

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."