly went to work on it, and he weighed 288 his junior and senior year," West said. "It was nothing to see him running in the heat of the day in July in Texas. He ran a six-minute mile for our conditioning test at 288 [pounds]. He'll do whatever he has to do, and that's what sets him apart and why he's a first-round draft pick."

Brown made an immediate impression on his teammates and coaches at Texas when he enrolled there the summer before his freshman year.

"By the time we got to August practice, he had already earned the respect of everybody in the locker room through his work ethic and toughness, which at a line position is pretty difficult to do," said Manny Diaz, formerly the defensive coordinator at Texas and now in the same position at Mississippi State. "You wouldn't think a freshman would challenge some older guys to finish their lifts or runs, but he brought that instantly."

Brown earned a spot in the defensive line rotation as a true freshman, and started all 13 games as a sophomore. He didn't quite dazzle during his first two seasons, compiling just two sacks and 12 tackles for loss as a sophomore, but the Texas coaches loved having him around and knew he still had tremendous potential.

"Malcom was never in the office for anything negative," Mack Brown said. "He's a very upbeat, positive young guy that took school very important. Never late for a meeting, never in any trouble in any kind, he was never around drugs. Just the perfect student-athlete for us."

He met Faith in a freshman class, and she provided the love and support he was missing from the Agnew family. He quickly assumed the role of father for Rayna, and spent his days changing diapers at 5 a.m., going to class, then practicing football. They scraped by on his football stipends and her odd jobs. They got married last May, and had Mayah last August during two-a-days.

"He was so excited about it, just like, 'Ah man, it's a great feeling to be a father, I can be there for my daughter,' " said Cole, his best friend. "He's one of those guys, it kind of clicked for him earlier than most people. He found the special girl for him that makes him happy, and he was like, 'This is who I want to spend the rest of my life with.' And it's worked out."

When new Texas coach Charlie Strong arrived for the 2014 season, he had discipline issues with the players from the Mack Brown regime, as is common in college. His message to the players who didn't want to fall in line: "Why can't you be more like Malcom?"

"I said that because he played hard," Strong said. "And if you watch him, his game tape, he was one of those guys, even if he took a play off, he felt guilty about doing it. He never wanted to let the team down."

'A unique skill set'

Brown is serious about his football. He loved it so much that during his junior season, he would sit in on the coaches' game-plan meetings on Monday mornings to get a headstart on preparation, even though Monday was his one off day of the week.

"The first time he brought Faith home, he said, 'Will you tell her it's OK that I dream about football?' " Margaret Agnew said. "I said, 'Faith, ballerinas dream about dancing, singers dream about singing. Malcom's a football player, he dreams about football.' "

Brown made a jump his junior season, compiling 6½ sacks and 15 tackles for loss and becoming a finalist for the 2014 Outland Trophy and 2014 Nagurski Award. Coaches rave about his quickness, knee bend, footwork, and power, as Brown is more of an interior pass rusher than a Wilfork-like run stuffer. He can play inside or outside, 1-gap or 2-gap. West said everyone in Brenham was "extremely disappointed" when Brown ran a 5.05 in the 40 at the Combine in February because they'd seen him run in the 4.7s many times.

"He's a speed-and-quickness guy," Strong said. "If he needs to play the double team he can play it, but he's not just an anchor guy that's going to hold down the middle. Some guys that big, you have to create plays for them. But he can go 1-on-1 and create his own plays."

"It's a unique skill set. To have a big guy like that that can still be productive rushing the passer, not just a run plugger, is a huge commodity," Diaz added.

Before the draft, Patriots defensive coordinator Matt Patricia went down to Texas to work out Brown and linebacker Jordan Hicks, and came away impressed with Brown's physical skills as well as his football IQ. Naturally, Brown watched the draft with 70 friends and loved ones in Austin instead of soaking up the red-carpet experience in Chicago.

"He's one of those guys that understands ball," Strong said. "You can put him on the board and he can give it back to you. Smart, tough, and dependable, that's what Malcom is."

Now he's a Patriot, too, with the goal of manning the middle of the defensive line for the next five or six years, at least. He doesn't have to scrape by anymore, as he will sign a contract worth \$7.3 million over four years.

But his loved ones say money and fame won't change him. Brown already has everything he needs in his wife, two daughters, and a career playing football.

"He's not a material guy. He wasn't at all wanting anything from us except attention, instruction, discipline, and love," Margaret Agnew said. "He's not into the hype. He's a family man — changes diapers and takes care of his girls. He's just Malcom. That's what I want everyone to know."

CB Malcolm Butler



A Hero's Welcome for Malcolm Butler

An undrafted free agent who once worked at Popeyes for \$7.25 an hour became the unlikely star of Super Bowl XLIX. The MMQB followed him back home to Vicksburg, Miss., where everyone already knew his name
William Widmer for Sports Illustrated/The MMQB

VICKSBURG, Miss. — A sultry breeze rolls off the Yazoo River, and it looks like Malcolm Butler might drift with it ... into a slumber. It's Saturday afternoon, nearly three weeks since his goal-line interception in the waning moments of Super Bowl XLIX, and the Patriots' rookie cornerback is lounging on a red rocking chair on the porch of a 150-year-old bed and breakfast in his hometown.

For the past three hours Butler entertained 150 guests for brunch. The guest list was only 30, but his community college coach brought along two assistants, two members of the public relations staff, plus a photographer, and, well, you know how these things go. Butler worked the room, mingling with a saxophonist, the mayor, two beauty pageant queens and countless friends and family as the B&B served fried chicken, grits, fresh fruit and individual bags of Chick-fil-A potato chips.

Butler smiled. He shook hands. He kept saying, "Thank you, sir," and "Appreciate it, ma'am," and "I'm blessed." He autographed enlarged copies of The Vicksburg Post and grinned for countless photographs. He briefly disappeared upstairs to record a video interview with Patriots TV and then stepped outside for an impromptu photo shoot with Sports Illustrated. Now he's enjoying a calm moment on the porch, the chair rocking slowly, his eyes fluttering on the verge of a nap.

His is the hero's journey told anew. Before he became an instant star in the Arizona desert, he was a once-cut JUCO player who went from working at Popeyes for \$7.25 an hour to an undrafted free agent in the NFL. When he charged in front of Ricardo Lockette's slant route and picked off Russell Wilson's bullet of a pass, the 24-year-old became a legend in all six New England states on the order of Carlton Fisk waving the ball fair, Bobby Orr flying through the air, Larry Bird's crooked finger and Curt Schilling's bloody sock.

And yet Butler, who made the rookie minimum of \$420,000 last season, will find himself fighting for a roster spot in August. That's the cold reality of Bill Belichick's NFL, even after you find yourself taking a selfie with LL Cool J and getting Jamie Foxx's cell number at the Grammy's. That's why Butler says he's dedicating himself to four pillars: staying humble, being appreciative, remaining focused and continuing to work hard. But today is all about celebrating the past.

"Hey Malcolm, you ready?" shouts Milton Moore, a lieutenant with the Vicksburg Sheriff's Department who is shadowing Butler for the day.

"Yeah, let's do it," Butler says, jumping up from the rocking chair. "I just gotta change first."

He looks down at his lavender dress shirt and paisley tie.

"My buddy is going to bring over a jersey," he says. "I can't be wearing this to my parade."

In Vicksburg, Miss., February 21 is Malcolm Butler Day.



No Offseason

MALCOLM BUTLER CONTRIBUTOR

Ever since I made that interception, life's been a little different. I can't roam around like I used to. Everywhere I go, people want pictures. They want me to sign something. I can't even go to the grocery store without somebody wanting to talk to me. It's a big change from the "regular" guy I used to be.

I guess it just comes with the territory. People are treating me like a celebrity, but I'm still the same guy who's worked hard and taken advantage of his opportunities, and that's all I'm trying to be. I'm definitely just enjoying the ride and being respectful and appreciative to the fans. Without them — and my coaches, teammates and others who've supported me along the way — none of this would have even been possible.

The first thing everyone asks me about is the play, so let's get that out of the way now.

It's crazy because I wasn't even supposed to be in on that play. The Seahawks were on the one-yard line, so we sent out goal-line personnel. We thought for sure they were gonna try to punch it in with Marshawn Lynch. But when we saw they had three wide receivers on the field, we had to adjust.

That's when Coach Flores, our safeties coach, called for three corners, so we pulled a linebacker off the field and he yelled, "Malcolm, go!" So I went in.

When I got into position and looked at Ricardo Lockette lining up as the outside receiver, I knew that if his first step was outside, that meant he was going inside. I recognized the formation because I got beat on the same play from the five-yard line during Super Bowl week practice, and Coach Belichick wasn't happy. He told me I had to be on that.

Lockette faked outside and came inside, just like I was expecting.

I had to sell out and go for the pick. If I played the receiver and just made the tackle after the catch, he'd already be in the end zone for a touchdown. It was only second down, so if I just knocked the pass down and broke it up, they'd still have two more chances to run Marshawn from the one-yard line. I didn't have any choice but to take a chance and jump the route.

The rest is history. I just went for it, and after I caught it, everything got real slow. I couldn't really feel anything. I was in shock. I couldn't believe it.

I may have known that play was coming, but I definitely didn't know what was coming next. Maybe the reporter literally chasing me down on the sideline after the game should have been an indication. I was never a guy reporters chased down, but that had changed. Everything had changed.

That was the first of many firsts for me this offseason.

After the game, everything happened pretty fast. I already had a calendar full of media appearances first thing the next morning — SportsCenter, Good Morning America, The Today Show — I had like six of them back-to-back, and I had barely even slept. Immediately after that, I was on a jet with Julian Edelman to Disneyland. We had a parade and a big celebration at Disney, followed by more media appearances, and a couple of days later, we were back in Foxborough for the Patriots victory parade.

I wasn't used to all that attention. It can definitely suck you in, and I was enjoying it. Who wouldn't? Everybody in the world saw what I did, so it wasn't just sports shows that wanted to talk to me. I was invited to radio stations and TV shows I'd never even heard of. Everybody seemed to want a piece of me.

It was nice to feel anonymous again, even if it was only for one night.

After that first week of media appearances and parades, I got what was probably the coolest opportunity so far. Just six days after making that play, I was presenting an award at the Grammys.

Julian Edelman and I presented the award for Best Rock Album, and we were on the red carpet and everything. I took pictures with Jamie Foxx, LL Cool J and Nicki Minaj. I met John Legend and Jay Z. It was crazy.

After being all over TV and being recognized everywhere I went since the game, nobody there really knew who I was. I was surrounded by stars, so I was the one who was nervous. I was the one asking for pictures and talking about how much I love what they do. The tables were definitely turned, and it was kind of a relief. It was nice to feel anonymous again, even if it was only for one night.

I even saw my owner, Robert Kraft, who was there with the CEO of CBS, and as the night went on, the stars started to figure out why I was there and who I was. And once they did, they were amazing. Everybody was so encouraging.

That was a great night.

I don't care where you go in life or what you accomplish, there's no place like home. So even after presenting at the Grammys and all the honors and experiences I've had since making that play, the one memory I'll cherish most is when my hometown of Vicksburg, Mississippi held Malcolm Butler Week.

Seeing myself in a Patriots jersey on the front of The Vicksburg Post — the same paper I used to see my high school stats in — was amazing. Getting the key to the city, seeing kids in the streets wearing my jersey and having people come up to me and tell me that I'm an inspiration to them? That was humbling.

Riding in a parade down the same streets where I grew up, thinking about all the struggles and where I came from and where I am now, is a feeling I can't even begin to describe.

There have been a lot of other things I've been able to do since making that interception. I've dropped the puck at a hockey game. I've had dozens of autograph signings where hundreds of people showed up. We even had Malcolm Butler Day at West Alabama, where I played college ball.

I'm enjoying every minute of it, but being in the spotlight does take a toll on you. I don't know how some people do it. The attention can get to you sometimes, even though it's all love and support. It's all so new to me. I'm just learning as I go.

Being in the spotlight does take a toll on you. I don't know how some people do it.

But at the end of the day, it comes with the territory.

I think that's why it's so hard to repeat. After you win, you spend a part of the offseason celebrating and enjoying it. And every minute you're out celebrating, there are 31 other teams getting that extra work in, and they're all coming after you.

That's what separates great franchises from great teams. Yeah, we won the Super Bowl, but we're still hungry. I'm still hungry. I'm working every day to get better and contribute to this team, and I know everyone in the Patriots organization is doing the same thing.

It's only been a couple of months since I made that play, and the hype has finally slowed down, which has given me a lot more time to put it into perspective.

I don't want that play to define me. I don't want to be a guy who had one great moment then disappeared. Getting to the NFL is hard, but staying there is even harder. There's always someone out there gunning for your job. Last season, I was that guy trying to take someone's job. Now, because the hard work I've put in — and yeah, because of that interception — I have a chance to lock down my spot on the roster. And when I do, I'm guarding it with my life.

Sooner or later I'm gonna have to take a trip somewhere and just get some "me" time, but working and training for next season never stops. Not for Super Bowl media tours and not for vacations. We lost two of the best cornerbacks in the game in Darrelle Revis and Brandon Browner this offseason, and as much as I hate to lose those guys, I'm confident in the players we have in our secondary, and I'm gonna do everything I can to contribute and be one of the guys that fills that void.

That's the thing about the NFL: It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, you just gotta be ready when your number is called, cause you never know when it's gonna be your turn to make a big play.

Trust me, I know.

Intangibles have helped Patriots' Malcolm Butler write his rags-to-riches story

By MARK DANIELS

August 20, 2014

FOXBORO — Malcolm Butler was lost. He was without a college, without football and unsure what was next. Butler got a late start with football while growing up in Vicksburg, Miss. He only played for two seasons at Vicksburg High School, during his freshman and senior seasons, and when he graduated the only opportunity he had — in part because of his grades — was at Hinds Community College.

But in one fell swoop his football career almost came to crashing halt. After five games during his 2009 freshman season, Butler was kicked out of school. (Though he wouldn't confirm the reason, the only arrest on his record shows a charge for possession of drug paraphernalia.)

It was that next year, in 2010, that he calls "life-changing." He got a part-time job at Popeyes and worked there for most the year before taking summer classes at Alcorn State University to get back on track. For the first time in his life, he missed football.

"That just made me realize how bad I wanted it and how bad I really needed it," Butler said. "You don't know how good it is until it's gone."

Butler was invited back to Hinds, where he played for one more season, in 2011. From there he went to Division II West Alabama. In what has started to become a trend, Butler persevered. For two years he was one of the best cornerbacks in the Gulf Coast Conference. His performance was enough to get him signed by the Patriots, on May 19, as an undrafted free agent.

After taking an unusual and tumultuous road to Foxboro, Butler entered training camp facing an uphill battle to even earn a roster spot. But if there's one thing this 24-year-old knows, it's that he'll never quit.

"You just can't blow opportunities like this," Butler said. "You've just got to take advantage of the great things when they come. It's been a long road to get here. Some ups, some downs, but I never gave up. I kept pushing and kept believing. I always believed that I could play in this league. It's just confidence, faith and hard work."

IT TOOK ONLY a few moments after the phone ring to make Will Hall excited.

On the other end of the line was Patriots assistant special teams coach Joe Judge. Hall knew Judge, who worked under Nick Saban at Alabama for three years, through multiple mutual acquaintances, and the Patriots' coach wanted to know all about Butler.

Judge asked about Hall's star cornerback and the West Alabama coach gushed. He talked to him about Butler's skills in the return game, how he played on all four special-team units and showed exceptional tackling. He raved about his ball skills — he led the league in passes deflected as a senior — but more importantly, he talked about his character.

"Joe called me and told me how much they thought of him, and I was fired up and had a good feeling because I know coach [Bill] Belichick does a good job of taking guys like him," Hall said. "But the big thing is, I knew he would have the attitude coming from where he's been in his life, and he would do whatever it takes to make it. And he would do it with a great attitude."

"He's just a great guy. He's got a great heart and is a tremendous competitor. He feels like he belongs. He never walks into an arena where he doesn't feel like he belongs there. But at the same time, he's pretty humble. We thought he had a good shot. We really did."

During his time at West Alabama, Butler earned all kinds of accolades — All-American and All-GSC first team. He was a catalyst when the team beat rival North Alabama in the final game of the 2012 season, clinching the first outright conference championship in school history. When a North Alabama pick-6 tied the game, 14-14, Butler returned the following kickoff for a touchdown and the Tigers never looked back.

But it was the little things that made Butler special. It was how the cornerback would volunteer to set up garbage cans around the field before practice, or how his work ethic carried over his part-time job at school.

Butler worked for Hall's wife, Rebecca, on campus at the fitness and wellness center for his work study. He operated the front desk, cleaned equipment and washed and dried towels.

"She thinks the world of him. When you're around him, he just lifts you up. He's just one of those people," Hall said. "Coming from his background, that's why I knew, when he got up to New England, he would be willing to do whatever it took to make it."

BUTLER ALWAYS thought he had a chance to make it in the NFL. He always thought he belonged. And though it was the mention of special teams that brought him to Foxboro, it's been his play at cornerback that's opened up eyes.

In the Patriots' first preseason game, against Washington, he totaled seven tackles and deflected two passes. Then, against Philadelphia, he got the start opposite Darrelle Revis, collected seven more tackles and should've been credited with two forced fumbles.

On Monday, he followed it up by forcing a fumble on Rob Gronkowski during 7-on-7 drills and then intercepting a Tom Brady on a pass during 3-on-2 drills.

"I've been able to enjoy it and be shocked at the same time. It's such a blessing," Butler said. "Tom Brady, one of the best players, and Darrelle Revis — it's just crazy. I've settled down and just hoping I can maintain a spot on the roster."

Friday, he'll line up again with the Patriots as they take on the Carolina Panthers. It's wild for him to think about the road he took to get to this moment. He hates to think about what would've happened if he didn't go back to school in 2010.

Of course, quitting was never an option.

"It's just that diehard attitude to never give up

. If I gave up I probably would've been the manager at Popeyes right now, if anything," Butler said. "I didn't give up. I just stuck with it and just believed."

The cornerback then paused for a second, looking around the Patriots locker room.

"I just believed."

OL Marcus Cannon

The Providence Journal

Patriots' Marcus Cannon no stranger to hard work

By Mark Daniels

January 13, 2017, 12:22 PM

FOXBORO - Marcus Cannon came home scraped and bruised. He was only a child and learning how to ride a bicycle presented some challenges.

After falling down multiple times, he dropped his bike and ran to his parents. The conversation inside the family's home in Odessa, Texas, was short. Before his father knew it, he was back outside and on his bike. A couple of bumps in the road weren't going to stop him.

"We'd be like, 'what happened to you?'" Ebbie Cannon, Marcus' father, said. "He'd be like, 'I crashed my bicycle.' ... He would just shake it off, take his bike and keep on going."

Learning how to fall down and get back has served Cannon well. It's a trait you need when you're diagnosed with cancer just before your 23rd birthday. Mental toughness is also needed to make it in the NFL. It's an absolute must when you're doubted like Cannon was here in Foxboro.

The right tackle 'fell off his bike' more than once here in New England. But like he did when he was a child, he was back to work before anyone had time to clean up his wounds.

This season, his sixth, he rode farther than most expected. The 28-year-old became a full-time starter for the first time and turned into one of the best right tackles in the NFL. His hard work earned him a \$32.5-million contract extension as well as a spot on the NFL's All-Pro team.

"I think his mental toughness comes from him wanting to be a better player and get better at what he's doing - playing football," Ebbie Cannon said. "His mental toughness, he's always had that - in high school and at TCU. He's always been a mentally tough kid. This last season, it just seemed like he stepped up a lot more."

Down in Denver

Marcus Cannon took more than his fair share of lumps in last year's AFC Championship Game in Denver. During the Patriots loss, Tom Brady was hit 17 times and sacked four times, and Cannon had his toughest game as a pro, allowing eight quarterback hits and 2.5 sacks.

What happened in that game makes the 2016 season even more remarkable.

Cannon allowed three sacks in the first four games, but when Brady returned in Week Five, he didn't allow a single sack for the remainder of the season. According to Pro Football Focus, Cannon allowed fewer hits this year (six) than he did in that conference title game. The performance is a reflection of the Texas native making multiple changes in his training regimen.

"Well, he pretty much wanted to better himself," Ebbie Cannon explained. "When he comes home for the summer or the break, he's constantly wanting to get better. Finally, he found something that really works - a diet plan, staying busy in the weight room. He found that to be successful and that's what he ran with."

It took Cannon six seasons to find a routine that works for him, but that determination was seen before. He came to TCU from an option-based offense in high school so his pass-protection skills were raw. Since the team wanted him to protect quarterback Andy Dalton's blindside, Cannon was either going to sink or swim.

Offensive line coach Eddie Williamson worked with him on technique. Cannon had to learn how to frame his body and set his feet in order to take the right angle while trying to protect his rush lane. Cannon was so athletic in high school that he got by on natural talent, but when that failed in college, he attacked the problem.

"The thing about him, Marcus is very conscience," Williamson said. "He was one of those kids that would want to stay after practice. If he was struggling with something, he'd want to work on it and get it fixed. He'd keep coming back and he would listen. He wasn't hard-headed or anything like that. He wanted to try and learn new skills."

A big blow

Cannon made the right adjustments and before he knew it, he was one of the best tackle prospects in the 2011 draft. He was preparing to live out his dream when he got the news.

On Aug. 20, 2011, eight days before the 2011 NFL Draft, he was told he had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a treatable cancer in the lymphatic system. The diagnosis was devastating for Cannon, his family at home and family in college at TCU.

"Obviously, there was pain and hurt there," Williamson said. "There was some element of question for anybody who walks up and tells you you've got a trace of cancer somewhere in your body. I would be scared to death. I think he had to deal with those issues. He was determined."

The news hurt Cannon's draft stock. The Patriots selected the tackle in the fifth round after he was originally projected to go in the top three. Despite it all, Cannon never lost hope. He started chemotherapy sessions in April and, while fighting cancer, he was often seen in the weight room, working to stay in shape for his first NFL season.

"He had it in his heart to beat cancer and he did," Ebbie Cannon added. "Thank God. He moved forward from that and has progressed from that. He kind of set his mind to it and progressed from there."

"He did not back off. He just kept on working," added Williamson.

Cannon started his rookie season on the reserve/non-football injury list. He announced that he was in remission in October and added to the 53-man roster in mid-November. So when Bill Belichick was asked about the mental toughness he showed after the AFC championship in Denver, the coach pointed to 2011.

"Well, I think Marcus showed a lot of mental toughness from the day he got here," Belichick said. "He came in, had to go through the cancer treatments and all of that. I mean honestly, it's hard for a rookie to come into the National Football League and just make the adjustment, period. Marcus came in with all that a rookie normally had plus his personal situation and the treatments and the checkups and so forth. I thought he handled that with great maturity, and so he's shown a lot of mental toughness."

Solid season

This season came together quickly for Cannon. It was evident in training camp that he was in the best shape of his life. The addition of offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia also did wonders for the tackle and has cleaned up his technique.

Cannon has always been a fan of working out - he won a power lifting state championship in high school and set TCU weight-room records in the power clean (500 pounds), squat (870), bench press (575) and incline press (565).

In the offseason, he stepped it up not only in physical conditioning and nutrition, but in the meeting room and on the practice field.

"This year, he's shown amazing discipline with his training ethics, everything he's doing off the field to be ready to be on the field the best that he can be," left tackle Nate Solder said. "I've been so impressed with the way that he's taking care of all the details like never before."

"I'm talking about his nutrition, his weight training, his film study, concentration in meetings and focus on the field. Every kind of little detail that he's really honed in on and focused this year on, which has been very impressive."

"When you look at Marcus' journey from high school to TCU and up to there [in Foxboro], you see him progressing," added Ron King, one of Cannon's assistant coaches at Odessa High School. "It's not surprising that he's successful because of his abilities and all, but it's a credit to him to continue to have that work ethic to become successful."

His success might be surprising to some, but certainly not to those who know Marcus Cannon.

"Marcus is a hard worker. When he puts his mind to something, he pretty much makes it happen," his father said.
"We knew it was coming sooner or later. It was just a matter of time."

LS Joe Cardona



PATRIOTS PERFECT MATCH FOR LONG SNAPPER, U.S. NAVY MEMBER JOE CARDONA

By Ryan Hannable
Fri, 11/11/2016 - 8:20am

FOXBORO -- Joe Cardona knew the NFL wasn't a guarantee.

Cardona was a long snapper as well as an active member of the Navy after playing four years of football at the Naval Academy. Any team that selected him would be taking a chance, as not only was he just a long snapper, but he would have to fulfill his commitments to the Navy and it wasn't necessarily a guarantee he would be allowed to play.

There was a team willing to take a chance and it wasn't a big surprise as to who it was -- the Patriots and Bill Belichick. New England selected Cardona in the fifth round of the 2015 NFL draft.

Belichick has a lasting connection with the Naval Academy where his late father, Steve, was a long-time coach and associate professor in the department of physical education. Navy was where Belichick was introduced to coaching and spent most of his childhood. Because of this, the coach has a great appreciation for the military and all the history that goes along with it.

"The [Patriots have] been incredibly understanding for a rookie snapper last year with a lot of outside obligations and then throughout the offseason they were flexible and understanding that I had commitments," Cardona said on Thursday. "It's been great and there is a lot of carry over between this organization and my full-time commitment."

Last season Cardona wasn't only a rookie in the NFL, but a command duty officer at the Naval Academy Preparatory School in Newport, Rhode Island. The California native would work a 24-hour shift on Tuesday (the Patriots' day off), but also shifts on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday around the Patriots' practice schedule.

Even he admitted it was a lot.

Cardona spent his offseason away from the team and its offseason programs working full-time in Maine on the USS Zumwalt upwards of 60 hours a week. This season is a little different as he is now in the Navy Reserves and he will fulfill the majority of his duties in the offseason. He can focus on just football during the season.

(It's worth noting Cardona couldn't play in the NFL each of the last two seasons without receiving full permission from the Navy, which wasn't 100 percent confirmed until May for this year.)

"It's definitely been a little bit of a relief with shifting over to the reserves," Cardona said of what this season has been like. "The biggest thing has been just being able to prepare for games on a weekly basis and knowing in the offseason I still will be able to fulfill my commitments and finish my qualifications to continue my career in the Navy."

His work ethic certainly has drawn the attention of his teammates, particularly the ones he works the most with like punter Ryan Allen, as he and kicker Stephen Gostkowski spend countless hours with Cardona perfecting the field goal operation.

"A lot [of respect], especially last season when he was doing double-duty throughout the entire length of a NFL season," Allen said. "It says a lot about work ethic, accountability and those are long hours. The fact that he was working early in the morning and then shooting back over here for practice in the afternoon, I doubt a lot of people would choose or even be able to sustain that type of schedule for an extended period of time. For that he's got my respect."

On Monday Cardona was announced as the Patriots nominee for the NFL's sixth-annual Salute to Service Award. Since 2011, the Salute to Service Award honors a league member who demonstrates exemplary commitment to

honoring and supporting the military community. Finalists for the award will be announced in January, with the recipient being recognized at the NFL Honors awards show in Houston on the night before the Super Bowl.

Whether Belichick had a member of the military on his team or not, the coach has always made it a point to recognize holidays and monumental events associated with the military. Allen wouldn't say exactly what Belichick says or does when it comes to these, just that it's something that means a lot to him.

"All I can say is he definitely values and appreciates people who are selfless and put themselves in front of others rather than themselves," he said. "That's all I can really say. I know he values that."

Perhaps no NFL team values the military as much as the Patriots do, which is why Cardona is so proud to wear a Patriots uniform every day.

"I think [holidays and events] definitely are reflected upon," he said. "I think we do a good job around here of really appreciating it the right way. The guys in the locker room reflect the same sentiments."

With Friday being Veterans Day, it's likely Belichick will bring the holiday up in some fashion to his team. It would also not be surprising to have it involve Cardona in some fashion.

"Veterans day is a special day of reflection on those who have served before and those who are currently serving our freedom and allowing us to live the life we want to live," Cardona said. "It means a lot to me. It means a lot to my friends and my peers in the military. It's a great day for us outside the military to truly give thanks and reflect."

No matter what day it is, Cardona is grateful to be able to do what he does, which wouldn't be possible without Belichick and the Patriots. And with Belichick's deep appreciation for the military, it's been the perfect match.

FB James Develin



Don't tell Patriots that James Develin's position is dying

Develin is driving force for run game

By Ron Borges

Thursday, December 29, 2016

FOXBORO — According to the Associated Press' All-Pro team, James Develin's position doesn't exist. Tell that to New York Jets linebacker David Harris, whom Develin kept putting on the ground last week as if he caught him stealing his furniture.

Or ask LeGarrette Blount, who every Sunday morning lights a candle of gratitude because there's still a fullback in his huddle, one who comes to the field with bad intentions.

"There are some teams that try and write fullbacks out of the league, but I just feel like it's hard to be successful without one," said Blount, who has run behind Develin's crushing blocks for 1,110 yards and 17 touchdowns this season. "They're the most important guys on the offense when you want to run the ball well. They do a lot of lead blocking. They do a lot of things that get us to go in the position we want to go in. I feel like they're not getting as much recognition or publicity as they should, especially with the job that they do, which is probably one of the toughest jobs for anybody to do on offense, which is to go in there and blow somebody up every time you're in the game.

"I feel like he doesn't get the recognition he deserves, but he definitely deserves a lot of the recognition that I get."

Once fullbacks got all the recognition. It was the position of Jim Brown, Jim Taylor and John Henry Johnson, Hall of Famers all. It was a position where you ran through holes more often than opened them up for others, but over time the game evolved and the position devolved into one the AP's official honor roll now thinks doesn't exist.

But in a few outposts it remains. The fullback position is not what it once was, but it remains an essential part of one of the NFL's most prolific offenses in part because the Brown-educated Develin is a willing foot soldier in a weekly fight for yardage and dominance at the line of scrimmage, a ground battle in which men like Develin happily do the grunt work that make headlines bearing others' names.

"He loves to play," coach Bill Belichick said. "He's happy to go in there. He's a very dependable player. James is strong. He's not big like a lineman but he's got very good playing strength for his size. I'd say he's built to last.

"He's got a strong body, and he can take contact and give it out, too. He's tough. He's got a good mentality. He likes contact. He seeks it out. I mean that's the job.

"But he's changed up his techniques and as he's played more guys have kind of played him differently. There are some things he's had to deal with this year that maybe he didn't have to deal with — he didn't play too much last year (out with a broken tibia) but two years ago — from a technique standpoint. He's adjusted and adapted to that.

"I'd say the hard part is you don't see college teams using fullbacks very much so there's no real training for them. A lot of the fullbacks in the NFL like James were defensive conversions or there are some circumstances around that position. They didn't grow up as a fullback and play fullback their whole life like David Andrews played center his whole life or Elandon Roberts played linebacker his whole life. These guys have to make a conversion.

"Sometimes that's challenging but I'd say that's challenging for the whole league because, again, when you look at the fullbacks in the league, I want to say the last time I did it, like half of them weren't fullbacks initially. They were something else."

That's fitting because, frankly, today's fullback is something else from the days of Brown and Taylor. They were guys who carried the load. Today Develin moves a load, putting his head into someone else's at a high rate of speed and jarring his brain play after play for the betterment of his team and the man behind him with the ball.

A chemical engineer by training, Develin is an Ivy League graduate who was looking to line up job interviews in 2010 when the Oklahoma Yard Dawgz of the Arena League and the Florida Tuskers of the United Football League called.

They needed a fullback and why wouldn't a college defensive tackle trained to be a chemical engineer jump at the chance? No reason Develin could think of, so he took it and began a twisting path toward a weekly collision course.

"I was trying to sell myself as anything I could be to get into the league," Develin recalled. "I knew my skill set. NFL defensive ends and linebackers were all three, four inches taller and ran faster. I knew I'd have to change (positions), but if I didn't try I'd regret it. It's been quite a journey."

His began on the Bengals practice squad for the final five games of 2010 and all of 2011. A year later he was in the same circumstance with the Patriots before finally making the 53-man roster in 2013 and playing in all 16 games. He was a fullback now, in not only name but also deed.

Develin is now in his fourth season as the lead blocker on a team that ranks eighth in rushing yardage. One reason for that pounding success is Blount and the line in front of him. The other is Develin, whose lead blocks are consistently not only crushing but well thought out.

To the untutored eye the job requires only a willingness to be involved in eight to 10 car crashes a game. But as with many things in the sport there is more skill to the "unskilled position" than many think.

"The hard part about that position is dealing with what's in front of you," Belichick explained. "A lot of times, the way a play is drawn up on paper isn't the way it happens. Guys move and blocks that should be made cleanly in front of you aren't clean and there's another body or half a body that's in the way. Do you take that guy instead of the guy you're supposed to block or do you go around him and let him penetrate?"

"When there's too much penetration you have to take him, when there's not enough, then the running back can get by him and you still go to your player, and then sometimes that changes. The guy you were blocking moves and stunts and somebody else is there and you have to figure it out on the run. There's a lot more of that from the fullback position than there is on the line of scrimmage.

"You have an assignment and provided everything goes the way it should go, then you get to that assignment. But when things happen, then you have to make an adjustment and do the best thing for that play.

"It's like a linebacker sorting it out on the other side of the ball. 'Here is where my gap is supposed to be but something happened and I can't go there. My guy got knocked into it,' or what have you."

It is Develin's job to move those people out, a road grader's job needing a wise operator assessing the situation before he takes that load left or right.

"Sometimes you line up 10 yards from a guy and meet him at 5 but you need some instincts and an understanding of the timing of the play and where the back is," Develin said. "The more times you see situations in games and practices the more often you'll make the right decision."

The issue of the right decision for a fullback, however, involves more than whether to carry out the original assignment or alter it. It is more basic than that. The issue can be as simple as whether to pursue such a concussive career at all. Last year, Develin was confronted with that in the way he faces most things — head on.

"Concussions are a sensitive subject," he said of the kind of brain trauma that accompanies the violent contact that is part of his job. "This offseason my parents watched 'Concussion' (a film based on the life of Dr. Bennet Omalu, who first discovered the presence of massive CTE deposits in the brains of dead NFL players). They asked my opinion. I told them I knew what I got into.

"They trust my judgment. They know I'm trying to do the right thing. But if you ask anybody (in the locker room), we try not to think about it.

"You can't go out and play on Sunday or Monday nights with those thoughts in your head. Fullback is not a glory position. You have to play with reckless abandon."

James Develin plays that way, the way one must to flourish in a position some people believe no longer exists. One of those people is not LeGarrette Blount.

“Develin has been a huge piece for us,” the bruising Blount said. “That’s my guy. I love him. I love him to death. For someone that doesn’t get all the touchdowns, he’s just as hyped as I am when I get them. We’ll have each other’s back regardless.”

Yes, they will. Develin will put someone on his back for Blount and Blount will pat him on the back when he’s done, fully knowing the yards don’t come as easy if the man whose position doesn’t exist isn’t in front of him.

DB Nate Ebner

The Boston Globe

A true Patriot ready to hit the field for Team USA

By Christopher L. Gasper
AUGUST 3, 2016

RIO DE JANEIRO — The Patriots' Nate Ebner is forgoing football this summer to chase his Olympic dream. Fittingly, it entails practically nonstop running.

That's the nature of rugby sevens, the fast-paced, lung-searing, seven-person-per side version of the game that is making its Olympic debut at the Rio Summer Games. (Rugby union with 15 players per side was featured in the Games in 1900, 1908, 1920, and 1924.)

Ebner, who grew up playing rugby and converted to football during his junior year at Ohio State, is here in Brazil with the USA Rugby sevens team after being named to the 12-man squad last month.

He is already in better shape than any of his Patriots teammates who are sweating through training camp back in Foxborough. He'd better be for his grueling sport.

"For me, to transition from football to rugby, it was kind of natural because I did grow up playing rugby my whole life, so I did know how to do that whole thing a little bit," said Ebner. "It took some time getting used to it [again], especially the cardiovascular aspect of rugby.

"Football is a very explosive game. It only lasts five or six seconds, and we train that way. I trained that way for eight years straight until I came back to rugby.

"Definitely, there was an adjustment period. [Teammate] Danny [Barrett] has been on me about looking skinny now from when I first came in. There were some things I had to adjust to. The cardiovascular thing, I just knew that was going to be part of it. The rest of it is just kind of go with the flow."

Ebner might be geographically far from New England, but the special teams ace/safety isn't far from his teammates' thoughts. Special teams captain Matthew Slater showed that during the first practice of training camp when he donned Ebner's No. 43.

"Yeah, I was aware of that," said Ebner. "That was pretty awesome. He is a class act.

"It says so much about not only him, but the organization and the type of people they bring to that organization that truly care about one another. Matt is a first-class dude. He got my mom a little emotionally worked up about that.

"I just want to say that not only Matt showed me a lot of support, but a lot of guys throughout that organization. The [defensive backs] and coaches and stuff, they've all been amazing through this for me. I can't say enough about that."

Ebner is no stranger to playing rugby on a world stage or to another brand of red-white-and-blue uniform. He was a standout on USA Rugby under-19 and under-20 clubs from 2006-08 and was named MVP of the 2008 Rugby World Cup as a U-20 player.

A 2012 sixth-round pick, Ebner is taking a risk with his football sabbatical. The Patriots have a roster exemption for him while he competes at the Olympics, but he will have to earn a spot upon his return.

But the opportunity to compete for an Olympic medal in a sport that was crucial to the bond he had with his late father was too much to pass up. Ebner chose to wear No. 12 because that was his father's number as a rugby player.

"I had a lot of different emotions when I found out I made the squad," said Ebner. "Obviously, I was extremely happy. I gave this everything that I had. I think seeing my name on that roster was confirmation that I did give it everything that I had. Seeing that was a great feeling.

"It's not only those good feelings, though. I also had a lot of heartbreak for the other guys that didn't make the team . . . We've become so close over those five or six weeks. It's heartbreaking, honestly.

"A lot of good feelings, some bad feelings, but ultimately I'm excited — excited to represent not only those guys, but our country and my family and everyone back home."

Ebner said he lost a good amount of weight training for the Olympics, though he wouldn't give a specific number. But he also said it's nothing he can't gain back in the weight room.

The first thing he hopes to lift is an Olympic medal. Ebner and the USA Rugby Eagles open group play next Tuesday against Argentina at Deodoro Stadium.

There are three groups of four teams in the competition. The top two finishers from each group and the top two third-place teams advance to the quarterfinals.

Ebner fielded lots of questions from the international media Wednesday. His presence at the Games as an NFL player is clearly a boon for the sport. But he isn't a football player right now.

He is thankful that the Patriots have allowed him to step away from the team's pursuit of a fifth Super Bowl ring to tackle the five rings of the Olympics.

"If it weren't for their support, I wouldn't be here doing this," he said. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and to have them back me doing it means the world to me."



Why Pats' Ebner pursues Olympic rugby dream

By Arash Markazi
April 5, 2016 7:36 AM ET

CHULA VISTA, Calif. -- Nate Ebner heard the question more times than he can remember after he arrived at the U.S. Olympic Training Center two weeks ago:

Why would a New England Patriots special teamer with a Super Bowl ring and new contract spend his offseason trying to make the U.S. Olympic rugby team?

To understand why Ebner politely smiles whenever he's asked that, you have to go back eight years and flip the context:

Why would an accomplished rugby player think he could walk on for one of the nation's most prestigious college football programs?

The answers to both questions -- and many others Ebner has faced -- can be traced back to his father.

"I think about him every day," Ebner, 27, said. "I always think what he would think about what I'm doing."

Ebner's parents divorced when he was 3 years old, but the father-son relationship wasn't stunted. It developed into a deep friendship rooted in a shared passion for just about everything -- most of all, rugby.

"I first started playing rugby with my dad when I was 6 years old, and we played all the time," Ebner said. "He was my best friend, no doubt. We did everything together. We would compete in the weight room, on the field, and we had the same humor. Everything he liked, I liked. That's just how we were."

Jeff Ebner, who played rugby at the University of Minnesota, coached his son's rugby team at Hilliard Davidson High School in the Columbus, Ohio, area. In the summers, Nate worked with his dad at the family auto reclamation business in Springfield.

"Jeff was an awesome father," Nancy Pritchett, Ebner's mother, said. "He was all about making Nate the best man he could possibly make him, as far as the influence he had as a parent."

When they weren't at the shop, Jeff and Nate would work out or play club rugby. As a teenager, Nate started playing against adults his father's age. Ebner grew to be one of the top junior rugby players in the country. At 17, he was the youngest player ever to compete for the USA Sevens team. He was named team MVP at the Under-19 International Rugby Board Junior World Championship in 2007 and again at the Under-20 IRB Junior World Championship in 2008.

Ebner had an itch to play football while he was in high school, and he nearly joined the team his senior year, but his rugby commitments, which included travel to Wales, Ireland, Dubai and Guyana, came first. He played club rugby at Ohio State after outgrowing junior tournaments, but that was a letdown after he had performed on the international stage.

In November 2008, during his sophomore year of college, Ebner broached the idea of walking on the Buckeyes football team to his father. Because he wouldn't be able to join the team -- if he made it -- until his third year of college, it wasn't an ideal situation. Jeff Ebner wanted to make sure it was a long-term endeavor for Nate -- not just a short-term fix to quench his competitive thirst.

"He said, 'I don't want to see you throw away all the years and potential you have as a professional rugby player just so you can play football at Ohio State,'" Ebner said. "I told him I wanted to be a professional football player and play in the NFL. He came to terms that if the main goal was to go to the NFL and be elite, then Ohio State was a great platform for that. ... He said, 'If you're going to do it, you have to go all the way. If you want to go to the NFL, you have to be committed.'

"That was the last conversation we had."

On November 13, 2008, Jeff Ebner was beaten to death during a robbery attempt at the auto salvage shop. He was 54.

Nate Ebner was one month from his 20th birthday when his father was killed. The two were supposed to play rugby together that weekend. Instead, Ebner was tasked with giving the eulogy at his father's funeral.

"That was a hard time for me," Ebner said. "I was in a rough place. I dropped out of school for the remainder of that quarter, and I was just in a really bad place. I just kept to myself."

The holidays passed. The calendar turned. The dark cloud lingered. Pritchett knew Ebner was in pain, but she couldn't bear to watch him shuffle through the house with his head constantly down, hidden from the world under a hoodie. She decided to reach out to her son.

"I went up to him," Pritchett said, "and I said, 'Nate, what happened is tragic, and no one should have to go through that, but you're still here, and you have to continue to live your life. If your dad was here, this would really make him sad to see you not living your life.'"

Those words -- and memories of his father's message -- got through to Ebner.

"She wanted me to be the man that he raised me to be," Ebner said. "I just remember the last conversation I had with my dad, where I committed to playing football, and that gave me a lot of motivation to bring me out of the bad place that I was in."

Around 80 hopefuls participated in Ohio State's walk-on tryout in January 2009. Ebner was the only one who made the team. As it turned out, there was something cathartic for Ebner about being on a football field. During a time when he craved emotional support, he got plenty from his new brothers.

"That whole process is what really brought me through it all," Ebner said. "I was in a cloudy, bad place at the time, and being able to come and work through my frustrations and anger on the field and in the weight room and being a part of that family helped me."

The kinship with his teammates enabled Ebner to open up about his father. Midway through his first season, three days after Ohio State was upset by Purdue and fell to 5-2, Ebner asked coach Jim Tressel if he could address the team. Ebner shared the message his father told him whenever he was on the field or in the gym: Finish strong. Those words were etched on a bracelet that his aunt had given him.

"She wore one, he wore one, I wore one, and he gave them to people on a very limited basis," Pritchett said. "He didn't want me giving them to anyone. He wanted to choose who got to wear these bracelets. So he asked his aunt if she could get 100 of the bracelets made in the next few days. She did, so he got up in front of the team, and he talked about what 'Finish Strong' meant to him and his dad.

"He told them about the bracelets and said, 'I don't want you to take them just because you're here, but if it means something to you, they're here.' Everyone on the team, including Tressel, took one."

Tressel, now the president of Youngstown State, said "there was just something special about" Ebner.

"He really earned the respect of everyone quickly," Tressel said. "He hadn't had a whole lot of football experience, but he wanted to do everything he could to help the team. So when he wanted to lay himself open and tell his story to the team and challenge them a little bit, he had, in my mind, earned that right to see if he could impact the people who were there for him when he had some needs. It brought us closer together. It was very impactful."

Ohio State didn't lose another game that season and beat Oregon in the Rose Bowl. Ebner played 36 games and recorded 30 tackles from 2009 to 2011, and he was voted the team's most inspirational player his final season.

Listed as a defensive back, Ebner wasn't used much in the secondary. But at 6-foot, 205 pounds with a 4.48 time in the 40, he was a special-teams demon who chased down return men like a heat-seeking missile. The Patriots took notice and used a sixth-round pick on him in the 2012 draft.

"I didn't know if I would get drafted or if I would even make the team," Ebner said. "I just wanted to work as hard as I could and make the most of the opportunity. I wanted to make it so bad, and I just put my head down and grinded. ... A couple of years go by, and you get a grasp of things, and here I am going into my fifth year. It's crazy."

Ebner became an unrestricted free agent this year, and on March 12, he reached an agreement on a 2-year, \$2.4 million contract to stay in New England. Three days later, with the Patriots' blessing, he announced he would be taking a leave of absence to pursue an Olympic berth in the sport his father taught him.

Ebner was back in his element last month on the rugby field at the U.S. Olympic Training Center, but that didn't stop some of his new teammates from ribbing him during the High Performance Camp.

"Go back to the secondary!" one player screamed.

"This isn't the NFL!" another added.

Ebner simply laughed at the jabs as he worked on kicking drills. His rugby instincts remained intact, but all the running turned out to be a challenge.

"In football, it's six to eight seconds of going as fast as you can, and then you can rest, but rugby is a completely different shock to the system," Ebner said during the March 24-28 camp in suburban San Diego. "There's no rest, really, and that makes it so challenging. I'm still getting acclimated to that."

Ebner didn't completely forsake rugby when he took up football. He continued to play with the Tiger Rugby club in Columbus, Ohio, in the NFL offseason -- for cross-training purposes and also with an eye toward this moment. With rugby returning to the Olympics for the first time since 1924, the moment was right for Ebner to return to his roots.

"Rugby is a part of my DNA, so when it became an Olympic sport, it was hard to not be a part of that," he said.

Ebner understands that beating full-time members of USA Rugby to earn a spot on the 12-man Olympic team is not guaranteed. But if he makes the squad, he'll compete in the Rio Games in August before rejoining the Patriots in training camp. He'll return to the international rugby scene this week to play for the elite Samurai side in Hong Kong.

"He has a real chance to make the team. Otherwise, he wouldn't be here," USA Sevens head coach Mike Friday said during last month's camp. "I've been speaking to Nate for a year about this possibility, and he's putting his reputation on the line. ... He's not an NFL player. He is a rugby player who plays in the NFL. He's a unique player and a blueprint of what could happen in the future, with rugby being a complementary sport for the NFL."

The deadline for the U.S. roster to be announced is July 15. Regardless of what happens, Ebner feels back at home playing the sport he has loved ever since his father handed him a ball two decades ago.

"It would have meant a lot for him to witness this and be a part of this," Ebner said. "I think he would be proud of what I'm doing and the light this is shining on rugby in the States. He loved playing rugby, and I'll do anything to give back to this sport that has given me so much."

WR Julian Edelman

The Boston Globe

Julian Edelman has gone from unheralded to invaluable for Patriots

When Julian Edelman takes flight, he moves the chains, and sometimes a pylon, for the Patriots.

By Michael Whitmer GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 05, 2015

It was a short drive, not even 10 minutes, but long enough — and taken often enough — that Julian Edelman and Fred Taylor strengthened a connection during training camp in 2009.

Edelman was a Patriots rookie trying to make the conversion from college quarterback to NFL wide receiver. Taylor sought a new start in New England that year, too, after rushing for more than 11,000 yards in 11 seasons with the Jacksonville Jaguars.

The veteran liked the potential he saw in the rookie, and really admired the kid's work ethic. So Taylor began offering Edelman a ride, in Taylor's car, to or from the team's training camp hotel, and to or from practice at Gillette Stadium.

During those car rides, questions would be asked, frustrations expressed. The answers were reassuring, motivational.

More than six years later, Edelman still remembers Taylor's advice, the best he says he's been given during his time with the Patriots.

"I was having a hard time, just on an emotional roller coaster, and Fred goes, 'You know, it's going to be like a roller coaster, there's going to be ups and downs. Just try to keep things as level as possible, and it'll all work itself out.' That's something I've really taken home and learned from," Edelman said last week. "There's going to be really high highs, and really low lows. It's about keeping everything even-keel."

Taylor, reached by phone, couldn't confidently vouch for the authenticity of Edelman's recollection — "I tease my wife when I say, 'Well, babe, my memory isn't that great because I've only been tackled a couple thousand times'" — but said his message as mentor was consistent.

"I would talk to Julian when he would get frustrated. Julian was one of those guys who was real curious as a rookie, had a lot of questions. A lot of veteran guys will take that as, 'Look, man, I'm not here to babysit. You figure it out.' But I saw a kid who wanted to know. I saw his desire, I saw him work his butt off," Taylor said. "He made typical rookie mistakes, but he didn't let that slow him down."

Slow down? Edelman rarely does that. He's on the go the second the Patriots emerge from that inflatable helmet before kickoff at Gillette Stadium. Tom Brady always leads the team out, but he's quickly overtaken by Edelman, who sprints the length of the field, into the end zone, and jumps as high as he can, right arm raised, in an effort to whip the crowd into a frenzy.

It works every time.

Then the game begins, and Edelman transforms himself from emotional cheerleader into serious, sure-handed receiver, catching pass after pass and giving repeated reminders that, although the Patriots rely heavily on Brady and tight end Rob Gronkowski to move the ball and score, perhaps nobody is as valuable to the offense as the 5-foot-10-inch, 200-pound Californian who grew up wanting to be Doug Flutie.

It's early — the Patriots are 3-0 and had the weekend off because of their bye — but Edelman is off to the best start of his NFL career. Through three games, Edelman has 30 receptions, nearly double the Patriots' second-leading receiver (Gronkowski has 16). He's on pace for 160 catches on the season, which would shatter his previous best (105, set in 2013), soar past the season club record (Wes Welker had 123 in 2009), and also break the NFL record (Marvin Harrison had 143 for the Colts in 2002).

By catching 11 passes against the Steelers, 11 more against the Bills, and 8 against the Jaguars, Edelman has put together the most productive three-game in-season stretch he's ever had as a Patriot. The 30 catches are the most

by any Patriot over three games since Welker had 32 in 2012 (Weeks 4-6), and the most over the season's first three games since Welker caught 31 in 2011.

Edelman rarely talks about himself, a humble trait that Taylor immediately noticed six years ago. Predictably, attempts to get the receiver to discuss his start to the season and how valuable he's become to the Patriots offense are politely, but effectively, dodged.

"I don't know. There's been a lot of production from a lot of other guys, as well," Edelman said when asked what has worked for him these first three games. "It can change, according to scheme from the other teams. It's just . . . my number has been called a couple times and we've been fortunate to execute during that time. I guess it's a coincidence."

Coincidence? The statistics might disagree. Counting the playoffs, Edelman has caught at least seven passes in 10 consecutive games. The streak started with 11 receptions against the Lions on Nov. 23, 2014, and continued through the playoffs (8 catches against Baltimore, 9 in the AFC Championship Game, then 9 in Super Bowl XLIX, including the winning touchdown).

Had Edelman not been inactive for the final two regular-season games last season, he likely would have finished with more than his personal-best 105 catches; instead he had 92, for 972 yards and 4 touchdowns.

Edelman has caught two touchdown passes this season and is averaging 9.3 yards per catch, slightly less than the 10.3-yard average over his first six seasons.

His yards-per-catch might be down, but Edelman's value to the offense might be reaching an all-time high.

"He's a great player and he plays really hard at all times. That's valuable to any offense, at all positions. He gets open, catches the ball, competes in the run game. He's been here a long time and has been doing it at a high level," said fellow receiver Danny Amendola (8 catches, 92 yards, 1 touchdown). "Whether it's taking double coverage, or blocking — which is all effort — those are things you don't really see on the paper in the stat column, but it's something that brings value to your spot and value to the team."

What makes Edelman so valuable to an offense that is averaging 446 yards and nearly 40 points?

"You'll have to ask Coach [Bill Belichick] that," Edelman said. "I'm valuable as long as I can go out and practice hard each day, try to improve, and help the whole unit get better."

OK, let's try that again. What makes Edelman so valuable to an offense that is averaging 446 yards and nearly 40 points?

"If you go back the past eight years and look at the type of offense the Patriots have run, they need that guy to make the offense go. All they want to do is keep the chains moving," Taylor said. "No matter where Gronk is at, you can't guard him, and then when you add Julian to that mix, he's going to hit you short, and has the ability to hit you deep. But they don't ask him to go deep, because he's an intermediate nightmare. He's a pick route/rub type of receiver who will catch it short, shake you, run it and get 15, 20 yards off a short catch."

This isn't a role that Edelman created. The small, shifty slot receiver who catches screens and runs short possession routes has been part of the Patriots offense for years, and helped make stars out of Troy Brown and Welker. They, like Edelman, also added value to the Patriots in the return game.

Now it's Edelman's turn, and he's followed the blueprint masterfully. Like Brown and especially Welker, Edelman plays with an edge, a smaller man playing a rough, physical game, and putting up eye-popping numbers.

"He's confident. I wouldn't say he's cocky. It's hard to separate the two. You've got to have that cocky sort of swagger in order to compete. You don't want anyone to see you walking around with your head down or not talking a little trash," Taylor said. "He's feisty. He's fiery. You've got to be that tough [expletive] on the field."

"He's a small guy. Guys want to take his head off, and if he doesn't jump up, get in their face, and act that way, then guys will just take shots at him. I love his demeanor, love what he brings to the game."

Those car talks with Taylor to and from practice began when Edelman was nothing more than a seventh-round curiosity out of Kent State, a question mark trying to scratch his way onto the team.

Lynch and Denard Robinson — finished in the top six of the Heisman voting. You won't find Edelman's name on the Heisman ballot, but a former MAC coach swears you'd find it somewhere else.

"If there was a statistic for the most created missed tackles in the history of the NCAA, he'd be pretty high up on that list," said ex-Miami (Ohio) defensive coordinator Jay Hood.

So what memories linger from those MAC matchups with Julian Edelman, the Kent State quarterback?

"He brought them back single-handedly," Haneline said.

"He single-handedly beat us," said former University of Buffalo linebacker Raphael Akobundu.

"I can remember sometime maybe in the second quarter, our head coach, Shane Montgomery, gets on the headset and says 'Jeez, can anybody tackle this guy?'" Hood said.

The answer to Montgomery's question was usually no, unless there were multiple anybods on the play. Even then, there were no guarantees.

What they all recall from Edelman's quarterbacking days reads like the stuff of legend now: so outrageous it makes you wonder if the stories have been exaggerated as the years have passed.

In 2006, Edelman's first year as Kent's quarterback, lightning delayed a game versus Ohio. There was rain and sleet. Cold as hell, Hartke said.

"Imagine trying to tackle Julian when you can't feel your hands," he said.

Now imagine four defenders pouncing on Edelman in the backfield, the other seven assuming the play was done, and the shortest guy on the field ducking out of the quadruple-tackle for a 60-yard gain straight up the middle. That's what Hartke remembers.

Hartke had 7.5 sacks that season. Two of them were on Edelman, but he told reporters afterward that he could've had five if he'd been chasing any other quarterback.

For three years, Hartke worried about one play: "They had this playaction where they'd have two guys in the backfield, and (Edelman) could either hand it to the back or rollout and improvise. It was almost like a naked boot, which is petrifying for a defensive end."

Hartke has a theory that, on designed passing plays, Edelman would hold the ball purposely, inviting defenders to lunge at him. Because they'd miss, obviously, and Edelman would race downfield. Everybody agrees: He was an underrated passer, but nobody could get a clean shot on him as a runner.

And they all have their stories. Former Akron linebacker Mike Thomas recalls a 4th-and-long on which Edelman broke loose for 34 yards, setting up an overtime-forcing field goal. Edelman's teammate and friend, Brian Lainhart, remembers the play as 4th-and-30. The old box scores say it was 4th-and-9. As the years pass, the legend grows.

Hood recalls the final play against Edelman in 2007, his Miami defense clinging to a 20-13 lead.

"(Edelman) dropped back, there was nobody open and he took off, and it was just like 'Oh my God, somebody please tackle him!'" Hood said. "Then he's on the 20, then the 10, and we knocked him out at like the 2-yard-line, and it's just a sigh of relief. Your heart is racing."

Ask Haneline, who from his Will linebacker position at Bowling Green had the unenviable role of spying Edelman: "You chase him all the way to the right hash, and then he'd run all the way to the left numbers. I've dropped 50 pounds since playing from doing cardio and I still can't get myself as tired as I was that night."

"If there was a stat for the most created missed tackles in the history of the NCAA, he'd be pretty high on that list" -- Ex-Miami (Ohio) DC Jay Hood

On one play, Haneline abandoned his coverage to blitz. Screw it, he thought. Edelman had just ripped off a 30-yard run on the previous play. He wasn't about to let that happen again.

So Edelman saw the blitz and dropped a pass over the top. Whoops.

"He had a great knack for being able to throw the ball right before (he crossed) the line of scrimmage," said former Buffalo coach Turner Gill.

Edelman's college career ended against Buffalo, the 2008 MAC champion. Holding a 24-21 lead late, Kent State needed 11 yards on a third down to seal the deal and run out the clock. Edelman, shedding tackles and diving forward, got 12.

"We played LeSean McCoy, Donald Brown, Jeremy Maclin, RG3," said ex-Buffalo linebacker Raphael Akobundu. "As far as talent, (Edelman) ranked somewhere in the middle, but as far as heart, I would say he had the biggest heart. You could just tell from the way he played; he just wanted to win the game so badly."

"No one gave us a problem like he did," Akobundu continued. "He beat us alone."

**

None of those guys really knew Julian Edelman. They just knew how maddening it was to play against him.

Yet they also knew, from the one or two or three times they'd faced Edelman while he was at Kent State, that he was great for reasons beyond physical skill.

"He was a mean dude," said Haneline, who later trained with Edelman prior to the NFL Draft. "Intense as all you can be. I feel like at times he thinks he's 6-5, 250 pounds."

The stories from the inside, equally legendary, confirm that: Kent State had a punt blocked in the 2008 season opener against Iowa State, and according to former Golden Flashes defensive back Brian Lainhart, Edelman decided to become the personal punt protector from that point forward. It stayed that way for the rest of the season. Edelman also returned six punts that year, and even punted four times (for a respectable average of 39.3 yards a try).

And he once beat up a Kent State receiver during practice because the receiver "half-assed a route," Lainhart remembers. He told Lainhart "we need to do more" after the Golden Flashes lost to Akron despite Edelman's 270 yards, 34 of which were on that fourth-down scamper, and Lainhart's three interceptions. And when he arrived on campus in 2006, as legend has it, Edelman told Kent State's incumbent quarterback, who was messing around punting the ball, "you better get used to that because that's all you'll be doing." Then he took the guy's job.

In 2007, before No. 3 Ohio State faced Kent State, two Buckeyes, ex-high school teammates of Lainhart's, told their friend that coaches were concerned about containing Edelman.

"You better be," Lainhart told them, "because he don't give a s--- if you play for Ohio State or not."

The gamplan against Edelman varied. Ohio blitzed the hell out of him, figuring the first guy would automatically miss, but the second would stand a chance. Same thing at Miami of Ohio, where Hood told his players, "You just have to run to him and take your shot and at least misdirect him to the next guy."

Buffalo opted to defend him without a spy. At Bowling Green, the responsibility fell on Haneline, a film junkie who typically stayed in the coaches' office until 11 p.m., studying the upcoming opponent. Not during Edelman week, though.

During Edelman week, Haneline got his sleep. He even got a massage. He knew it would be more about endurance and physical condition than game-planning. He knew it the Sunday before Halloween, when the Falcons had put the Northern Illinois game behind them, and when he and his teammates popped in the film of Kent State: "We all just said, 'Oh God...here we go again.'"



Julian Edelman enjoys his moment

Kevin Van Valkenburg, Senior Writer, ESPN.com and ESPN The Magazine

JULIAN EDELMAN IS hesitant, at first, to break out his Bill Belichick impression. He is well aware that even a playful needling of his head coach, the closest thing the NFL has to a Tywin Lannister, carries a certain amount of risk. But he cannot resist.

He's sitting in the back of his favorite Los Angeles sushi restaurant, Sushiya on Sunset Boulevard, chomping on a second plate of edamame and re-creating the moment when Belichick called him to say the Patriots were drafting him in the seventh round of the 2009 NFL draft. Edelman's impression is less an accurate rendering of his boss than it is a vocal marriage of Dick Cheney and Kermit the Frog, but it works because there are hints of genuine affection in it. Edelman commits to the character in full, adding a half sneer and a furrowed brow: "I pick up the phone and he says to me, 'Eeeeeedelman, I don't know what we're going to do with you, but you're a hell of a football player.'"

The Patriots knew they were taking a flier on Edelman. A quarterback out of Kent State, he'd never played any of the positions -- wide receiver, punt returner, cornerback -- Belichick was contemplating for him. The team certainly had no intention of making him a Brady backup. But that phone call set in motion one of the most unique career arcs in recent NFL history. Edelman spent his first four years toiling on the margins, almost getting cut one year to the next, before exploding for 197 receptions over the past two seasons. He attained full New England folk hero status by catching the go-ahead score in this year's Super Bowl.

After fighting and clawing just to stay in the NFL for most of his career, it's safe to say that Edelman, 28, is enjoying his moment. Over the past three months, he has paraded through Disneyland, presented at the Grammys and become a fixture on the talk show circuit. He partied atop a duck boat during the Pats' Super Bowl parade, beating his chest, taking off his sweater in a mock striptease and punching out a giant picture of Richard Sherman. He popped up on a red carpet looking like Daniel Craig's James Bond and appeared in a blurry video lifting up his shirt for a flock of admiring females at a Harvard keg party. He, of course, screened the *Entourage* movie, in which he has a cameo, with Mark Wahlberg, Justin Bieber and Rob Gronkowski. He might have even passed Gronk as the team's Good Time Charlie when he showed up in a picture, either asleep or passed out in bed, posted by a woman on the dating app Tinder, alongside the caption, "Just f---ed Julian Edelman, no lie!" Gossip sites rejoiced. Edelman laughed it off.

But for Edelman, things aren't as carefree as they seem. After all, it was just three seasons ago, he says, that Belichick called him into his office and told him he was no lock to make the team. The Patriots are notoriously ruthless and unsentimental, and Edelman -- who's spent most of his career playing at the league minimum -- knows it. There are rules, and you break them at your own risk. You don't talk about injuries, especially concussions. (Edelman declined to discuss the apparent blow to his head during the Super Bowl.) And you're allowed to be playful and goofy only while you're at the top of your game.

"As long as you're doing your job on the field, you can have fun," Edelman says. "But if you start slipping, you're going to start hearing s---. Everything is about football with Bill. I love the guy to death. He's the man who gave me the opportunity. But I know the day I start slipping, the day I'm not producing enough and there is somebody cheaper, I'm gone. That's just Coach."

Which is why, despite what his extended post-Super Bowl tour de fiesta might have you believe, Edelman is living the life of a football monk. A mere 40 days into his offseason -- a time when most players are still recovering from the grind of a long year -- he insists on eating nothing but edamame and drinking ice water (with lemon) for lunch while he chats.

"I'm actually on this crazy little diet right now," he says. "I try to pack all my nutrients into a smoothie right when I wake up. I'll go out to restaurants at night sometimes, but I count pretty much every calorie."

If it seems strange that the receiver could live simultaneous lives of excess and asceticism, the explanation is simple: He understood, long ago, that all of this could be gone tomorrow.

PART OF EDELMAN'S calculus this offseason has been trying to figure out how to maximize his time in the spotlight. In the era of Chris Borland, every NFL player is thinking more about his future, and over the past year, Edelman has put in motion a calculated business strategy, literally designed to capitalize on his moment in the spotlight.

Turns out, he knows what he's doing. Two years ago he teamed with a Boston marketing firm called Superdigital to build and grow his Internet stardom. And lately, their efforts have kicked into overdrive. He films comedy sketches to post on YouTube, and although higher-profile stars have more followers, Superdigital claims that fans interact with Edelman on social media at a higher rate than any other NFL player outside of J.J. Watt. Whether or not that's true, it's hard to find a pro athlete who leverages his digital brand more deliberately than the Pats receiver.

"I think Jules has always approached his career with a small-business mentality," says his father, Frank Edelman, a mechanic and the owner of A-1 Auto Tech in Mountain View, California. It's a month after the Patriots' Super Bowl triumph and, dressed in a blue shirt with his name stitched above his heart, Frank is looking up at the pictures of his son plastered across his office walls. "No one wants to hear you complain. They want you to get the part they need, and they want you to fix their car.

"Every day," he adds, "your job is on the line." Frank Edelman's own dad died when Frank was 3 years old. He spent much of his childhood living in a trailer park, playing very few sports. To support himself, he learned to fix cars and became a certified mechanic by 19. After opening his shop in 1987, he would come home each day and drag Julian and his older brother, Jason, to the park. He would hit them ground balls, pitch to them or have them work on throwing a football until it got dark. Even when they hated it. Even when they tried to refuse. "I think my dad still needs shoulder surgery from all the batting practice he threw us," Edelman says. "He wanted to live through us a little."

Sports came naturally to Julian. "A total daredevil and a ball of energy," says his mother, Angie Edelman. "He'd go up the slide, then jump off instead of slide down. His whole life, you had to watch him closely." His Pop Warner team, coached by his father, won the youth football Super Bowl with Edelman playing tailback and linebacker. His father didn't let him lift weights, but every day they worked on agility drills. Pushups. Situps. Changing directions like a squirrel running for its life. Sometimes, when firing another endless string of passes, Edelman would pretend he was Tom Brady, a local kid starting for the Patriots who'd played high school football at Junipero Serra in San Mateo, just 9 miles from Redwood City.

Edelman was a small kid, but that was hardly reason for his dad to go easy on him. Once, during a session of batting practice when he was in eighth grade, Edelman accused his father of throwing inside once too often and warned him not to do it again. Frank, not one to back down or be mouthed off to, fired the next pitch even closer to his son. Edelman charged the mound and leaped into the air in a rage, his fists whirling, but his father was ready. He caught him in midjump and slammed him to the ground. Frank laughs as he tells the story. "Jules jumps up and tries to head-butt me. I kind of pin him down, and he's kicking and screaming, and he cuts the inside of his lip because he'd just gotten braces that day. There was blood all down the front of his jersey. People were looking at us like we were lunatics. By today's rules, they'd probably have put me in prison. It wasn't all peaches and cream."

Going into his junior year at Woodside High School, Edelman was still barely 5 feet tall and less than 100 pounds. "Kids would tease him all the time, and he was getting into fights," Frank says. "He'd come into my room and just cry and say, 'Dad, when am I going to grow?'"

The growth spurt finally happened, and Julian grew 7 inches in less than a year. His senior year of high school, he quarterbacked Woodside to a 13-0 record.

"I thought to myself, 'OK, now it's on,'" Frank says.

IT STILL TOOK years for Edelman's ambitions to take shape. He wasn't recruited out of high school, so he spent a juco year at the College of San Mateo, then transferred to Kent State. He won the starting quarterback job right away, but it didn't exactly prepare him for a future in the NFL. Despite setting a school record for total offense, he wasn't even invited to the 2009 combine. He wondered if, after graduation, he could find work as a firefighter. "I started checking out firehouses in Cincinnati," Edelman says. "I didn't know what I was going to do. I was starting to get scared."

It was in preparing for the NFL draft that he first decided to train as if his football survival depended on it. Every day he'd wake up at 5 a.m., climb into his truck and drive 50 minutes in the freezing cold to Cleveland, just so he could run routes and catch passes from former Browns quarterback Charlie Frye. The truck's heater didn't work, so most of the time he'd wrap himself in blankets for the drive. When he came home, he'd catch passes from a JUGS machine for an hour, trying to suppress any feeling that it might all be for naught. "I did that every day for three months," Edelman says. "I really grew up. I started to get addicted to the Jerry Rice mentality. I can get up before anyone else does. I can outwork anyone." At Kent State's lightly attended pro day, his time in the shuttle drill was faster than that of anyone else who'd attended the combine that year. The Patriots decided he was worth the late-round gamble.

"The day I'm not producing enough and there is somebody cheaper, I'm gone."

Patriots wide receiver Julian Edelman

He was a mess during his first training camp. During a break for Wes Welker, Edelman was thrown in with the starters, and he dropped his first pass. At another practice, he lined up on the wrong side of the formation, and Belichick snarled at him, asking if he'd even bothered to study his playbook. "I thought I was studying so hard," Edelman says. "I had flash cards I'd go over constantly, but it was like going from junior high to getting your Ph.D. in terms of complexity." He'd often stay late at the facility, sometimes just staring at his helmet, trying to soak it all up in case he got cut the next day.

He was convinced that his chances of making the team were so thin, he kept from the medical staff that his groin was in agony. He believed the team would simply give him an injury settlement and release him. "I was an idiot, but you feel like you don't have a choice," Edelman says. It wasn't until the year was over -- 37 catches for 359 yards in 11 games -- that he found out he'd just played through multiple sports hernias. "Julian is a tough kid," Belichick told reporters recently. "We knew that right from the beginning."

NOT SURPRISINGLY, EDELMAN spent his first few years with the team in quiet awe of Brady, hoping the quarterback might invite him to work out during the offseason when they were both back in their native California. They shared an agent and grew up near each other, so it seemed like a possibility. The first offseason, Brady called just one time.

As the years went on, the calls became a bit more frequent, even as Edelman's playing time diminished. In 2010, his second year, Edelman caught just seven balls. In 2011, the year the Patriots went 13-3 and played in the Super Bowl, he had only four catches and moonlighted as a corner to help hold on to his roster spot. Yet Edelman obsessed over what routes Brady liked best -- the nuances, like where he preferred to place the ball on certain throws and the way he could convey his intentions with a presnap nod. One year, Brady called to throw while Edelman was at a family barbecue. "I ran so hard, I puked," Edelman says. "He ran me to death." But it paid off: A friendship began to emerge. "He's like a big brother," Edelman says. "He taught me everything about how to be a professional. We'd throw three times a week, then we'd go have lunch at his house, and at first it was surreal for me. Just me and Tommy, hanging out. Is this for real? But then it became just normal. I stopped being scared of him."

Edelman was still a journeyman type in the eyes of everyone else, though, including his head coach. In 2013, when Welker signed with the Broncos, Belichick brought in Danny Amendola from the Rams as his replacement. Edelman trusted, however, that the countless hours he'd invested with Brady would be his secret weapon. When Amendola had trouble staying healthy, Brady started firing darts Edelman's way. By the end of the year, he'd caught more passes (105) than he had his entire career. As a free agent following the season, he might have gotten more money elsewhere, but he re-signed with the Pats because he wanted to keep playing with Brady. "Julian and I share the same work ethic and commitment to the team concept," Brady says. "It's been great watching him grow as a person, as a player and now as one of the leaders of our team."

Watching the way Brady handled his business, both on and off the field, also pushed Edelman to think about a life outside of football. Leading up to the 2013 season, a mutual friend set up a lunch meeting with Assaf Swissa, the creative director for Superdigital. As Edelman's profile grew, Swissa persuaded him to star in a series of playful -- and surprisingly funny -- YouTube videos in which the wide receiver hosts a fake talk show, shares his favorite smoothie recipes and conducts bumbling mock interviews like he's a slimmed-down Zach Galifianakis. "SmoothieTyme" and "BurgerTyme" soon racked up some 250,000 views each.

"It's fun. You get to show the fans a little bit about you," Edelman says. "It's kind of a way to say, 'Hey, I like Dumb and Dumber too.'"

Edelman's Facebook page has grown to 621,000 followers, Instagram to 465,000 and Twitter to 392,000. A parody of the Growing Pains theme song, "Growing Pats," that was posted to Edelman's YouTube page just before the Super Bowl, has 1.6 million views to date. All of it raises his profile -- and might give him more career options when the NFL is done with him.

"Videos and social posts and cool T-shirt designs, this is the new Rolex watch for athletes," Swissa says. "This is the new cool thing you get to show off."

And so when Edelman threw a surprise 51-yard touchdown pass in the Patriots' AFC divisional playoff win over the Ravens, a pass that helped his team erase a 14-point deficit for the second time, Swissa knew exactly what he needed to do. He left Gillette Stadium around midnight and didn't get back to his house until nearly 1 a.m., but he

immediately sat down in front of his computer and started designing a T-shirt with a silhouette of Edelman throwing the touchdown to Amendola. He finished the design around 4 a.m., sent it off to production and got the shirt up for sale on Edelman's website by 10 a.m. Within hours, Swissa says, Patriots fans were flooding the site with orders for the \$29.99 shirt.

Back on the field, Edelman had been so focused all these years on surviving in the NFL, he'd forgotten how good it felt to uncork a touchdown pass. As he walked to the sideline, high-fiving Brady, Amendola and the rest of his teammates, he was briefly transported in his mind to the park near his parents' house in Redwood City, throwing footballs with his dad.

Weeks later at the Super Bowl, with under three minutes to play, Edelman ran a perfect route, shook free from Seahawks defensive back Tharold Simon and caught a touchdown from Brady to give the Patriots a 28-24 lead. But there was no time for reflection. When Brady came over to praise him on the sideline, Edelman growled back, "It doesn't mean s--- unless we win."

When New England prevailed, Edelman stood on the platform during the trophy presentation and scanned the crowd until he finally spotted his father, and the two locked eyes. I love you, Edelman messaged in sign language, a gesture they'd often used growing up. Frank signed the same words right back, and Julian began to cry.

Months later, as he pops edamame, Edelman's nostalgic mood has passed. There will come a day, he says, when he'll try to let the unlikeliness of his career sink in. But he's not there yet. If he's learned anything from Frank Edelman and Bill Belichick, it's that every day your job is on the line. His next moment is yet to be earned.

DL Trey Flowers

The Boston Globe

Trey Flowers's motto? Leave the all-you-can-eat buffet still hungry

By Jim McBride

JANUARY 7, 2017

FOXBOROUGH — Trey Flowers's stomach is always growling.

On the field, in the weight room, during a film session, and even walking away from a big dinner spread, the 6-foot-4-inch, 265-pound Patriot is always craving a little more.

This season, opponents, particularly those opponents with a football in their hands, have been feeling the hybrid defensive lineman's bite.

"The kid quoted his dad every other word when I was around him," said Bret Bielema, Flowers's coach at Arkansas. "One time he was telling teammates, 'If you go to an all-you-can-eat buffet you better walk away from that table hungry.' Everybody's looking around like, 'What the hell is he talking about?' and Trey said, 'Never be satisfied.'"

Reminded of his father's words, Flowers, who really is a chip of the old block — he was born Robert Flowers III — laughed and said his father's message was simple: "Do all you can. Be the best you can. But be hungry for more."

It's a creed that has served Flowers well.

"Say you're in the weight room and you get your personal best in the bench press," said Flowers. "Well, you got your PR, so you did your best. But you still should want more."

More is exactly what the Patriots have been getting from Flowers, a fourth-round pick in 2015 who missed virtually all of his rookie season with a shoulder injury. This season, Flowers has picked up 46 tackles with team highs in sacks (7) and quarterback hits (12).

Flowers has caused headaches for offenses because of his ability to line up inside or outside and consistently make plays from either spot. He has the speed and power to be effective off the edge, but also the quickness and leverage to be a menace on the interior.

Though that versatility has really developed in New England, Flowers did some jumping around at Arkansas, particularly his senior year. Bielema had utilized J.J. Watt in that capacity during their time in Wisconsin and he was sure Flowers could handle the responsibilities, as well.

"One thing that jumped out to me right away was that Trey had those country strong, big hands that were hanging there like meat hooks and he knew how to use them," said Bielema. "It was very similar to J.J. I remember J.J. used to do those one-handed slaps that would send guys spinning and right away it was the same way with Trey, he had that country strong sense to him."

Bielema said his staff would identify the "fish or weakest link" on an opponent's offensive line and they would line up Flowers against him. It wasn't just Flowers's physical gifts that allowed Bielema to exploit those matchups. It was his encyclopedic knowledge of the defense.

"When we would hand out a test to a defensive lineman or a linebacker and we'd drawn the formation and say, 'Where do you align?' a lot of them would just draw themselves into the picture and that's it," said Bielema. "Trey would draw all four D-linemen, all three linebackers, and all four DBs, and 99 percent of the time he'd be exactly right on every one of them."

It's one of the main reasons Bielema said he'll be offering Flowers a coaching spot as soon as his playing days are over.

“He may have mentioned that,” Flowers said with a hearty laugh. “But hopefully that won’t be for a long, long time.”

Flowers fondly remembers taking those pop quizzes and the benefits of being thorough with them.

“It helps if you did have to change your position or if you need to help someone else out,” he said.

Flowers’s rapid ascent from forgotten fourth-round pick to formidable presence may have caught a lot of people off guard, but it’s been no surprise to those who have spent any time around him.

He was never going to be content being anything other than a starter. It was another of his father’s quotes that drove him.

Big Robert would tell him, “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.”

Again, Trey said, the message was simple.

“Say you’re doing something good and you keep doing it, you’re going to continue to get good results,” he said. “But if you’re not doing something good and you’re expecting to change your spot on the depth chart but you’re not doing anything to affect that change, then you know, you’re just going to stay the same.”

Complacency wasn’t tolerated in the Flowers home. The work ethic was engrained. Of Robert and Jacqueline’s 10 children (Trey is No. 7), five were Division 1 athletes. In addition to Trey, two brothers played football, one played basketball, and a sister played soccer.

According to Bielema, Big Robert said that of all his kids, Trey “had that extra little heartbeat.”

That was apparent from a young age.

“He had that ‘it’ factor,” said Sam McCorkle, who coached Flowers at Columbia High in Huntsville, Ala., one of many stops in a 43-year career. “Plus, he worked so hard. And he was so smart.”

After being lightly recruited out of high school, Flowers settled in in Fayetteville and got better each year. After his junior season (and first under Bielema), Flowers contemplated entering the draft. The thought of life without Flowers didn’t sit well with the coach.

“I went to visit with him and his dad at their home and I talked him into staying,” Bielema said. “One of the best recruiting jobs I did the whole year. I think it did end up turning out real well for him.”

It’s turning out pretty well for the Patriots, too.

“He’s been very productive for us in there, he’s caused a lot of pressures and his penetration in the middle of the pocket a lot of times opens things up for one of the other defensive tackles or defensive ends that wrap around into the space that he has created with that penetration,” said coach Bill Belichick. “So it’s not just the plays that he makes, but he creates some for his teammates, too.”

The man known as the “Waterboy” during his Razorback days — “Because he was kinda freaky [like the movie character],” said Bielema of Flowers — is now known as “Technique” for his precise play.

“That fits him to a T,” said Bielema. “He just absorbs everything you give him.”

And no matter what you give him, it’ll never be enough.

Just listen for the growl.

QB Jimmy Garoppolo

The Boston Globe

Patriots' Jimmy Garoppolo resembles Tom Brady

New England had Brady's air apparent in mind when they picked Garoppolo in the second round of last weekend's draft

By Ben Volin

MAY 18, 2014

ARLINGTON HEIGHTS, Ill. — Jeff Christensen wants to show an example of perfect quarterback mechanics. So he opens up his 15-inch Asus laptop and finds the All-22 film of the Patriots' 27-20 loss to the Colts in November 2006.

Coincidentally, this is one of Tom Brady's worst statistical games as a pro, with four interceptions. But when it comes to throwing mechanics, this is when Brady, then 29, was at his peak. This game is one of the films that Christensen, a journeyman NFL quarterback in the 1980s who now coaches quarterbacks full time, uses when teaching pros such as Kirk Cousins, Teddy Bridgewater, and Jake Locker, or prep school kids here in the Chicago suburbs.

"See how he gets his feet apart? See that bounce?" Christensen says of Brady. "You see that back heel off the ground? How his toes are pointed right at the target? How his hips are open? Now, watch where the ball goes. Right on the money. It's like a clinic."

Then Christensen opens another file on his laptop. It's a video from two summers ago, when Jimmy Garoppolo was working with him at a local park. Garoppolo is dropping back and throwing the ball to a receiver — with his eyes closed. He hits the receiver in stride every time.

"Flat front foot, back heel 2 inches off the ground, legs at an angle, his back slightly angled, no tension in his shoulders, no head movement. Nice and easy," Christensen says. "Perfect."

Christensen presses pause right as Garoppolo cocks to throw. He holds a similar photo of Brady on his iPhone up to the computer screen.

"Isn't that something?" Christensen says. "Just like Brady. Identical."

Garoppolo, 22, is most often compared to Tony Romo, because they both went to tiny Eastern Illinois University, a Football Championship Subdivision school deep in the Illinois cornfields.

But the real comparison is with Brady.

"He didn't have any posters in his room or anything, but Tom Brady, that's his guy," Garoppolo's mother, Denise, said Wednesday at their home in Arlington Heights.

The drills Garoppolo has done in the last seven years with Christensen, the videos and photos he watches in the classroom — it's all with the goal of emulating Brady.

"The way Tom has poise in the pocket, the way he throws the ball — it's pretty picture perfect, if you ask me," Garoppolo said.

Now that education takes on a whole new meaning.

Garoppolo was drafted by the Patriots in the second round last weekend, 62d overall.

"Is this a big deal?" Denise asks, genuinely.

Yes, it sure is.

Bill Belichick never took a quarterback that high in his previous 14 drafts with the Patriots.

Brady is soon to be 37, and Belichick acknowledged that the team doesn't know how much time the quarterback has left.

No one is ushering Brady out the door yet. He is signed for four more years, and Garoppolo is just the third-string quarterback right now, also behind Ryan Mallett.

But the Patriots have grander intentions for Garoppolo than they did with the six other quarterbacks they've drafted in the Brady era.

Who knows how gracefully Brady will age? So the Patriots hand-picked Garoppolo — the kid who didn't get a scholarship offer from one Football Bowl Subdivision school — to be the next Brady, if that's what it comes to.

"He's learned all the stuff from Tom and his throwing mechanics, and now he gets to go live it in real life, and not just through drills," said Doug Millsaps, Garoppolo's former coach at Rolling Meadows High. "It's really unbelievable."

Similarities, differences

There's a lot of Brady in Garoppolo's game — the mechanics, the rhythm passing, the leadership qualities, his control of the offense, his attention to detail in the classroom. Type Garoppolo's name in YouTube, and watch him drop corner fade after corner fade into his receivers' hands for touchdowns. It's mesmerizing.

But Garoppolo is his own man, of course, and the Brady comparison isn't perfect. Garoppolo is 2 inches shorter. He excelled at baseball, but was never considered to be an MLB draft pick like Brady. And while Brady earned a scholarship to football powerhouse Michigan, Garoppolo only received offers from FCS schools — Illinois State, Montana State, and Eastern Illinois.

Garoppolo is more relaxed than Brady and doesn't quite have the same chip on his shoulder. Don't mistake that for a lack of work ethic. Garoppolo just is enjoying the ride a little bit more.

Garoppolo and his brothers — he's the third of four — all played high school football, but it's not like they had great measurables or came from a football hotbed. His older brother, Mike, played linebacker at Western Illinois, but Jimmy was more of a baseball and basketball guy at first. In football, Garoppolo liked running back and linebacker, which he played for his first two years at Rolling Meadows.

"The quarterback thing was never really a goal," said his father, Tony. "He wasn't even buying into it at first, and then it sort of grew on him."

Millsaps saw good athleticism in Garoppolo and sent him to his friend Christensen, who played at EIU in the early '80s and was the Bengals' fifth-round pick in 1983. Garoppolo's throwing mechanics were a mess — he had a long windup like a baseball player — but they saw potential.

Garoppolo's two years as the quarterback at Rolling Meadows were fairly uneventful. The team wasn't very good, and Garoppolo didn't win any honors from the local newspapers. But Garoppolo cleaned up his mechanics and tightened his throwing motion, which is more three-quarters than over the top.

One Friday night Christensen got a call from Roy Wittke, the longtime receivers coach at EIU, who was in town to recruit another kid. Christensen implored him to check out the first half of Rolling Meadows's game that night to see Garoppolo.

Wittke, who had been at EIU for 25 years before leaving for Bowling Green recently, was instantly sold. He told longtime EIU coach Bob Spoo to sign Garoppolo.

"Roy recruited Tony Romo, so knowing Roy's track record, it was an easy choice," Spoo said.

Made most of opportunity

Garoppolo was supposed to redshirt his freshman year, but the Panthers were awful, on their way to a 2-9 season, so Spoo inserted Garoppolo as his quarterback in late September and stuck by him, even as he got battered, throwing 13 touchdown passes against 14 interceptions.

Garoppolo was better as a sophomore, throwing 20 TD passes with 14 interceptions, but the Panthers again went 2-9, and Spoo retired after 25 seasons.

In 2012, the Panthers hired as their new coach Dino Babers, who was Baylor's receivers coach during the Robert Griffin III era. He brought the up-tempo, shotgun spread offense to EIU, and many inside the program told Babers he should find a new quarterback and convince Garoppolo to transfer.

"I said, 'Hold on, let me see him in practice or something,' " said Babers, recently named the head coach at Bowling Green. "Jimmy threw five balls, and I said, 'That's the starting quarterback.' That's all I needed to see. I thought a bunch of recruiters made mistakes, because this kid was at the wrong level."

Garoppolo flourished in the up-tempo offense — Babers took out the running element he used with RG3 and tailored the offense to Garoppolo's strengths. Garoppolo threw for 3,823 yards, 31 touchdowns, and 15 interceptions as a junior as the Panthers improved to 7-5.

Still, the NFL seemed like a fantasy. Garoppolo played in a glorified high school stadium in the middle of nowhere, in front of a few thousand fans.

"People always asked us, 'Is he gonna go pro?' " Tony Garoppolo said. "I was like, 'He's at Eastern Illinois.' " "

But the NFL started taking notice.

A handful of scouts started coming through EIU last August. Garoppolo threw for 361 yards, three touchdowns, and zero interceptions in the first game of the season, a 40-19 win at San Diego State, an FBS school. San Diego State's second game of the season came against Ohio State, and Urban Meyer helped put Garoppolo on the map.

"Eastern has really one of the best quarterbacks I've ever seen," Meyer said after watching the game tape. "I didn't even know who he was until I watched him. He's a great player."

Garoppolo didn't slow down. He threw for at least 440 yards and four touchdowns in each of the next three games. Garoppolo finished the season with 5,050 passing yards, 53 touchdowns, and just nine interceptions, shattering all of Romo's EIU career records.

The Panthers went 12-2 and lost in the FCS quarterfinals. They averaged 48.9 points and 87.1 plays per game, both tops in the nation for FCS. Garoppolo won the Walter Payton Award, the FCS version of the Heisman Trophy. For the first time maybe ever, two NFL general managers watched EIU games in person — Chicago's Phil Emery and Tennessee's Ruston Webster.

Still, expectations were low.

"We thought, 'Maybe we can get him drafted in a late round, maybe be a free agent signing,' " said Rich Moser, EIU's sports information director. "What he did after the season really catapulted him."

Admirable qualities

Garoppolo was invited to the East-West Shrine Game in January, a second-tier college all-star game. Garoppolo was the star of the week, turning heads at practice and winning MVP honors for throwing for 100 yards and a touchdown in the game. His performance earned him an invitation to the Senior Bowl the next week.

"Very accurate, great timing," said NFL Draft insider Tony Pauline, who was in the stands all week at East-West. "He was able to acclimate himself to his new receivers right from the word 'Go,' and I mean, never missed a play. Looked like he was playing with these guys for a long time."

"He didn't have a big arm — he's not a vertical passer, more of a timing passer — but that's the way Brady started."

Buzz quickly grew that Garoppolo had elevated himself to a second- or third-round draft pick.

The NFL invited him to attend the draft in New York City, and he visited more than a dozen teams on official visits. He even visited Foxborough, but didn't think too much about becoming a Patriot.

"He liked New England. It was different from every other team he visited," Tony Garoppolo said. "I remember him saying that there was a lot more playbook stuff than any other team. [Offensive coordinator] Josh McDaniels went through hours of an interview with him, with the playbook, when other teams were just basic."

"He barely ate there or anything. Didn't have time for it," Denise Garoppolo added.

But it's easy to see why the Patriots were enamored with Garoppolo and willing to snag him with the 62d pick.

"He's got a lot of qualities that we admire in a quarterback," Belichick said.

Garoppolo is an accurate passer (66 percent completions last year) with great footwork and a quick release. He has experience in a pro-style offense and the no-huddle, up-tempo attack. Eastern Illinois didn't huddle much the last two years or use a traditional playbook, but the Patriots aren't a traditional offense, either.

"Hell, you guys are NFL up-tempo, with Brady," Babers said. "If you took Jimmy, [Blake] Bortles, Bridgewater, [Johnny] Manziel, and [Derek] Carr, took their jerseys off and just had them throwing around, I promise you Jimmy Garoppolo would be in the top two."

Garoppolo already is impressing with his leadership, constantly quizzing his fellow rookies on the plays and their assignments during their long days at Gillette. Babers called Garoppolo "not good — awesome" in the film room.

By the third game of Garoppolo's senior year, Babers let Garoppolo call some of his own plays at the line of scrimmage. Garoppolo isn't a straight-A student, but he's always been solid in the classroom.

"He came to class, sat in the front row, notebook open, and took notes, notes, notes," said Kesha Coker, Garoppolo's retail management professor last fall at EIU. "You have to think strategically in retail, and I saw that in Jimmy."

Garoppolo has never sat on the bench since enrolling at Rolling Meadows as a freshman, but his parents are happy that he gets to sit and learn behind Brady for at least a couple of years.

He needs to improve his deep ball, and the NFL is two levels up from the FCS.

"I don't know that he's an Andrew Luck, ready to walk in and play," Tony Garoppolo said. "So he can learn from the best player, and the best organization. We couldn't have asked for a better situation."

The knock on Garoppolo is that he didn't play good competition at EIU. Christensen thinks Garoppolo should be even better in the NFL. He didn't have any 6-foot-5-inch monsters like Rob Gronkowski running down the middle of the field.

And he has some pretty good teachers in New England.

"You get someone with great technique and talent, add info from Tom Brady and Bill Belichick, and he can become a star," Christensen said. "He wants to be great, he's coachable, he doesn't have any baggage, he's willing to learn. He perceives it as bragging, but I told him as a senior, 'You could be Tom Brady.' "

Now, Garoppolo gets his chance.

The Providence Journal

A master class in quarterbacking for Patriots backup Garoppolo

By MARK DANIELS

Published: November 29, 2014

FOXBORO — Before the 2014 NFL Draft, it was easy to compare Jimmy Garoppolo with Tony Romo since both quarterbacks went to Eastern Illinois.

But for Garoppolo, there's always been one comparison that he's liked more than others. The quarterback talked about it two months before the Patriots drafted him in the second round.

Related

"I like to think I'm pretty close in comparison to Aaron Rodgers," Garoppolo told CSN Chicago. "He's very athletic and gets the ball out quickly. He's very knowledgeable of the game, controls the offense totally and that's something I try to do. Just know the offense inside and out."

Garoppolo has always tried to mirror Rodgers. He did when he first learned how to play quarterback at Rolling Meadows High School, thanks to his quarterback coach, Jeff Christensen. When Garoppolo learned to throw, Christensen, who owns Throw It Deep, a quarterback and receiver training academy in Lockport, Ill., taught him by breaking down film from a handful of elite quarterbacks, including Rodgers.

He's also following in Rodgers' footsteps now by backing up a future Hall of Famer in Tom Brady. His situation is similar to the Green Bay Packers' quarterback, who spent the first three years of his career backing up future Hall of Fame quarterback Brett Favre before taking the reins.

As the Patriots head into Lambeau Field on Sunday, Garoppolo will get a closer look at the player whose story he dreams of following.

"He's a heck of a quarterback. That's for sure," Garoppolo said. "You see guys in the NFL when you're younger and you try to model your game after that. He was one of the guys I tried to do that with."

If all the pieces fall into place, perhaps that will one day be Garoppolo — taking the reins for the Patriots following a decade and a half of success by a Hall of Fame quarterback. All the right things will need to occur for that to happen, but if you ask the man who molded this quarterback, Christensen certainly sees the parallels.

"I don't think there's any question, he's going to be the next Aaron Rodgers," Christensen said. "I believe that in my heart. As someone who broke down the way they throw, I can selfishly say I think that's going to happen."

Garoppolo transitioned to playing quarterback full-time after his sophomore season at Rolling Meadows High School. He was a linebacker before that, and at first it wasn't pretty.

The only time this Illinois native ever threw was in baseball. So when he'd fire off a football, he did so with a long windup as if he were on a pitcher's mound. That's when his coach Doug Millsaps called up Christensen, who also played in college for Eastern Illinois and then in the NFL from 1983-1987 for Cincinnati, Philadelphia and Cleveland.

When he developed his training regimen, he did so by studying some of the best quarterbacks with the best technique. He said the sequence of footwork drills he came up is based on what Dan Marino, John Elway and Favre did, and what Brady and Rodgers do now.

When it came to throwing, Christensen taught Garoppolo efficiency, making sure his shoulder, arm, elbow, feet and hips are all working together in perfect mechanics.

"There's plenty of footwork drills. Getting the ball out fast. There's certain things that he does," Garoppolo, who still works with Christensen in the offseason, said. "I don't want to give away too many of his secrets, but he does little things that you wouldn't even think about, but you try it and it works, and you're like, 'Wow. OK. This guy knows what he's doing.'"

Garoppolo's comparison with Rodgers also comes with his lightning release. That's one part of his game that Christensen implemented from watching hour upon hour of Rodgers throwing.

"Yeah. You want to mimic that," Garoppolo said. "He has a very quick release and a very strong arm. If you can take a little bit of what he does and put it toward your own game, that's a good thing to do."

"It's the carbon copy of Aaron Rodgers," Christensen added. "Knowing what I know about Aaron and watching him closely at age 23 and watching Jimmy at age 23, he's better than Aaron Rodgers right now.... Now we're talking about specifically throwing the ball to point A to point B efficiently. He's ahead of where Aaron is at the same age."

The first time Christensen met Rodgers was in summer 2004 at the EA Sports Elite II competition in California. The weeklong competition is reserved for the best prep quarterbacks in the nation.

During that summer, Christensen's son, Jake Christensen, was one of the competitors, and Rodgers, who was recently drafted by the Packers, was a camp counselor. Christensen and Rodgers talked all week about throwing, playing the position and his mindset going into training camp with Favre.

"I said, 'When you get to Green Bay, watch what Brett Favre does and do everything he does,'" Christensen recalled. "I saw Aaron probably three or four years ago and said, 'How did that work out for you?'"

"He said, 'You called it, coach.'"

The advice that Christensen gave to Rodgers is exactly the type of advice this Packers quarterback said he would give to Garoppolo.

"There's no better quarterback coach than the guy in front of you. For me it was Brett, for him it's Tom," Rodgers said. "That's the training right there; it's invaluable. Quarterbacks usually don't have the opportunity to gain when you can watch a guy like that who has been consistently at the top of their game for a long time. Pay attention to what he's doing, listen to what he's doing, how he goes about his business and try to pick up as many things as you can from him and try to incorporate the stuff you like into your own game."

This season, Garoppolo said he's been observing Brady from a distance.

"I'm in the same room as him, but I don't want to ask too many questions or anything," Garoppolo said. "You just kind of have to observe and see how he goes about his preparation. It's very impressive. I've learned a lot."

As the Patriots head into Lambeau Field on Sunday, the Packers haven't missed a beat with Rodgers at the helm. It's quite the contrast to how other teams — Miami with Dan Marino or Buffalo with Jim Kelly — in the league have struggled for years and decades after losing a franchise quarterback.

It's a situation that the Patriots would undoubtedly love to be in when Brady's time in Foxboro is over.

"It's a long shot," Garoppolo said of following in Rodgers' footsteps. "It's a good idea to have in the back of your head. You can't think about it too much. Everyone has their own story. I just kind of got to go through the process and let the chips fall where they may."

Of course, anytime he's compared to Rodgers, Garoppolo will take it.

"That's never a bad thing," Garoppolo said smiling. "That's for sure."

K Stephen Gostkowski



He filled big boots: Gostkowski on cusp of own legend

By: Adam Kurkjian

Sunday, December 21, 2014

FOXBORO — Stephen Gostkowski's pure numbers depict a kicker who epitomizes clutch. But in terms of pure emotion, the picture gets cloudier for many Patriots fans.

Unlike his predecessor in Foxboro, Gostkowski doesn't have that signature moment to elevate him to legendary status. When it comes right down to it, he simply hasn't had the opportunity.

For Adam Vinatieri, there was the January 2002 "Snow Bowl" kick against the Oakland Raiders that helped the team reach Super Bowl XXXVI. Vinatieri then booted the game-winner against the St. Louis Rams for the franchise's first Lombardi Trophy.

Gostkowski has played in two Super Bowls, but didn't attempt a field goal in the 2008 loss to the Giants. (In fact, Bill Belichick famously eschewed a 49-yard attempt by his then-second-year kicker for an ill-fated punt on a third-quarter fourth-and-12.) In the 2012 loss, Gostkowski made his only field goal attempt against the Giants, a 29-yarder in the second quarter.

What Gostkowski has lacked in drama, he's made up for in consistency.

"I just feel so comfortable when he goes to kick the ball and he does it in such a fashion that he makes them all," former Patriots kicker and radio analyst Gino Cappelletti said. "He's going to pump it through there."

The numbers bear that out. Currently, Gostkowski sits fourth all-time in field-goal percentage at 86.6. He's 71-of-74 in fourth-quarter attempts (one was blocked) and 3-of-3 in overtime. In kicks that could either tie the game or put the Patriots ahead in the fourth quarter or overtime, he's 20-of-21.

The only time he's blown a late kick that cost the Pats a game came two years ago in a 20-18 loss to the Cardinals, when he missed a 42-yarder with five seconds to play. Even in that game, he hit four field goals.

As Cappelletti said, "He's automatic."

Keeping the task routine

Gostkowski describes his approach to making a pressure-filled kick the same matter-of-fact way others may characterize their daily routine at any other job.

"I really don't think too much about it," he said. "I try to just treat it like a normal kick. It's hard to do, but I don't worry about the consequences. I just worry about what I have to do to make the kick.

"I'm not a big celebrator so I just try to act like I've been out there and done it before. I just don't want to show any kind of nervousness or any kind of panic. I just try and make everything look like I know what I'm doing."

It's safe to say he knows what he's doing. Last weekend, he passed Vinatieri for the franchise lead in career points, now with 1,165 — three weeks after surpassing Cappelletti for second place.

Gostkowski maintains as much humility as accuracy when it comes to his accomplishments.

"We have a good offense," he said. "We kick a lot of field goals. Other teams don't. I don't worry about that stuff. I'm just trying to make as many kicks as possible. When I do miss, I try to make sure that one miss doesn't lead to two and two to three. I try to just make as many as I can."

When opportunity knocks

Devin McCourty remembers the first time Gostkowski earned his trust as a big-game kicker. It was during McCourty's rookie season of 2010 and Gostkowski nailed the overtime winner against Baltimore.

"I just remember running on the field and everybody trying to run up to him," McCourty said of the 23-20 win in which Gostkowski both made the tying field goal with less than two minutes left in regulation and a 35-yarder to win it. "I think that might have been the first game I've ever been in where time's gone and it's all up to the kicker to make the field goal and Steve came through.

"Every time after that . . . I don't think there's (been) doubt in any player's mind. If we give it to Steve with any amount of time — to tie, to win, whatever it is — I think it's complete confidence throughout the whole team that he's probably going to win the game for us."

Gostkowski has his personal favorites, too.

"There's definitely ones that stick out: The game-winner I had my rookie year in San Diego," Gostkowski said of the 31-yarder with 1:10 to play that gave the Patriots the 24-21 divisional-round win in the 2006-07 season.

"I had a go-ahead in the AFC Championship my rookie year that (the Colts) unfortunately came back and scored."

He actually kicked two go-ahead field goals in the fourth quarter of that 38-34 loss.

"That was cool," he said. "Having some big kicks in the playoffs kind of helped me feel like I belonged here. I would say that my rookie year, any time you kick a bunch of fourth-quarter kicks, game-winner, tying, stuff like that, those are special."

But befitting a player whose hallmark is consistency, Gostkowski doesn't define himself by game-winners. He takes the most pride in converting the next attempt after a missed one.

"That kind of sets the tone for my mental toughness to where I'm not going to let one bad game lead to two or three bad games," he said. "That's what I try to pride myself on."

The Patriots, currently the AFC's top playoff seed, are among the favorites to make it to the Super Bowl. Presumably, Gostkowski could find himself in the same position Vinatieri did against the Rams.

"It was right down the middle," Cappelletti said of Vinatieri's winner. "I can see Stephen doing that as well."

Still, Gostkowski maintains he doesn't get caught up visualizing the type of kick.

"No, I don't think about that stuff," he said. "I just worry about what's going on. You can't make your opportunities. I'm ready for any opportunity that I get. I don't worry about that stuff."

When the time comes, his track record shows that maybe Patriots fans won't have much to worry about, either.

The Boston Globe

Replacement player

What pressure? Gostkowski has been an able successor to Vinatieri

By Peter Abraham

February 4, 2012

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TE Rob Gronkowski



Same Old Gronk—or Maybe Better

Rob Gronkowski's stunning return to dominance this season after two years battling injury highlighted the dedication that was mostly lost amid his party persona. Now wiser in his ways—well, maybe a little—he could be the key to another Patriots Super Bowl run

BY PETE THAMEL

Wed Jan. 7, 2015

The black iron gates protecting the suburban Massachusetts estate swing open. A visitor walks up the long driveway to a five-bedroom house—bigger than a McMansion, smaller than an actual mansion—and is greeted by a man with thinning dark hair and the squat build of a former high school fullback. A red T-shirt draped over his beer belly reads, "I'm Kind of a Big Deal." He offers a firm handshake: "Rob Gronkowski, nice to meet you."

From a few yards away, near the doorway with its number 87 welcome mat, the real Gronk's laugh—"huh, hut, huh, hut"—sounds like a quarterback pleading for a snap. The man at the top of the driveway is actually Robert Goon (really), who along with being a friend and confidant serves as Gronk's contractor, dishwasher, airport chauffeur, security guard and roommate.

Goon's duties include driving and caring for the white party bus that's parked in the driveway. Gronk bought it from a church on Long Island last summer, thoroughly renovated it and nicknamed it the Sinners Bus. It seats eight comfortably and includes hardwood floors, blinking lights and the kind of sound system one would expect from a nightclub on wheels. Goon flew to Long Island to pick it up and drive it back to Foxboro. It now doubles as an airport shuttle and a tailgate vessel for members of the Gronkowski family flying in for game weekends. "Just a normal party bus, nothing too crazy," Dan Gronkowski, Rob's older brother, says nonchalantly.

Believe it or not, Gronk's ownership of the bus can be viewed more as a sign of maturity than of debauchery. After years of being an easy subject for iPhone paparazzi, with gawkers buzzing around him at bars and snapping shirtless photos that inevitably found their way online, Gronk has seen the value in hosting the party instead of seeking it. Goon serves as the driver and makes sure everyone gets home safely—instead of Uber, Gronk jokes, they have Goober. "You can still be having fun," Gronk says, "but maybe it's in more of a setting where people don't know what's going on."

Let's be perfectly clear: Rob Gronkowski, still only 25, is not a paragon of maturity and conformity. He wasn't suddenly transformed by the thoughts of career mortality that came with the six surgeries that forced him to miss 17 games over the 2012 and '13 seasons. When asked if he has considered what he would do after football, Gronk hesitates and says, "No." From the other side of the house, Goon screams, "MINI GOLF!" If you need more proof that Gronk is still Gronk, take a look at the new Entourage movie trailer, in which his beer-funneling skills are on full display. As the Sinners Bus demonstrates, Gronk is simply partying smarter.

They're celebrating with him all around New England. Gronk looms as one of the most important players in the 2015 NFL playoffs, thanks to a comeback from ACL and MCL tears that defied medical norms. Gronk's return resulted in 82 catches this season; his 1,124 yards and 12 touchdowns led all NFL tight ends. And with New England clinching home-field advantage through the AFC title game, having Gronk in full health—he played 15 games this season, missing only the meaningless Week 17 loss to Buffalo—and MVP form entering the playoffs for the first time since '11 could well mean the Sinners Bus ends up pulling into Glendale for the Super Bowl.

The last time we saw Gronk playing consistently at this level—requiring double teams, dragging three defenders through the red zone and flummoxing opposing coordinators—was in 2011. The Patriots predicated their offense that year on Gronk and Aaron Hernandez, and the second-year tight ends dominated all the way to Super Bowl XLVI. The Patriots lost to the Giants in that game, but everything changed for Gronk during that season. His name became a verb ("You've been Gronked!") and his quips ("Yo soy fiesta") landed on T-shirts. Something as simple as going to dinner in Boston's North End became such a chore that his teammates stopped inviting him to avoid the inevitable scene. He understood.

The moment Gronk morphed from NFL star to TMZ target can be traced to October 2011, when adult film actress BiBi Jones tweeted out pictures of herself and Gronk, who was wearing his goofy grin and no shirt. Jones revealed later in a radio interview that Gronk requested she tweet out the picture so he could get more Twitter followers. (She had about 100,000 and he fewer than 60,000; he's now up to 672,000.) The incident exhibited Gronk's most enduring and endearing trait: his simplicity.

As Gronk's profile rose, his core personality remained entrenched in the FGK House. That's the four-bedroom faux frat house in Foxborough where Gronk lived during the 2011 and '12 seasons with linebacker Dane (Freshman) Fletcher and journeyman linebacker Niko Koutouvides. Defiantly unrefined, they duct-taped the initials FGK (Fletcher, Gronkowski, Koutouvides) to the living room wall like fraternity letters. "[Gronk and I] were into the same things—girls and hanging out and having a good time on top of football," Fletcher says.

Fletcher, Gronk and Kouty didn't bother buying silverware, instead taking plastic utensils and plates from the Patriots' facility and washing them for multiple uses. A bum leg caused the kitchen table to topple over with the slightest nudge. Fletcher got endless entertainment from Henry, a fake mouse that he'd tie with fishing wire and place in the fridge and cupboard. "Rob never failed to scream," Fletcher says. "He's such a wuss."

Gronk worked harder than he partied, something his friends insist got overlooked as his public image grew. "Don't get lost in his awkward silliness," his college coach, Mike Stoops recalls saying. "It's not immaturity. He's a great competitor."

FGK hosted teammates for endless Cornhole tournaments and backyard archery, thanks to Fletcher's bringing his bow and arrow from his native Montana. As Gronk set an NFL record for tight ends by snaring 17 touchdown passes in 2011, Koutouvides estimates that Gronk washed his bedsheets about once a month—"if we were lucky." Kouty cracks up at the memory of the lone wrinkled navy suit and yellow dress shirt that Gronk tossed on the floor after every game, only to pick it all up a week later. Gronk donned the same pair of size-16 Converse sneakers he'd had since his rookie year: Fletcher witnessed the gradual corrosion of the kicks from sparkling white to garden-soil brown. "He does not care one bit about material items," Fletcher says. "That's the cool thing about him."

Gronk worked harder than he partied, something his friends insist got overlooked as his public image evolved into its Zubaz-clad, shirtless, dating-show phase. On road trips Gronk would arrive at the team hotel and go into a plank pose—a taxing yoga posture—for long stretches. He'd cook broccoli or mixed vegetables with almost every meal. Former Patriots offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien recalls Gronk's consistently running 30 or 40 extra routes with Tom Brady after practice. "He's one of the hardest-working guys I've ever been around," O'Brien says.

It soon became hard to ignore the buzz around Gronkowski. Steelers defensive back Ross Ventrone, who moved into FGK in 2012 while with the Patriots, recalls an afternoon trip to see a movie on a weekday turning into an hourlong impromptu autograph session. A simple man suddenly couldn't do the simplest things. "He's such a good dude," says Ventrone, "he could never walk away and never would."

Rob Gronkowski arrives in the Patriots' locker room by 7 a.m. every day and doesn't walk around so much as he bounces, like a puppy let outside after his owner's long hours at work. On a recent day he giddily read a Christmas message for fans in Spanish—"Yo soy Roberto Gronkowski"—while a smiling Brady walked by and declared, "And the Oscar goes to . . ."

The daily glee that Gronkowski brings to the office is in powerful contrast to the depths he reached in 2013. In November 2012 he had broken his left forearm while blocking on an extra point play; then he broke the arm again in January. Complications that off-season, including an infection that required surgery, delayed his recovery and forced him to miss the first six games of the 2013 season. He was playing in his seventh game that year when another major injury struck. Against Cleveland on Dec. 8 Gronkowski charged upfield after catching an over-the-shoulder pass from Brady. Browns safety T.J. Ward's left shoulder pad collided with Gronkowski's right knee with such force that it spun the 6-6, 265-pound tight end around like an Olympic diver, his head smashing into the turf so hard it knocked him unconscious. When he awoke to see his parents and the Patriots' training staff in the locker room, Gronkowski learned he had a serious injury, later diagnosed as a torn ACL and MCL. He recalls thinking, Why is this happening again? Why me?

Gronkowski needed to wait a month for the swelling to subside before having surgery. The day after the operation he looked at physical therapist Ryan Donahue and asked, "Am I ever going to play again?" Gronkowski had undergone five surgeries the previous two seasons, four that stemmed from the broken arm and one, in June 2013, to repair a herniated disk in his back. But those injuries did not compare in recovery time, rehab and career-threatening scope to the knee injury.

Gronkowski brought an intense focus to each tedious rehab session. Says Ryan Donahue, his physical therapist, “He felt like he had to earn everything.”

Gronk’s comeback was fueled partly by his work ethic and partly by genetics. Donahue rehabbed Gronk at the Andrews Institute in Gulf Breeze, Fla., for two weeks postsurgery and was so dumbfounded by how little Gronkowski’s quad muscles had atrophied after the operation that he pulled aside legendary surgeon James Andrews to show him. Gronk also brought an intense focus to each tedious rehab session, which began with quad-muscle flexes and then progressed to simple leg lifts. Five or six days into his rehab, Gronkowski began trending back toward his usual puppy-dog optimism. He worked up to reps on a recumbent bicycle and soon requested a higher level, but Donahue held him back. To challenge himself, Gronkowski curled 35-pound barbells while working his leg on the bike. “He felt like he had to earn everything, which I really admire,” Donahue says.

After the Andrews Institute rehab, Gronk moved to Miami for the off-season. Every weekday for three months he worked with physical therapist Ed Garabedian at Doctors Hospital in Coral Gables, while periodically checking in with Patriots trainer Jim Whalen. Garabedian is considered to be a knee Yoda: He has guided Frank Gore, Edgerrin James, Willis McGahee and Fred Taylor back into form after ACL injuries. On some mornings Garabedian arrived before 7 a.m. to see Gronkowski waiting for him. Other days, Gronkowski would call and say he didn’t feel like coming, only to walk in the door a minute later saying, “Gotcha!”

To break up the monotony of rehab, Gronkowski took his own party to Miami. Bummed by the lack of music at the hospital, he brought in portable speakers to stream ’80s tunes. Garabedian could usually tell if Gronkowski had gone out the night before, as his knee would be swollen from standing for hours, but he stresses that the tight end was a diligent patient. Gronkowski’s work led to a recovery whose only comparison in terms of speed and effectiveness—he was essentially back in full form in nine or 10 months—is Adrian Peterson’s return in 2012. “Medically speaking, we expected him to be playing and effective,” Donahue says. “But as far as being an MVP candidate, that’s unheard of.”

Heading into the 2010 NFL draft, Gronkowski was a vexing prospect for Bill Belichick to evaluate. Gronk had starred during his first two seasons at Arizona—catching 16 touchdown passes—but missed his entire junior year in ’09 with a lower-back injury. He still received a second-round grade, a testament to his athleticism and production. Belichick notes with his trademark Saharan wit that spending 10 or 15 minutes with Gronkowski may not create the impression that he’s a consummate pro. (“It might be a little bit different,” Belichick says, flashing a millisecond smile. “Potentially.”) Belichick’s homework included a 15-minute call with former Wildcats coach Mike Stoops, a notoriously frank evaluator, who offered an unwavering endorsement: “Don’t get lost in his awkward silliness,” Stoops recalls saying. “It’s not immaturity. He’s a great competitor.”

When Gronkowski arrived for his predraft visit in New England, the Patriots simulated the team’s classroom experience. O’Brien and fellow assistant Brian Ferentz taught him blocking schemes, which Gronkowski absorbed and then demonstrated after ripping off his coat. “We were laughing our asses off, he was blocking the hell out of us,” says O’Brien, now the Texans’ coach. By the end of the meeting, Gronk’s yellow dress shirt was untucked and stained with marker from the grease board. And the Patriots were sold, trading up to get him in the second round, one of Belichick’s shrewdest moves.

At 6-6 and 265, Gronkowski is one of the few players in football who can match up against any defender on the field. Here he tussles with 240-pound Jets linebacker Demario Davis. (AI Tielemans/SI/The MMQB) Since New England fully integrated Gronkowski into its offensive game plan in Week 5 against Cincinnati this season, the Patriots’ offense has averaged 34.5 points per game (excluding the Week 17 finale when Gronk rested), compared with 17.8 when he was out or limited. Brady compliments Gronk’s improved understanding of coverages and his ability to make “adjustments to adjustments to adjustments.” Tight ends coach Brian Daboll says Gronkowski sees coverages from corners, linebackers and safeties, depending on the opponent.

Gronk’s value to New England may best be quantified by a third-and-goal play from the three-yard line against the Dolphins in Week 15. When Gronk split wide right, just a few yards from the sideline, he pulled Miami safety Reshad Jones away from the middle of the field with him. Jones needed to shade over the top to help linebacker Dion Jordan, who couldn’t expect to guard Gronkowski one-on-one. With a gaping hole in the defense, Brady checked down to a handoff, and running back Shane Vereen slithered into the end zone for a touchdown. Gronk can neuter a defense without coming close to the ball. “We’re watching greatness,” says Gronk’s fellow All-Pro Darrelle Revis. “Tony Gonzalez. Antonio Gates. He’s in the same shoes with them. He’s a problem child out there.”

Don’t be surprised if that problem child reappears in the Super Bowl, Sinners Bus and all. And don’t be afraid to jump aboard and crack a beer. After all, Goon is driving.



The Rob Gronkowski story not often told: Generosity to charitable causes

Mike Reiss, ESPN Staff Writer

November 5, 2015

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Two weeks ago, New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski was a surprise guest at a Massachusetts middle school. This Saturday, he'll welcome a child to Gillette Stadium as part of the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Everyone knows about the force that Gronkowski is on the football field, but this is the side of him that isn't often talked about.

Few Patriots give as much time to charitable and community endeavors as Gronkowski.

"I don't think that Rob has ever had a bad day," owner Robert Kraft said. "His happy, go-lucky attitude is infectious, which makes him a great ambassador when he is out in the community."

Such was the case in Gronkowski's most recent community appearance, on Oct. 20 at Holten Richmond Middle School in Danvers, Massachusetts. The parents of two students had bid on an auction item at the annual Patriots Charitable Foundation gala to bring Gronkowski to school, which is the second year the star power of Gronkowski has raised big money for the franchise's charitable arm.

The visit was a surprise to many, and as is usually the case wherever Gronkowski shows up in New England, a frenzied excitement erupted when he arrived -- from students and many staff members.

"It's all smiles, the whole school going crazy, everyone going wild," Gronkowski said. "When it's like that, it is fun for both parties."

Gronkowski answered questions at a school-wide assembly, took selfies, and then had a meet-and-greet with 30 students as he signed autographs and taught them how to spike a football.

"He was so accessible to the kids, down to earth," said Adam Federico, the school's principal. "He was at their level and they really enjoyed how authentic it was to spend time with somebody like him. The message was great to the kids, about the importance of being involved with sports and activities in school, and I think they took it to heart."

That appearance came five weeks after Gronkowski greeted military members and their families. The Department of Defense event, coming two days after the Patriots' season-opening win over the Pittsburgh Steelers, was for families who are adjusting to having a loved one overseas.

In July, Gronkowski visited Boston Children's Hospital, teaming up with a local foundation that raises funds for cancer research. Gronkowski has shaved his head at the foundation's annual buzz off event each of the last few years.

In June, he was at Massachusetts General Hospital as part of an employee recognition and volunteer program. Prior to that, he was part of the team's "trophy tour" to Foxborough schools in which the Lombardi Trophy was shared with students. He was also part of a Play 60 event in local schools to promote healthy diet and exercise.

Kids raced to decorate their favorite Patriots players like Christmas trees during the Patriots' annual holiday party. Courtesy of the New England Patriots

And he's always a regular at the team's annual children's holiday party where kids decorated him like a tree, as well as volunteering as part of the Patriots' annual Thanksgiving Goodwill event in which turkey baskets are donated and delivered to families' cars.

"If I call him to do something, he'll do it for me," said Donna Spigarolo, the team's director of community relations. "His enthusiasm is contagious, no matter where he goes, and he always brings a smile to the room. It's a joy to work with him."

Spigarolo recalled her first meeting with Gronkowski during his rookie season in 2010, as he was at a Patriots community event in which a new playground was being built. The two sat next to each other on the bus to and from the event, and by the end of it she remembers Gronkowski asking to be part of more of them.

He often was, before his rising profile changed the dynamics a bit.

"As he became more of a star, his time became torn between different places and he couldn't be with me every week," Spigarolo said.

Gronkowski's tough run with injuries late in 2012 and into 2013 also didn't help, but he still has exceeded expectations. The Patriots mandate players to make a certain number of community appearances each year, but Gronkowski has easily spiked the minimum requirements over the years, sometimes bringing his brothers and making it a family event. In addition to being part of Patriots-based charity and community endeavors, he also does some on his own.

"You can't do it all. You get many requests all the time, but I still have to focus on football, still have to live my life a little bit," he said. "But there are definitely times during the week when you want to take time out.

"I was always blessed growing up with opportunities and access to facilities, equipment, and playing with my brothers in the backyard to be the best athlete I could be," he continued. "Everyone always helped me out growing up, and everyone now supports me Sunday. So whenever there's a chance to give back, to the community, to the less fortunate kids so they have the opportunity to gain the most potential they can in their life to be success, it's always good to do."

On the field, Gronkowski's impact arguably has never been greater, most recently evident as he caught 17 passes for 221 yards and two touchdowns in the club's last two victories, and was credited by head coach Bill Belichick for creating opportunities for others even when he didn't register on the stat sheet.

He's also been productive in the marketing game, saying that he lives off his endorsement money and has never spent anything that he's earned as part of his contract. In fact, the first question Washington reporters asked him on a Wednesday conference call was about a party cruise he's sponsoring after the season.

Stories of Gronkowski the party man are plentiful, as are those of Gronkowski dominating on the football field. But even as his star has risen, and demands on his time have grown, he's still stayed grounded to the point that following through on community and charity events is important to him.

And, more importantly, to those he's reaching out to.

"I'm not sure Rob even knows how impactful his visits to schools and hospitals are," Kraft said. "I think he just genuinely enjoys meeting people and making them happy."

LB Dont'a Hightower



Football journey: Dont'a Hightower

By Mike Reiss
December 1, 2012

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WR Chris Hogan

The Boston Globe

Patriots' Chris Hogan took an unusual route to the NFL

By Jim McBride

JUNE 6, 2016

Chris Hogan took four seasons off from football but he never really stopped playing the game during his time as a lacrosse player in State College, Pa.

"He certainly played lacrosse like a football player," recalled former Nittany Lions coach Glenn Thiel. "He was very physical and he was such an athlete. Physically, he could just overwhelm lacrosse players."

Coming off a stellar career at Ramapo (N.J.) High, where the future Patriots receiver was a first-team All-New Jersey performer as a junior and senior in lacrosse and an all-state first teamer as a senior in football, Hogan had a decision to make.

With offers rolling in to play Division 1 lacrosse (from perennial powerhouse programs Syracuse and Virginia, among others) and Division 1 football (including Rutgers and UConn), it wasn't an easy decision.

"It was tough," Hogan said last week after wrapping up his OTA duties in Foxborough. "I loved playing both sports. When it came down to it, I felt Penn State was an amazing school. I loved the campus. And it was an opportunity to help build a rising [lacrosse] program. It was tough, but I've never regretted my decision at all."

No regrets, but Hogan never really lost the football bug. Living in the shadow of Mount Nittany, reminders were everywhere. It was a difficult adjustment to not strap on the helmet and shoulder pads (at least the football kind) when he arrived.

"Actually, I struggled even going to the games because I felt like I should be out there playing," he said. "It was a rough first fall for me."

Still, he went about the business of being a lacrosse player — a dominant one according to Thiel, who acknowledged it was a bit of a coup to land an athlete of Hogan's caliber.

"Obviously he was a great athlete," said Thiel. "But his size set him apart. He was 6-2, 6-3, 215 pounds — we just didn't see that on the lacrosse field, very seldom. There are some guys playing now that size but he was unique then."

Hogan was such a presence on the field that he often intimidated opponents before the opening faceoff.

"Just putting him on the field, the other team had something to worry about," said Thiel, who retired in 2012 after 33 years leading the Nittany Lions. "Then on top of that, he was a good lacrosse player. I mean, big, strong, fast, could get his shot off. He was unique."

Hogan started all 13 games as a freshman in 2007 and scored 11 goals. He played just three games as a sophomore because of a high ankle sprain — a turn that would prove fortuitous as Hogan was granted a redshirt season.

Hogan came back with a vengeance in 2009, collecting a team-high 29 goals and 133 shots. Showing his patented physical play, he also led the Nittany Lions with 10 penalties.

For his efforts, he was named first-team All-ECAC and chosen a captain for his senior season. Hogan also proved to be the poster boy for the program.

"Younger kids coming in saw the product that he was — the size, the speed, the strength — and they would try to emulate that," said Thiel. "He was somebody people wanted to mold themselves after."

Though Hogan's numbers dipped his senior season (15 goals, 24 points), there was a good reason.

"We switched him to defensive midfield because we wanted to get more out of transition from defense to offense," said Thiel. "He would get us running so we could create offense instantly . . . So he really did everything for us over the three full seasons."

Scratching that itch

It was the first of several transitions for Hogan, who was set to graduate but still had a year of college eligibility because of that ankle injury. It was time to scratch that football itch that had never left.

"It was something that was definitely in the back of my mind always," said Hogan, who believes all the cutting he did in lacrosse has helped him getting in and out of his breaks on pass routes. "I always thought that I could play football at the college level . . . I thought about it constantly."

After exploring his options and talking with former high school rivals Kenny Amsel and Nick Romeo, who were enrolled at Monmouth, Hogan met with Hawks coach Kevin Callahan, who had recruited him in high school.

"I sat down with him when he came to campus and just loved everything about him," said Callahan. "We knew he hadn't played in four years but we weren't overly concerned about that."

Much the way he made an instant impact in State College, Pa., he did the same in West Long Branch, N.J. There was no evidence of rust.

From his first workout with the Hawks, Hogan stood out, according to Callahan. The coach said he normally would hesitate to bring a player in for just one season, but it was clear this was no normal case.

"He's not a guy you had to watch practice 10 times to figure out he was special," said Callahan. "We saw him run a route and we said, 'Wow, we really have something here.' "

He quickly picked up the playbook and secured a spot as a receiver, but his role would soon expand. After three games and several injuries, Callahan found himself thin in the secondary. After scanning his roster, Callahan found a solution — the new guy.

"I approached him and he said, 'I can do that,' " said Callahan, who thinks the four years away from the pounding of football may have prolonged Hogan's career. "So we kind of gave him what he needed to know, didn't overcoach him an awful lot to be honest, just enough so that he'd be playing within the scheme, and he was a starting corner the rest of the season."

Again, Hogan paid immediate dividends. In his first game at cornerback he picked off a pair of passes in a win over Duquesne. He also added a 41-yard catch.

For nine games Hogan played full time on defense, about 15-20 plays on offense, and on all the special teams units. He may have played only one season, but he packed plenty into it.

"Chris has great instincts, and most of all he's a very dependable, reliable athlete," said Callahan. "Meaning, if you tell him part of a play or a play design or pass concept and you tell him he has to be in a certain place at a certain time, he's going to be there. He's going to find a way to get there."

Hogan finished the season with 28 tackles and three interceptions, 12 catches for 147 yards, three TDs, and dreams of continuing his football career.

"My agent [Arthur Weiss] didn't sugarcoat it at all, he told me it would be a tough road," he said. "But I didn't want to regret not trying it."

Hogan carried the ball during a 2010 game against Bryant. He had 12 catches for 147 yards in his season at Monmouth, and also had 28 tackles on defense.

Bouncing around

Hogan joined some teammates in NFL Combine training drills with the hopes of catching some eyes. And though he didn't get invited to the big cattle call in Indianapolis, he turned heads during Fordham's Pro Day.

Callahan remembers getting a call telling him Hogan was the top performer at that workout.

"I remember that day like it was yesterday," said Hogan. "It was an emotional day. I was able to put up some really good numbers. My 40 [time] was good. My shuttle was good. Bench press was good. Everything I did was enough to impress some people. Enough to be one of those guys they wanted to work out after and do some drills."

Hogan signed with the 49ers in July 2011, but it was a quick stay. He was scooped up by the Giants and spent a short stint on their practice squad before being released.

His next stop was Miami, where he gained a bit of fame and the nickname "7-11" from Reggie Bush because he was "always open" during the Dolphins' turn on "Hard Knocks." He was cut from Miami's practice squad in September 2011.

Hogan signed with Buffalo in 2012 and was there until signing with the Patriots in March.

"I jumped around a lot," said Hogan, who "never gave pro lacrosse a thought" after diving back into football. "And every single spot I was at I had a lot to learn and was able to do just that. I got a lot of opportunities and I was able to make the best of them."

His latest is in Foxborough. With top targets Julian Edelman and Danny Amendola coming back from injuries, Hogan was asked if he has been able to build a quick rapport with Tom Brady.

"There's a lot of opportunity out there," Hogan said. "It's only OTAs, but I've been working with all the guys. For me, it's just about getting the offense down and learning how we play around here, and that's what I'm focused on."

Thiel, his former lacrosse coach, will be focused on Hogan. "I sure hope Brady can throw him the ball a few times."

DB Cyrus Jones



Patriots pick Cyrus Jones makes unforgettable impact

Jeff Howe

Friday, May 06, 2016

Cyrus Jones was supposed to dig in his foot at the 10-yard line and stay there.

Jones' Gilman School Greyhounds needed a touchdown in the final minutes to clinch another state championship when coach Biff Poggi dispatched his star to field a punt. They were backed up close to their own goal line, so Poggi gave the standard orders to abort the mission if the punt sailed inside the 10.

Jones was more ambitious than that, although his eagerness briefly led to a panic attack on the sidelines.

"He catches the ball over his head at the half-yard line," Poggi recalled with a laugh. "We're all screaming, 'What are you doing?' And he proceeds to run it 99 1/2 yards for the touchdown to win this game.' That's him. That's his deal. Really cool."

Jones, the Patriots' second-round draft pick last week, has always been unique, even as a seventh-grader when he met Poggi at a football camp in Baltimore, that was run by Gilman assistant Keith Kormanik. It was getting dark after camp ended for the day when Kormanik informed Poggi the youngest, and perhaps smallest, kid on the field wouldn't leave until Poggi watched him run a 40-yard dash.

"We said, 'OK, kid, run and get out of here,'" Poggi said. "Then we see him running, and we're like, 'OK, we've got to get this guy.'"

Poggi successfully brought Jones to Gilman, which was nationally ranked most seasons during his 29-year run as head coach, and he started the freshman at quarterback.

Jones' career got off to an unforgettable start. As Poggi told it, Jones fumbled the first snap of the season, picked it up and raced 90 yards for a touchdown.

"I said, 'Calm down, it's the first snap you ever had,'" Poggi said.

The next snap? Another fumble, another recovery, another 90-yard score.

"He's just a freaky kid athletically," Poggi said. "He can do it all."

Jones played all over the place at Gilman, even punting for a season, though he was best utilized at cornerback and wide receiver. He was also a ruthless note taker over his four-year career. When Jones practiced on offense, he logged every pass thrown his way and whether he made the catch. As a cornerback, Jones charted the result of every target.

"That's like bordering on almost insanity," Poggi said. "That's the kind of thing you need to be the best at what you're doing. It's a bright brilliance that separates those of us from being mundane or special. He has that brilliance."

Jones, who chose Alabama over dozens of college offers, was a better cornerback than receiver, but coach Nick Saban let him play offense as a freshman in 2012. After only catching four passes for the national champs, Saban wanted Jones to switch to cornerback for his sophomore season, and he even called Poggi to help reinforce the idea to the Baltimore native.

They didn't need to twist his arm, though. Jones knew he could be a high-end corner as opposed to potentially getting lost in the shuffle as a slot receiver. Plus, Saban is known to run the cornerback room, so Jones would get some quality first-hand coaching.

Even though the pros heavily outweighed the cons, Saban gave Jones a ton of praise for going through with it because it can be difficult to give up the offensive glory.

“Cyrus understood the business decision part of it that he might have more upside in developing a career as a football player if he played defense, and it certainly worked out that way,” Saban said. “He worked hard and bought into it.”

Jones’ sophomore and junior seasons were a true testament to his character. He really struggled with the switch in 2013, and took it on the chin in a pair of nationally televised games. Johnny Manziel and Mike Evans connected for a 95-yard touchdown when top-ranked Alabama held on in a shootout against No. 6 Texas A&M, but the Crimson Tide’s title hopes later crashed in the Iron Bowl against rival Auburn. Jones peeled off receiver Sammie Coates to pursue a scrambling Nick Marshall, who eventually hit Coates for a tying touchdown in the fourth quarter of a game that famously ended when the Tigers returned a missed field goal for a score at the buzzer.

Then, doctors discovered Jones had a torn hip labrum in the summer before his junior year, which would have required season-ending surgery. Jones put it off until January 2015, gutted out his junior campaign and blossomed as a second-team All-Southeastern Conference corner, which spurred an equally impressive senior season when Jones set a program record with four touchdowns as a punt returner.

“A lot of this is about maturity and guys understanding what it takes to be the best that they can be, the sacrifices that they have to make, the choices they need to make, who they need to work with, what they need to learn, what their commitment is to being the best player they can be,” Saban said. “For the last two years, Cyrus has done as well as anyone in our program.”

The Patriots have drafted an elite athlete whose career is sharply ascending. They’ve also inherited a 22-year-old with high character. When Poggi was fired in January, Jones flew home to speak at a meeting with parents and trustees to vouch for the way he influenced his life.

Jones also wrote a letter to Poggi after his junior year at Alabama. It stated how much he cared for one of his greatest mentors, and Poggi has kept it as a bookmark for his Bible.

“I want to be buried with that letter,” Poggi said.

On the field and off, as the Patriots believe they’ll learn, no one forgets about Cyrus Jones.

DB Devin McCourty



Guregian: Devin McCourty has become Mr. Patriot

Karen Guregian

Wednesday, January 11, 2017

FOXBORO — Devin McCourty didn't play with Tedy Bruschi, Willie McGinest or any of the Patriots greats from those early championship teams.

Yet he'd certainly fit right in at the head of the table.

Now in his seventh season, McCourty has all the i's dotted and t's crossed in that Patriots kind of way. The Pro Bowl safety has evolved into a similar kind of leader. On the field, off the field, he shows up at the most important times. He's also pretty good at taking care of all the mundane but necessary tasks needed to keep the locker room functioning at a peak level.

"To me, in my mind, Devin is Mr. Patriot," fellow captain Matthew Slater said. "He just does everything the right way, whether it's on the field, off the field, the type of man he is, what he does in the community. I can't think of a better example of what this organization hopes to stand for than Devin McCourty."

McCourty has been thrust to the forefront in dealing with the media, in part a responsibility of being a captain, but also because he handles the job so well. He's well-spoken, but in true Patriots fashion gives nothing away, a trait Bill Belichick appreciates in his captains.

McCourty just shows everyone the way. It's like he's taken the baton from Bruschi and McGinest and has become the face of the Patriots defense.

"He definitely is exactly what the Patriots embody and embellish — team players. And it's very natural for him," cornerback Logan Ryan said. "He's a unanimous captain every year. He does everything for the team and has a lot of fun doing it. He's a good Mr. Patriot. If a play needs to be made, he makes it. If something needs to be done in the room, he does it."

Former Patriots safety Rodney Harrison said the tipoff to how Belichick and the organization felt about McCourty, and where he stood, came during free agency two years ago when they extended him to a five-year, \$47.5 million deal at the 11th hour. Belichick personally called McCourty to seal the deal.

"If he didn't fit in that (Patriots) mold, they would have never paid him the type of money they gave him," Harrison said. "Bill has let other guys leave in free agency. I think they understood he was a very, very important piece, even if they had to overspend on him."

McCourty certainly made some huge plays down the stretch this season, helping the team to a 14-2 record, home-field advantage and a date Saturday night in the divisional playoffs against the Houston Texans.

Perhaps his biggest play thus far, one that's considered the signature moment and defining play of the regular season, happened in Denver in Week 15. In the fourth quarter, McCourty delivered a jarring hit to Demaryius Thomas at the sideline to break up a fourth-down pass. It essentially sealed the game.

"That's big-time," Harrison said. "Nobody (cares) about the Pro Bowl and racking up a bunch of big numbers, that's fine. If you ask me, it's all about making key plays in big moments of games. That's what people remember."

People definitely mention that play. Or they mention McCourty's ongoing charitable work. Or they mention listening to him at the podium, speaking the word of the Patriots every week.

"I've always been taught it's what you do, not what you say. That's what my mom preached," McCourty said. "That's me in a nutshell. I'm not a guy who says a ton. I'm not a yeller or a screamer. But I think guys learn the most from your actions and what you do on a daily basis. That's what they see most."

McCourty learned the Patriots Way mostly from former teammates Jerod Mayo, Vince Wilfork (who will be in town Saturday with the Texans) and Logan Mankins.

"Everyone talked about how Logan never missed practice during his career. I'd hear things like that, then playing defense with Vince and Mayo, I was just trying to follow the things they did and what they represented," McCourty said. "Vince obviously played with a lot of those guys, and Mayo caught the back end (from the early championship guys). It might be just from them and what they learned."

Well, he learned his lessons well. He was voted a captain his second year on the team. That was a bit daunting for McCourty, but he's grown into the role and now embraces it.

"The plays on the field, I don't have much control. Sometimes they just happen, but I think when you talk around the locker room or have meetings with the guys, you just get a feel for it, when you need to say something," said McCourty, a captain for six seasons. "When something needs to change, anything you feel you need to do, that just hits you, and you feel comfortable doing it."

Slater believes McCourty is timeless.

"You put him in any era, you plug him in the early 2000s or plug him in now, I think he'd fit in, and you'd say the same thing about him," Slater said. "I think we're very fortunate to have a man like him in our locker room on our team. He's true in his convictions, and obviously we know him for his performance on the field."

"He is Mr. Patriot, no question about it."

WR Malcolm Mitchell

The Boston Globe

Malcolm Mitchell's love of reading led him to author a children's book

By Rachel G. Bowers GLOBE STAFF

APRIL 30, 2016

When the Patriots drafted Malcolm Mitchell in the fourth round on Saturday, they picked not only a wide receiver but also a children's book author.

Though Mitchell did not like to read as a child, even through high school, that changed when he was forced to miss all but one game of Georgia's 2013 season with an ACL tear.

"I've always searched for ways to be creative. And when I got injured in 2013, reading picked up," Mitchell told The Red & Black last fall. "It was one of the hobbies I picked up. And as you read more over time, you get more creative."

As his love of reading flourished, he wanted to help kids get into reading and enjoy it, so he began frequenting local elementary schools to read with students for what was eventually dubbed, Read With Malcolm.

Then, the Valdosta, Ga., native put pen to paper to author "The Magician's Hat" last summer. He was able to have the book published — he spent between \$500 and \$1,000 of his own money to publish it — and even sell it in local bookstores.

"This is a piece of me, technically, because it's my vision, it's my art, it's my words," he told the Athens Banner-Herald last year. "Just opening up and sharing that with everybody isn't the easiest thing to do. But if you want to get a message out you have to open your arms and allow people to step in and today is my attempt to do this with this book.

"Without the injury, there is no guarantee that none of this is taking place. And this means so much to me," Mitchell said last fall. "I wouldn't want to be without this book. If that means that I wouldn't have it without having the injury, then I would have the injury."

A year after his injury, Mitchell also joined a book club in Athens, Ga., where the University of Georgia is. But it wasn't a book club made of teammates or even a book club on campus.

It was a book club of middle-aged women in Athens.

Mitchell approached Kathy Rackley near the best-seller rack in the local Barnes & Noble one afternoon, asking for book recommendations.

"From there on, the conversation just grew until she told me she had just joined a book club," he said in 2014.

Mitchell had been on the hunt for a book club to join, so he asked Rackley if she would reach out to her club on his behalf.

"I said, 'I don't know if you want to join ours. We're all 40-, 50-, 60-year-old women.' And he said, 'I don't care. I just like to read.'"

"I thought they were going to say no," he said.

On the contrary.

"I've been adopted into their family," he said. "I definitely enjoy it."

The club met once a month, helping Mitchell expand his literally horizons and forge new relationships.

"All the ladies in the club are great people and definitely good friends," he said.

Mitchell is not the only Patriot with experience being a children's book author. Tight end Martellus Bennett developed a children's book series last year, called "Hey, A.J.!" that he expects to publish this year.



The book on Patriots' Malcolm Mitchell is all perseverance & heart

Jeff Howe

Wednesday, May 04, 2016

Pratina Woods stared at the piece of paper for months.

It remained there in her mother's three-bedroom house in Valdosta, Ga., as a symbol of a haunting past that Woods dreaded would continue to stunt her family's future. Rejection, at this stage of her long journey for a better life, served as a crippling fear after already overcoming so much but also desperately needing even more.

Woods was a survivor. She won a two-year battle with breast cancer, escaped an unhappy marriage and moved her three children from Tampa, Fla., in July 2003. They had almost nothing, as Woods and her kids packed into her gold Mitsubishi Galant with just the clothes on their backs and a unified prayer for something better.

There wasn't much room for them at her mother's house. For two years and four months, Woods shared a bed with her daughter, Zakirra, who was the youngest of three children. Her oldest son, Marquise, slept on a sofa. Her middle child, Malcolm, took the air mattress on the floor.

Woods, who landed a job as a supervisor at a DirecTV call center, filled out the paper but was paralyzed by it. She was denied so many housing loans at that point that she lost count.

The paper might have been their last chance, and that's a seizing feeling.

"I was just afraid," Woods said. "I'm just being honest with you. I was afraid of turning it in. I didn't want another letdown, another disappointment. I just felt like I couldn't handle another disappointment."

In November 2005, a coworker convinced Woods to turn in the paper, which was an application for a loan through Habitat for Humanity. Days later, and nearly 11 years before her son, Malcolm Mitchell, would be drafted in the fourth round by the New England Patriots, Woods and her kids found out they were approved for a new white house with a blue door, blue shutters and a big backyard on the corner lot of a cul-de-sac.

Lessons from Mom

Woods is a strong woman with a golden smile, and she told her kids every day she loved them. They trusted every word out of her mouth, and her lessons remain with them today.

When Woods was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2000, she said she thanked God for putting her through the illness because life was too short to be unhappy, which led to her decision to move home to Georgia.

When Mitchell wanted to quit his sixth-grade football team because he wasn't getting enough playing time during their first year back in Valdosta, Woods instructed him to finish what he started. He wanted to walk away again during his senior year at Valdosta High when new football coach Rance Gillespie converted Mitchell from cornerback to wide receiver. Not only did Mom convince him otherwise, but she started playing catch with him in the yard to get him ready for his new position.

Those were minor hurdles, hardly the significant events that are responsible for turning a boy into a man. But life has a way of weaving one lesson into another, inviting an obstacle for one person that yields an awakening for many. This family had a greater purpose.

"The type of people we are, we always want to be of help to other people," Woods said. "I told Malcolm a long time ago, 'The things that we go through in life, they're never for us. They're always to help someone else. No matter what you face in life, you have to make sure what you're facing is to help the next person coming along. It's not about you. It's about the next person.'"

The realization

Valdosta is a football town with a powerhouse high school program that competes on a national level, and Mitchell was blossoming as one of its brightest athletes in years under coach Rick Tomberlin. Mitchell didn't play as a sophomore because he wanted to focus on basketball, but he returned to the gridiron as a junior, when Tomberlin started him at cornerback and as a returner while occasionally using him as a wide receiver in his run-first offense.

"He was kind of like Deion Sanders for us," said Tomberlin, who introduced Mitchell to Alabama's Nick Saban, among other high-profile coaches. "We knew he was very, very special."

But Gillespie noticed something was off when he replaced Tomberlin in January of Mitchell's junior year. Mitchell spoke as eloquently as any of Valdosta's students and boasted unique views on life that were representative of someone well beyond his years, but he was taking low-level classes in school, to the point where Gillespie worried the course load would sabotage his recruitment.

At the time, according to one former administrator, many freshmen enrolled at Valdosta were at least two grades behind on their reading level, and Mitchell was in classes with a lot of those kids. Gillespie set a new vision, with Woods' help, to show Mitchell a long-term plan that included big-time college football and a career in the NFL if he prioritized his schoolwork. So Mitchell elevated his course levels and spent a few sessions per week under the tutelage of then-principal Gary Boling.

"We had a very serious talk," Gillespie said. "I told him point blank that he had about five minutes to trust me and do some things that I was going to ask him to do. He looked at me funny and then bought in, and I never had another minute's problem out of him."

Mitchell broke Valdosta's decades-old record with 77 receptions (along with 1,419 yards and seven touchdowns) as a senior while being featured in Gillespie's prominent passing offense, and he chose Georgia over Alabama, Florida, Florida State and dozens of other big-time programs that aggressively chased the four-star recruit.

But Mitchell himself realized something was amiss when he started his classes at Georgia in 2011. He was reading well below his classmates' level and struggled to keep up.

"When he started to identify (the problem), he called me about it," Woods said. "He said, 'Mom, there's something missing.'"

When Mitchell was younger, Woods taught him another lesson by placing carrots, eggs and coffee beans in boiling water, and the teaching point was adversity changed the substance of the carrots and eggs while the coffee beans transformed the water. So when Mitchell wanted to improve his reading comprehension, he changed his surroundings, taking to extra tutors and seeking out mentors who were invested in his new passion to read.

"Guys like that are why you're in the business," former Georgia wide receivers coach Bryan McClendon said of Mitchell.

The book club

After two strong seasons on the field, mastering a complex offense that was rife with option routes for the receivers, Mitchell had a trio of surgeries on his right knee in 2013 and 2014 (torn meniscus, torn ACL and a setback that repaired his cartilage), so he used the time to dive into new literary forms.

That exploration led him to a Barnes & Noble in Athens, Ga., in May 2014. Kathy Rackley was in the same aisle looking for her book club's newest assignment when Mitchell asked for a recommendation.

"So we started talking books, and I showed him what I had in my hand," said Rackley, who offered up "Me Before You" by Jojo Moyes. "I said I had just joined a book club. He got all excited, took a step back and said, 'I want to join a book club. Do you think I could join yours?' I started laughing and said, 'I don't think you want to join mine. We're all 40-, 50- and 60-year-old women.' He very earnestly said, 'I don't care. I just want to read.'"

Rackley recognized Mitchell played football, but other women in the group were Georgia season ticketholders who were excited to welcome the Bulldogs' budding star. They were even more pleased that Mitchell really, genuinely wanted to be friends with them, as he attended monthly discussions at their homes and laughed hysterically when he'd read their group texts about his games. Rackley has even become friends with Woods, and eventually, the book club hopes to travel to Foxboro for a game.

"It's been a sweet, wonderful friendship," Rackley said.

'Never for us'

Mitchell believed his mother that his strife was designed for the betterment of others, so he worked last year to write and publish "The Magician's Hat," a children's book geared to promote the joys of reading.

It's also part of his Read With Malcolm initiative, as the wide receiver has courageously put his face at the front of a subject that can be embarrassing for kids to discuss. Mitchell often tours elementary schools to promote his message, including a joint effort Monday with Books for Keeps to hand out a dozen books per student for summer reading. Mitchell and Woods have even been approached by adults and elderly people who said they began reading more after being inspired by Mitchell.

The impact of their strides has also been felt closer to home. Fourteen years cancer-free, Woods will participate Friday in the annual Relay for Life while Mitchell is attending his first day of rookie camp at Gillette Stadium.

There was another pact, though. When Mitchell enrolled at Georgia, Woods said she, too, would return to school and graduate if he promised to do the same. She earned a degree in social work two years ago from Georgia Military College and has since reenrolled to continue her education.

Mitchell, meanwhile, just graduated from Georgia with a communication degree.

"December 18, 2015," Woods beamed, exclaiming the date that her son received his diploma.

It's a new piece of paper, one they'll stare at forever. A symbol of triumph over a haunting past that will accentuate their family's future.

DL Rob Ninkovich

The Boston Globe

There is no quit in Patriots' Rob Ninkovich

By Michael Whitmer
JANUARY 09, 2015

FOXBOROUGH — Disinterested, disgruntled, and on one memorable occasion completely disgusted, Rob Ninkovich had every intention of quitting.

Ninkovich, then a teenaged eighth-grader in the Chicago suburb of New Lenox, Ill., exceeded the youth football weight limit, so he decided to give wrestling a try. He hated it from the start. As a 180-pound heavyweight, Ninkovich was paired against bigger, more experienced wrestlers. The worst was when he hit the mat after another wrestler in a prior match had vomited.

So Ninkovich, as teens sometimes do, complained to his parents. Mike and Deborah Ninkovich, as sensible, responsible parents often do, delivered an answer the teen didn't exactly appreciate.

"I came home and said, 'Dad, I don't like this.' And he says, 'Well, you're going to have to see it through,' so I had to finish the whole thing," Ninkovich said. "I got better as I went along, but it wasn't my thing. Longest year of my athletic life. I wanted to quit after the first day."

Only he didn't. It wouldn't be the last time the future NFL defensive end chose not to quit, and the Patriots are better for it. Because of the lesson handed down years ago to Ninkovich — the son of an iron worker, and the grandson of an iron worker — he knew that when life appears to take an unsavory turn, something sweet might be waiting right around the corner. He's seen it in his professional life, and his personal one.

Inner drive

Before Rob Ninkovich became the player who will start at defensive end for the Patriots on Saturday in their playoff game against the visiting Baltimore Ravens, he was a senior at Lincoln-Way Central High School with no college scholarship offers. After spending two years at nearby Joliet (Ill.) Junior College, it took Ninkovich one day to convince himself he'd someday play in the NFL.

"He may not be the most athletic guy they've got, but he'll outwork you, he's smarter, and he'll do things the way you coach him, while others might say, 'I'm going to do it my way.' Robbie only wants to get better," said Tom Minnick, who recruited Ninkovich to Joliet and is now the head coach at Arizona Western College. "His goal was to play in the NFL, like a lot of kids, but he took advantage of it. I knew he'd be successful, because he didn't do everything you asked him to do. He did more."

Back to the day that convinced Ninkovich he'd become a pro.

"I knew the first day I walked onto the field for spring ball at Purdue that I was going to be able to play higher than college," he said. "Knew it. I've surprised many people, but I've never surprised myself. That's the story of my life, I guess. Every place I've been, I've surprised people."

Some saw Ninkovich's drive to succeed right away. Some still see it.

"He had unbelievable quickness, a suddenness to his game, had a high football IQ. But if you looked in his eyes, there was a want-to. You could tell he wanted to play the game, you could tell he wanted to be good, and he worked at it. Look in his eyes. You can see it," said Tony Samuel, who was Purdue's defensive line coach during Ninkovich's senior season. "In one year, I can't tell you that there was one play he took off, in practice or a game. That's the ultimate compliment."

The only place Ninkovich didn't want to go after leaving Purdue was the place he wound up going. As the fifth round of the 2006 NFL Draft was beginning, Ninkovich thought he'd be selected by the Patriots, who had the 136th overall pick. Instead, he went No. 135, to the New Orleans Saints.

“My mom asked me, ‘Where do you not want to go play?’ I said New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina had just hit,” Ninkovich said. “I love New Orleans now.”

That’s primarily because he met his wife, Paige, while briefly playing for the Saints. He and Paige are the parents of an 18-month-old daughter, Olivia.

Opportunity knocks

Spend some time with Ninkovich and details emerge. He’s humble but has always been extremely confident. He’s stubborn but responds best when coached by old-school, military-type (his words), strong individuals (sound like anyone in particular, perhaps favors a hoodie?). He’s quiet, but not afraid to speak up.

“I’m stubborn. I would say it’s helped me get to where I’m at, because I was persistent, and being stubborn helped me forget about things that could have kept me out of the league,” Ninkovich said. “I think that goes back to having confidence in yourself. I was always confident that I could get to a high level and play at a high level. I just needed the right chance, the right opportunity. Life’s all about opportunity.

“Sitting in Cam Cameron’s office asking for playing time when we’re 0-10, was that a bold thing to do? I don’t think so. I was trying to play on a team that wasn’t any good.”

That was in 2007, when Ninkovich ended up appearing in four games for the 1-15 Miami Dolphins. His first three seasons in the NFL were marred by injury and uncertainty. He tore knee ligaments twice and was released four times, bouncing between the Saints and Dolphins, active roster and practice squad. When he signed with the Patriots on Aug. 2, 2009, Ninkovich had eight NFL games to his credit, a question of what position he’d play (defensive end, linebacker, long snapper), but the unwavering belief that all he needed was a chance.

Bill Belichick, the Patriots, and defensive end — although he filled in at long snapper against the Chargers this season — have all been perfect fits for Ninkovich.

“Rob’s a tough Croatian, tough Croatian kid,” Belichick said earlier this season (like Ninkovich, the Patriots coach also has Croatian roots). “He’s really strong for his size, been durable. He’s athletic, he’s been able to definitely take care of himself out there and play in a lot of different situations. He’s strong enough to play against bigger people, and athletic enough to play in some space and coverage situations, whatever the requirements are. I don’t think anybody is looking to take him off the field.”

Certainly not Ninkovich, who compares his job at defensive end to a chess match.

“There’s something about being a defensive end . . . that guy [quarterback] is a target, I’m going against someone that’s trying to stop me. That’s a great challenge, to go against somebody that’s trying to stop you from getting to his prized possession. If you can consistently beat that guy, it’s fun, there’s nothing like it,” Ninkovich said. “It’s all a mind game of where you’re going to be, how’s [the offensive lineman] going to set you. Do you go with power, do you run around him, do you come underneath him?”

“There’s so many different things you do as a defensive lineman. I love that. It’s kind of like a progression through the game: How am I going to start off the game, where am I going to be in the third quarter, and then on a gotta-have-it play, what am I going to do, it has to be something that he’s never seen me do yet.”

Applying the pressure

He’ll be chasing Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco on Saturday, looking to add to the team-leading eight sacks he had in the regular season. That’s been a popular number for Ninkovich: He had eight sacks this season, eight sacks last season, eight sacks the season before. He had eight sacks as a senior at Purdue, and eight sacks as a junior. Counting the playoffs, Ninkovich has 39½ sacks in his six seasons with the Patriots; he’s missed just one game during that time, and has started every game in each of the last four seasons.

It’s his body of work — the durability, consistency, productivity, and nose for the ball (13 fumble recoveries the last five seasons, which leads the league) — that’s endeared Ninkovich to his teammates.

“Other than his sacks? I love his sacks,” said safety Devin McCourty, when asked what he likes best about Ninkovich. “I really admire Rob’s attitude toward the game. From getting to know him since I’ve been here, [he’s] a guy that’s fought and clawed all through his career. His ability to make big plays in clutch moments, that’s been key. He’s done it time after time.”

All this from someone who, because of injuries and pink slips early in his NFL career, had opportunities to give up the chase. Maybe the unhappy wrestler in him still lingers, because Ninkovich kept pressing on, despite being told by some NFL coaches that maybe he wasn't good enough.

Why didn't he just quit?

"Because I knew deep down that I could play," Ninkovich said. "In high school, I knew I could play higher. In junior college, I knew I could play higher. In D1, I knew I could play in the league. When I got here, I knew I could start, make a lot of plays, have a good career.

"I'm 30 years old. I don't even count the first three years when I didn't play at all. This is my ninth year, but take away three. It's only my sixth year, really. I feel like my body doesn't have a lot of wear and tear from the first four years of my career. I feel great. I've played at a high level for the last four years, and I don't see why I can't keep improving. I continue to have that mentality, not just with football, with everything. Just keep chipping away, everything will work out."

DL Jabaal Sheard

The Boston Globe

Jabaal Sheard excited to join Patriots, but not showing it

By Shalise Manza Young GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 16, 2015

FOXBOROUGH — In the few months he's been with the Patriots, Jabaal Sheard has given a handful of interviews. To say he's been low-key is an understatement.

Certainly not rude, and clearly happy for the chance to be with a team that is a model of stability rather than one in Cleveland that underwent wholesale changes seemingly every year, Sheard has essentially been Joe Cool when the microphones are around.

Until, that is, the night of the Patriots Hall of Fame induction, when the name of honoree Willie McGinest came up. Suddenly, Sheard was excited.

"That's a guy that I watch film on still to this day," Sheard said. "How he used to rush, how he'd attack, how he was relentless. It's amazing to be out here with him.

"The heart he had, that dog. He would get after the quarterback, get after the run. He was so into the team, whatever they asked him to do, he would do it."

So, we know Sheard is a fan of McGinest. He's also a proud father to preschool-age son Jaiden, and he likes getting to the beach in the offseason, natural for a man who grew up in Hollywood, Fla., just south of Fort Lauderdale.

He's also community-minded: In 2013, Sheard was named the Browns' Walter Payton Man of the Year, given to a player on each team who excels on the field and is a dedicated volunteer off it. Just before returning here for the start of training camp, he hosted a free football camp for 200 kids in Hollywood. That came a couple of weeks after spending a day chatting with and encouraging players and cheerleaders from the Hollywood PAL program, where he got his start playing football.

'[F]or the most part I'm more quiet and like to sit back and learn about guys and listen. I'm a great listener.'

Not that we'd expect him to freely offer such information.

With the Browns, who drafted him 37th overall in 2011, Sheard had 21 sacks in his first 45 games, all starts. Last season, the first with Mike Pettine as head coach, Sheard was a reserve outside linebacker in a hybrid 3-4. He started five games and had only two sacks.

Though his numbers make it look like he fell off, Sheard still had a fan in New England. Mike Lombardi, the Browns' general manager in 2013, came to work with longtime friend Bill Belichick last year with the nebulous title of "assistant to the coaching staff."

When Sheard became available in free agency, New England scooped him up with a two-year, \$11 million deal, with Lombardi's insight playing a role.

Sheard played just 23 snaps against the Packers, but drew a penalty when he pressured Aaron Rodgers.

Though changing teams meant Sheard had to learn yet another defensive system — in four years in Cleveland, he'd had three head coaches and three defensive coordinators — he feels it's a benefit that he's had to adapt to so many different philosophies.

"It makes you have short-term memory, you forget defenses fast and learn a new one. Working with so many different coaches, I feel like I know a lot more about defense, period," Sheard said. "The coaches are doing a good job helping me learn the system, and like I say, one day I think I could be a defensive coordinator, you know? As long as I can learn the system in and out."

Asked if he really would pursue coaching when his playing days are done, Sheard paused.

“I’ve given it some thought,” he said. “Coaches put a lot of work in and that’s something I’ve learned to respect about them. I don’t know if I could put that [time] in.”

For now, Sheard is dedicating his time to the task at hand, learning the Patriots’ defense and how he might best be able to fit in with a line that has depended heavily on ends Rob Ninkovich and Chandler Jones in recent seasons.

“It’s unfortunate he had to learn three different defenses [with the Browns], that’s not an easy thing to do, but the fortunate part of that is he was able to have experience in a lot of different schemes,” Ninkovich said. “The more experience you have at different things, the better you’re going to be on the field. Having different coaches, different installs can help you learn a fourth defense really quickly.”

“Our system is a little bit different, so there’s been an adjustment for him there with some of our techniques or assignments,” Belichick said. “Overall, a lot of things that we do he’s done, so there’s been a little bit of an adjustment, but he’s done well with that.”

“He’s a good player. He’s long, has good playing strength, pretty instinctive. He’s played on the end of the line for his whole career going back to Pitt and in the NFL and now with us. That’s pretty much where he’s going to play for us.”

Quick off the ball, as some of his offensive line teammates who have had to face him in practice can attest, Sheard is also fluid in pass coverage.

In the Patriots’ exhibition opener Thursday night against Green Bay, Sheard played just 23 snaps and was credited with one solo tackle and one assist. But he also drew a holding penalty and got good pressure on Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers.

In terms of personality, Ninkovich sees a bit of himself in his new teammate.

“He’s not going to say too much, he’s not going to be that outspoken guy and talk your head off,” Ninkovich said of Sheard. “I respect that, when guys lead by example and work hard. I think that says more than saying something.”

Asked if Ninkovich’s assessment is correct, Sheard smiled slightly, as though he’d been found out.

“Most people say I’m quiet. I’ve always been a quiet guy, but we have fun,” he said. “I definitely interact with guys and we get things done, but for the most part I’m more quiet and like to sit back and learn about guys and listen. I’m a great listener.”

If Sheard is the playmaker many believe he can be, he’ll be listening to more than just his fellow Patriots. He’ll be listening to the roar of the crowd, as well.



Jabaal Sheard aiming for new heights with Patriots

By: Adam Kurkjian

FOXBORO — Jabaal Sheard didn’t always like the coaching style of Greg Gattuso, his former defensive line coach at the University of Pittsburgh.

“Coach, you don’t have to coach me as hard as you used to,” Gattuso said, recalling Sheard’s words. “Especially his second, third year, he didn’t like that I coached him hard all the time. And I used to say, ‘Jabaal, when you get good, I promise, I won’t say a word to you.’”

Sheard believed at the time he could almost coach himself.

“I kind of just like to watch film by myself, blast some music and go into a different zone,” Sheard said.

His music of choice became Rick Ross, a South Florida-based rapper with a deep registered voice.

"That boss voice," said Sheard, who hails from Hollywood, Fla. "It's humbling sometimes because a lot of times I can relate to it."

But his first time on an airplane? Humbling? No. Terrifying? That's more like it.

"My first time flying was to Pittsburgh and it was the scariest flight ever and we're coming down and the plane's shaking," Sheard said. "We're going through a thunderstorm. I was like, 'I don't ever want to fly again. I'm over flying.' I told myself I was going to Miami. 'I'm going to Miami.'"

On National Signing Day, most faxed letters of commitment arrive around 8 in the morning.

When noontime passed on signing day in February of 2007, the hours ticked by and the pressure from the rest of the staff began to build on then-Pitt assistant Charlie Partridge, the recruiter taking the lead on Sheard, when no fax arrived from the defensive stud.

"We were a little panicked," said Gattuso, now a coach at Albany, "because (Sheard) was a good player. . . . It was like 3 o'clock in the afternoon and we were going crazy. I don't really know what happened."

The reason Sheard waited that long to send his commitment is he was still wavering. Can't fault the kid for not wanting to fly back to Pittsburgh in the winter, can you?

"I got a little bit better (at flying over the years)," Sheard said. "I have my headphones and get a little music and there's so many things to distract you. But back in the day when they said you have to take off your headphones, no music, I couldn't do it. I'd be there shaking and just focused on the plane and focused on your music, your movie, whatever else."

In the end, Sheard decided the Pitt coaching staff was too good to turn down, so he committed.

A take-charge guy

While at Pitt, playing under then-head coach Dave Wannstedt, Sheard was on a dominant defensive line that included future NFL players Greg Romeus and Nick Williams.

Not only did they share a wealth of talent, but a camaraderie, a natural chemistry.

"It was one of the most entertaining group of kids I've ever been around," Gattuso said. "The funniest thing I can remember about it was LeSean McCoy was our running back and in an inside-run period, Shady would say something and immediately, those guys, it would be on. They would rib him hard and taking it, just killing Shady."

"Oh, yeah, man. Camp days," Sheard said. "Competing. Everybody's competing, everybody's raw. Everybody's out there. You're trying to get each other better."

But when the competing stopped, the studying resumed for Sheard. Headphones on. Just him and the film.

"I can't even overstate how many times I've walked out of my office and he's sitting there at 9, 10 o'clock at night," Gattuso said.

"Our conference rooms and offices were in the same room basically. I had many, many late nights in my offices and until I was done and I came out and he was sitting there by himself watching tape. No one knew he was doing it, he wasn't telling anyone he was doing it. It was just the way he worked."

"His senior year, I don't know that I had to say a word to him. Literally. He just grew up into that kind of kid and player."

Help wanted at end

Over the past few years, when the Patriots started showing more 4-3 looks, the defensive ends have shown flashes of production, but at times, late in games, it dropped off with a lack of depth as the wear began to show on Chandler Jones and Rob Ninkovich.

Enter Sheard.

After four years with the Cleveland Browns, the Floridian had become used to the cold weather. The change of scenery wasn't as big of a deal this time for a 26-year-old NFL veteran as it was the 17-year-old prospect who had never experienced flying into torrential weather.

On March 12, two days after his birthday, he signed with the Pats on a two-year, \$11 million deal with a \$5.5 million signing bonus.

It helped that the Patriots had hired Mike Lombardi as a personnel assistant. As the former general manager of the Browns, Lombardi knew what Sheard brought to the table.

"My agent (Drew Rosenhaus) had a good relationship with (Lombardi), obviously," said Sheard who was drafted 37th overall by the Browns in 2011.

As for the study sessions, headphones on, critiquing his every move?

"That was one of their checkmarks," Partridge said of the Patriots' interest in signing Sheard.

Through two games, Sheard, Ninkovich and Jones comprise a group of ends that have shown an uptick in production. Through just two games, they've combined for five sacks, five quarterback hits, and five penalties drawn.

"We're all cool," Sheard said with a shrug of the chemistry. "A lot of great leaders around here, man. Everybody comes to work and gets the job done. That's what we're here for."

Same goes for the airplane rides.

"As long as everybody on the plane's calm," he said. "I'm good."



The 'heartbeat' of the Patriots plays special teams

By Mark Cannizzaro

January 25, 2015 | 10:46pm

When the Patriots make their anticipated Arizona arrival for Super Bowl XLIX on Monday, most eyes will be on their Deflategate-embattled coach and quarterback, Bill Belichick and Tom Brady.

The rest of the Patriots players will deplane, exit the team buses and disappear into the team hotel in relative anonymity by comparison — none more so than Matthew Slater.

Slater, with his unassuming, bookish, bespectacled look, easily can be mistaken as someone from the team's non-football support staff — a media relations or community relations official or an IT intern — not the four-year team captain he is.

On Sunday at University of Phoenix Stadium, Slater will be one of the integral forces attempting to lead the Patriots to their fourth Super Bowl title since 2001 and first since 2004. He is a glue that bonds the Patriots.

There is not a player on the Patriots roster who better embodies what his demanding coach seeks in a player. Slater is the quintessential Belichick player: ego-less, versatile and smart.

"There are zero words to properly describe Matt Slater's impact on this team," running back Shane Vereen said. "He's the heartbeat. He is who everyone looks to — other than Tom [Brady]."

Belichick has a phrase he uses with his players, a saying he probably gleaned from his father, Steve, also a lifer football coach: "The more you can do ..."

There isn't a lot Slater doesn't do for the Patriots in his role as their special-teams captain.

Yet if you surf the Internet and look at his statistics you might be led to believe he doesn't do much at all and wonder how it's possible he has been on the Patriots roster for seven years.

Slater was selected in the fifth round of the 2008 NFL Draft as a receiver. Yet he has one career catch for 46 yards. That took place in 2011. He has one career carry for 6 yards. That took place in 2009.

How has an offensive player who has one reception and one carry lasted seven years under Belichick?

"He's like our quarterback on special teams, the player-coach of special teams," running back Brandon Bolden said. "He works harder than anyone — and I'm not talking about just on this team, I'm talking about the whole league," Vereen said. "He's a hard-nosed, doesn't-back-down type of player. He's what this team needs. You can ask any guy in this locker room and they will tell you the same thing I'm telling you about Matthew Slater. I can't say enough about the guy."

Matthew is the 29-year-old son of Jackie Slater, who carved out a Hall of Fame career as an offensive tackle for the Los Angeles Rams and taught his son a thing or two about how to survive in a league that is constantly trying to get younger and cheaper with its revolving personnel grind.

"I always told Matthew that if he was going to play the game of football he has to respect it enough to do the hard things, to do the things that nobody else was going to be willing to do so that you and your role can be part of the overall team success," Jackie Slater said.

"My father taught me that in the NFL, nothing is owed to you, that everything that you get in this league you have to work hard to get it, you have to sacrifice; there's a price to be paid," Matthew said. "His work ethic over the course of his career stands out more to me than anything, because I remember him training in the offseason more than I remember the games."

Matthew made note of the fact his father didn't start until his fourth NFL season. Matthew never has started a game in seven years in New England, yet he's one of the most important players on the team.

"When I came here, we had [receivers] Wes Welker, Randy Moss, Jabar Gaffney — players that were very accomplished in this league," Matthew said. "My mentality was to do whatever I can to make the team, whether that's running down on kicks, giving looks on scout teams, whatever that was. I understood that everybody couldn't be a star player. But there was a need for role players. In order to have a good football team you've got to have good role players."

Those last words: music to any coach's ears.

When I suggested to Jackie Slater his son was the model Belichick player because of his ego-less manner, he said, "Well, that's Matthew. There's never been any other way with him. He was always a guy that worked real hard and wanted to do his part to help the team."

Matthew, with four Pro Bowls, is catching up to Jackie, who was voted into seven. Only the Manning family, with 19 (Archie's two, Peyton's 14 and Eli's three) has combined for more Pro Bowls than the Slaters' 11.

Jackie Slater called his son's four consecutive Pro Bowls "an amazing feat in my opinion, because it's not like they're taking three offensive tackles to the Pro Bowl; they're taking one special-teams guy."

One special, unique player.

"I never would have thought I'd be here seven years, but it's definitely been a fun ride," Matthew said. "I'm thankful for the experiences, the relationships and everything I've been able to do here."

Asked if he feels appreciation from Belichick, Slater said: "I know he appreciates me because he's still got me around here. That's good enough for me. He says everything he needs to say by allowing me to be on this team every year and I'm thankful for it."

The Boston Globe

Patriots' Matthew Slater got work ethic from his father

By Shalise Manza Young
January 6, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — The game is violent, made for large men like him, and carrying his name onto a football field would be a burden.

Or so the father thought.

As Jackie and Annie Slater raised their two sons in the Anaheim, Calif., area, they tried their best to steer them away from football. Jackie coached their older son, Matthew, at the YMCA, introducing him to soccer, baseball, and basketball.

But when they weren't at the Y, young Matthew went with his father to work, at the Los Angeles Rams practice facility. After his father ran, Matthew ran. When his father was in the weight room, Matthew watched, his wrists taped so he looked the part.

While his father was putting in all the hours necessary to stay on the field, to rehab from injuries, to honor the game he loved, Matthew had a front-row seat.

Jackie Slater, a 6-foot-4-inch offensive lineman, was with the Rams for 20 seasons. A third-round pick out of Jackson State in his native Mississippi in 1976, he didn't become the starting right tackle until his fourth season. Once he took over the job, however, it was a long time before he surrendered it.

Matthew was born at the start of the 1985 season, midway through what was a Hall of Fame career for his father.

Jackie never intended that the time Matthew spent with him at the Rams facility would be on-the-job training.

"It was a really hard way for me to go, and it was very physical and very demanding, and I was a big guy, I was always a big guy, and I have always felt football is a big man's game," Jackie said.

"I saw that he was going to be a little man and there was very little I was going to be able to help him with as a smaller player. I didn't know enough about the skill positions to teach him and help him and so I just kind of discouraged him away from it.

"To be perfectly honest with you, I just didn't think that he was going to be cut out to play the sport."

Matthew was smaller than his father — though, of course, most men are. But he was fast. And he loved the game his father played, in spite of Jackie's reluctance. He begged his parents to let him take up football.

"My dad did everything in his power when I was young for me not to play," Matthew said. "I think part of that was he didn't want me to feel the pressure of living up to being 'Jackie Slater's son' and secondly he didn't want me to get injured because he understands this is a dangerous game and he wanted his son to be healthy.

"But what he didn't know is he was the reason I wanted to play. Because even talking to my dad now, you hear him tell the stories of when he played, he still loves the game so much. You can see it in his eyes, and that was kind of contagious for my brother and I — what is this game that's bringing so much joy and passion in my dad?"

Eventually, the Slaters relented.

From Bruin to Patriot

Annie Slater isn't sure when Matthew started excelling at football. He was a stellar student at Servite High, the top-notch all-boys Catholic school he attended, and his college choice came down to two schools: UCLA, not far from home, or Dartmouth, an Ivy League college in the East.

He was a standout track athlete, tying for second in the 100 meters at the California Interscholastic Federation state meet in 10.67 seconds, and was part of a state-champion 4 x 100-meter relay team.

On the football field, though, he had modest numbers: 39 receptions for 707 yards as a senior. But he had enough tools that he was appealing to college programs. He settled on UCLA.

Slater was a versatile performer with the Bruins, playing at receiver, in the secondary, and on special teams. He had the most impact as a kickoff returner, obliterating the school's season record for kickoff-return yards in 2007 with 986 yards on 34 returns (a school-record 29.0 yards per return), with three of those going for touchdowns.

What former UCLA coach Karl Dorrell most remembers, however, is Slater's work ethic.

"His effort and how he did things, it stuck out like a sore thumb, so to speak," said Dorrell, now quarterbacks coach for the Houston Texans. "If you go through practice and scan everybody that was practicing, there was always one guy that was just going so much harder and so much faster than everyone else, and that was Matthew Slater.

"He just kind of stuck out that way."

When his career with the Bruins was over and the draft process began, Slater had no sense of what would happen for him. He had established himself as a special teams player, but he didn't know whether that would be enough to earn him a shot with an NFL team as a free agent, let alone receive a phone call telling him he'd been drafted.

If Dorrell had gotten his way, Slater would have been a Dolphin. After a 6-6 season in 2007, he was fired by his alma mater and wound up in Miami as receivers coach.

"He can do so many different things, and his effort and how he did things was really unmatched compared to what most people would do," Dorrell said. "I was trying to get [the Dolphins] to draft him because I felt that strongly about his ability."

But Miami didn't draft Slater. A surprise team, one that he'd had little to no contact with in the previous weeks, chose him in the fifth round: the New England Patriots.

“When you look back on it, it was a perfect fit because they appreciated guys like me around here and they still do,” Slater said. “They view things a little bit differently in regards to special teams. So it was a perfect fit with the way my college career went for me to end up here.”

His rookie season of 2008 is not one Slater remembers fondly. He struggled on the field, averaging just 14.1 yards on 11 kickoff returns, and off the field, the transition from college student to professional — far from his family and his familiar Southern California surroundings — was difficult as well.

And then came Scott O’Brien, the mustachioed, frenetic special teams coach the Patriots hired after Slater’s rookie year, the yin to Slater’s quiet yang.

O’Brien rebuilt Slater’s confidence, believing in the young speedster, making him believe he could be a great player.

Appreciating the grind

Jackie Slater believed that his son liked the grandeur of the game, that he enjoyed sitting in the stands with his mother and brother and seeing the Rams welcome different teams to Anaheim Stadium.

That was not the case.

“What I much later found out, the thing that had the biggest impact on him was, he’d watch me go through the grind, and I think the biggest thing that happened out of all that to him was he just learned to appreciate the underside of it, the mundane side of it, when nobody’s watching and you just have to go to work and get yourself ready,” said Jackie Slater.

“Those are some unique times, when we actually spent quite a bit of time together, when I was trying to retard the aging process and he saw that. He got up close and personal with the grind of the game, the hard work and everything that goes into it, the respect that you have to pay the game on a daily basis, the practices — that’s the thing that he seemed to have remembered the most.”

Matthew believes “95 percent of what I’ve learned as far as being a professional and how to work as a pro, and how to respect the game of football” came from his father.

“If there’s one thing I remember about my dad, it was his work ethic,” said Matthew. “As a little kid, going to Rams Park with him and watching him work out, and I didn’t understand why he was doing so much and why he put so much time into it, but as I got older, I began to realize why he was doing that and he always — even now — is talking to me about being a professional, what it means to be a pro, what it means to respect this game.

“This game owes none of us anything; we’re very privileged to be playing this game and we have to give it its just due in the way we prepare on the field and off the field so we’ll have no regrets at the end of the day. I got a lot of that from my dad.”

‘This is my craft’

For most players, special teams is a means to an end: It’s a way to get on the field as a young player, with the hope of getting more snaps at your preferred position later in the season.

Though he practiced as a defensive back and receiver in his first years with the Patriots, Matthew Slater, now 6 feet and 198 pounds, at some point realized that special teams was his position, and he set his mind to excelling at his position.

“I can’t tell you how much I love this game of football,” he said. “This game has been really good to me and my family, and once I got on the field and was able to play, I really saw that hey, this is fun. I like doing this.

“I’m very competitive by nature. I want to be great at whatever it is I’m doing, it doesn’t matter if we’re playing tic-tac-toe.

“In college, when I would see guys not take special teams seriously, I would feel like they were slighting the game, like they weren’t respecting the game.

“This is a huge part of the game. It’s not a job, it’s my craft, and I want to be a master at my craft. It’s not just me coming in punching a clock, going from 9 to 5 and doing the bare minimum.

"This is my craft, I want to perfect it."

Working on his own, working with O'Brien, Slater improved. He draws double-teams when he's on the field, opponents doing whatever they can to keep him from making a tackle on punt coverage or kickoff coverage.

More times than not, he's still the first player to get to the returner.

He has refined his craft to the point that he is considered by some the best special teams player in the NFL; last month, he was named to the Pro Bowl for the second straight year.

"There's something that sets the elite apart from everybody else, at any position, and to me it's really a desire and a passion that you have for what you do," O'Brien said. "Not only understanding it and wanting to be good at it but wanting to be the best at what you do. And the positions he plays are the hard ones, so that's a credit to Matt."

"When I talk to my peers, other coaches from different teams across the league, and they come up and say, 'Did you have Matthew Slater at UCLA?' I'm excited to talk about him," Dorrell said.

"I was very proud of what he did at UCLA but I'm even more proud of how he's established himself with such a great reputation, and also to be recognized as really the best special teams player in the league, that says a lot.

"He's a self-made man and he did a lot of that on his own because of how hard he works."

For the father, who didn't think his son was cut out for the game, who for a long time didn't appreciate the work done by special teams players, seeing his son's success is humbling.

"I always knew [special teams] was an important aspect of winning, it was just, in my heart of hearts, I didn't value it as much as some of the other positions," Jackie said. "It's been humbling to watch my son go that route.

"This is the opportunity that he was given to get on the field at UCLA, this is the opportunity he was given to get in a training camp in the National Football League, it's the opportunity he's taken advantage of to make one of the best teams in the country, and it's the opportunity he's taken advantage of to distinguish himself as one of the best players in the best league in the world."

Proud of the burden

When Matthew Slater steps onto the football field, it is with the last name of a Pro Football Hall of Fame player on his back.

He is glad he isn't an offensive lineman, with the burden of playing the same role his father did, with the expectations of playing it at the same level. There was pressure enough when he was younger to be like his father.

But Jackie raised him to be his own man, and on the football field he certainly is.

"It's hard because, no matter what I do, I'll always be the son of Jackie Slater," said Matthew. "But you know what, I'm OK with that. I'm OK with being the son of Jackie Slater because I am the son of Jackie Slater.

"But what I have to remember is I can't be him, I won't be him, I just have to be Matthew. He told me that at a young age, and even though at times I may struggle with that, I just have to be me and try to represent the name as well as I can."

On and off the field, he does.

OL Joe Thuney

The Boston Globe

A rookie guard is only Patriot to play every down this season

By Nora Princiotti
DECEMBER 7, 2016

FOXBOROUGH — The Patriots have changed quarterbacks and game plans, played on different fields and against different defensive schemes, but they've had only one left guard all season.

Joe Thuney has never been subbed out. The rookie has played every snap of every game. Whenever the offense has been on the field, so has Thuney.

Some of his fellow linemen also have been remarkably consistent and have missed only a couple of snaps here and there.

The difference is negligible in terms of football, but not in terms of pride. When a postgame stat sheet initially shorted Thuney a snap against Pittsburgh — claiming he had played 56 snaps instead of all 57 — it mattered.

"It said I missed one," Thuney said. "I had to square that away. I did not."

Thuney has four games left to complete his Iron Man challenge. Whether he does or not, the third-round pick out of North Carolina State has been a model of consistency.

That kind of stability is a change for all parties involved. Thuney played every position on the offensive line for the Wolfpack, and the Patriots were a revolving door along the line last season. Settling down has been good for both of them.

"It produces a feeling of familiarity, and, you know, you get comfortable with the guys around you," said Thuney. "So that's, I think, you know, a benefit. It helps with chemistry. That's important on the offensive line, so yeah, I think it's just that familiarity factor is helpful."

As in any workplace, chemistry on the football field isn't purely a matter of complementary skill sets. Getting to know colleagues and making them feel they know you and trust you is important, especially for linemen who can't play as individuals. The closer a player is to the center of a formation, the more they rely on coordination with the players around them.

Luckily for him, Thuney has a good track record of winning people over.

He's a people person, a jokester, and impeccably mannered. He introduces himself by name and with a firm handshake to anyone who comes over to his locker (which, of course, has his name on it). He mounted a winning campaign for senior class president at Archbishop Alter High School in Kettering, Ohio.

Thuney thinks the campaign video he made sealed the deal because it was funny. He claims he can't remember the jokes, or whether he had a slogan, though the grin on his face said otherwise.

"That helped," Thuney said. "I can't remember specifically, but it was good. I think. I like to think so. It got me elected."

It's obviously not a direct comparison, but can Thuney use those same qualities to fit in with his new team?

"I try to," he said, smiling sheepishly. "I try to be personable."

Whatever he's doing, it's working, as the offensive line has gone from a weakness to a strength for the Patriots. New England is eighth in the NFL in sacks per passing play, and the line has given up only 20 sacks all season. The team

is headed for the postseason trotting out the sixth-ranked run game in the league, having gained 1,407 yards and 14 touchdowns.

They passed a tricky test Sunday against the Rams defense, which didn't register a sack and hit Tom Brady only four times.

The Patriots ran for 133 yards in hefty chunks of 4.9 yards per carry, with 64 yards coming from the interior behind Thuney, David Andrews, and Shaq Mason. LeGarrette Blount's 43-yard run down the right sideline skews the numbers, but the Patriots' bread and butter was up the middle.

Moreover, Los Angeles defensive tackle Aaron Donald didn't have a heavy impact on the game.

"He was a really good player and they have a really good defense," Thuney said. "I've just got to try to learn from that game film and move on for the Ravens."

If the film reveals one teaching point that line coach Dante Scarnecchia probably will harp on, it's that Thuney can be a bit jumpy and a bit handsy. He has cost the Patriots 55 yards with seven penalties (four holding calls and three false starts) this season.

It's one area of Thuney's game where his rookie status shows. In most others, he's shouldering a rare amount of responsibility for a player his age who wasn't an elite draft pick and is enjoying a rare amount of success as a result.

"I'm really glad," he said. "It's great to be 10-2 and in this position. It's a long season but you just focus on what you can control and try to get a little better each day."

"It's a great start and I couldn't be happier where I am."