

2021 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 the 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



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 Boutsellis 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 Dovell 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. Parcells 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' TM 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.

The Boston Globe

How Josh McDaniels and Brad Stevens became suburban dad buddies

By Ben Rohrbach
AUGUST 21, 2018

Tracy Stevens, the wife of Celtics head coach Brad Stevens, was driving home after a game when the sports commentators on the radio began dissecting Jumbotron appearances by two prominent fans in attendance at the TD Garden that night: New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick and his offensive coordinator, Josh McDaniels. The hosts joked that while Belichick sat courtside, McDaniels was stuck in the “cheap seats” with the rest of the commoners.

“Hey, those aren’t the cheap seats,” Tracy recalls protesting to the radio on that winter night in 2017. “He was sitting with me.”

The commentators — and sports fandom in general — could be forgiven for not knowing that two of New England’s star young coaches hang out quite a bit when the cameras aren’t trained on them. Stevens, 41, and McDaniels, 42, have six children between them (two and four, respectively) and live 15 minutes apart in Boston’s suburbs. Both families tend to congregate at the Garden, where their wives can chat and the kids can escape to the depths of the arena. McDaniels typically attends about eight Celtics games a year to support his friend.

“I love the team, I love the coach, and I love the game,” he says, “so as many times as my wife will let me go, I’ll go.” He catches the rest of the games on TV.

“It reminds me a lot of when he watches his brother’s games,” says McDaniels’s wife, Laura, referring to Ben McDaniels, an offensive analyst for the University of Michigan. “He’s talking to the TV, and then at times he’ll say, ‘What are you doing?’ My husband analyzes everything to death. There are very few things he is not working through his head all the time. He has a busy brain.”

The obsession is mutual. Though Stevens hails from the Indianapolis area, he’s a full-fledged New England fan.

“I guess my Indy friends don’t always love to hear this,” he says, “but yeah — I root for the Pats.”

So how do two of New England’s most famous coaches like to spend their free time in the offseason together? “Dad stuff” is how Stevens characterizes it. They’ve barbecued with their families, and this summer they managed to squeeze in a round of golf. Josh has visited Brad during summer league play in Las Vegas. Their adolescent sons — 14-year-old Jack McDaniels and 12-year-old Brady Stevens — have crossed paths in spring and summer basketball. Despite the fact that they’re originally from the Cleveland area, the McDaniels family now cheers for the Celtics. This past spring, they attended a couple of playoff games, including Game 7 against the Cleveland Cavaliers. After that defeat, McDaniels sent his friend a sympathetic message, just as Stevens had done for him following Super Bowl LII.

“You understand how much is invested in those things,” says Stevens. “Josh understood I probably wasn’t getting as many texts after Game 7 as I was after some of our wins, so it was good to hear from him early on. You appreciate that about somebody who’s been through it.”

Talk to Stevens and McDaniels for any length of time, and it’s easy to see that they share a similar coaching philosophy and a genuine interest in learning from each other. They maintain a steady stream of conversation through regular phone calls, and their chain of text messages is filled with ideas about how to face hard decisions. They are chasing the legacies of Red Auerbach and Bill Belichick — one memorialized with a bronze statue near Faneuil Hall, the other still carving out his body of work — both among the most legendary coaches in their sports. Now they’re helping each other navigate the sports landscape of New England, where they’re learning to carry the expectations of two dynasties on their shoulders.

Neither Stevens nor McDaniels remembers exactly how they first met, but their friendship was sparked by a sense of mutual admiration. Stevens joined the Celtics in 2013, when the Celtics made him the NBA’s youngest coach with a six-year contract that has since been extended. Like so many football fans, he was impressed with the Patriots’ winning culture. Meanwhile, McDaniels had watched closely as Stevens led NCAA underdog Butler University to consecutive men’s basketball title games. He reached out to the new coach in town, and a conversation that started over lunch is still going five years later.

"We can have a one-question phone call turn into 45 minutes," Stevens says. "That's pretty normal. Because then we get into the deeper conversation of trying to maximize this [coaching] experience, and as many differences as there are, there are a lot of similarities."

McDaniels assured Stevens early on that New England was a great place to coach and "a tremendous place to raise your family." That came as a relief to Brad and Tracy, who were concerned about how their children might adjust to growing up in the limelight.

If they weren't mainstays on local sports programming, McDaniels and Stevens might blend into suburbia. Though still boyish looking, both men give off a pleasant Midwestern-dad vibe. Stevens disguises a fiery competitiveness behind his mild manner on the sidelines and drops dry jokes in conversation, whereas McDaniels strikes a more serious tone, like his father, Thom, a legendary high school football coach. The elder McDaniels believes his son has learned the art of stoicism from Stevens and Belichick — and become a better coach for it.

Though Belichick kept his e-mail responses to inquiries about McDaniels characteristically short, he describes his protege as a dedicated and quick study "who got along with everybody and brought a great personality to the staff." Those who know Stevens describe him much the same way.

"I don't look at myself as giving a Knute Rockne speech every other day," says Stevens. "I want to make sure I know these guys as well as I can. I want to make sure they know that we have a real interest in them, on and off the court. I think maybe to me that's the part I enjoy the most."

McDaniels and Stevens have also bonded over their roots in Canton, Ohio, the town where Josh spent most of his childhood in the shadow of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, which is also where Brad's mother worked summers in the gift shop during college. Their wives both grew up in and around Cleveland. Stevens enjoyed a childhood in Zionsville, Indiana, seemingly plucked right out of Hoosiers, though he grew up in a subdivision instead of a farmhouse. After half-days of kindergarten, he rewatched VHS tapes of college basketball games — his first film sessions, as it were. When he got a little older, Stevens and his father would join friends at the local Steak 'n Shake to discuss games. Meanwhile, in Ohio, McDaniels started tagging along to practice with his father when he was about 5 years old.

"The reward for cleaning your plate at supper that night was that you got to go to two-a-day [practices] the next day," says Thom McDaniels, who was named the nation's top high school football coach by USA Today in 1997 in the midst of a decades-long career. "I don't know if it was football practice or stopping at the Kustard Korner on the way home that cinched the deal for him, but there reached a point when he was 7 or 8 that he had to have a practice plan in his hand. He wanted to have a script so that he knew what play we were running. He was adorned with wristbands, a ballcap, and a practice plan."

Those days turned to high school stardom and Division III careers in football and basketball for Josh and Brad at John Carroll and DePauw universities, respectively. Stevens majored in economics, McDaniels in mathematics. Both accepted entry-level positions at stable companies after college — Stevens as a pharmaceutical marketing associate in Indianapolis and McDaniels as a plastics sales representative in Cleveland. Neither lasted much more than a year before trading their business attire for shorts and a whistle.

"Obviously, he's a basketball coach, and that's what he was born to do," McDaniels says of Stevens.

Stevens arrives at Patriots practice with pen and paper at least once almost every season, including twice last year. He studies how Belichick runs drills, sits in on the team meeting, and follows McDaniels from film session to film session. Stevens leaves with a full notebook every time, juiced, like a man who might get an endorphin rush from running a mathematical Olympics.

"He came home with lots of notes and lots of thoughts and was fascinated by how they run their logistics," says Tracy Stevens. "He was really energized by it. That's the thing about them; they love learning."

If McDaniels and Stevens are young Jedis, Belichick, with his seven Super Bowl rings (five as Patriots head coach, two from his stint with the New York Giants), is their Yoda. Their quest to replicate his success leads every conversation between the two men back to coaching, as they exchange precious morsels of information that might help them take that next step toward the summit.

"You walk into Patriot Place," Stevens is fond of saying, "and you walk out feeling inadequate." Adds McDaniels: "Bill's taught me most everything I know about how to do things at this level, and I learn from him every single day."

In turn, McDaniels also shadowed his friend at Celtics practice before a game against the Indiana Pacers in March and was blown away by how efficient it was.

"One thing he's helped me with is: Don't overcomplicate it," says McDaniels of his friend. "As much as you want to tell them 50 things they've got to do to win, it's much better to boil it down to three or four."

In basketball, "you're coaching the basics of spacing, of action, of playing off penetration, but there's a lot of randomness to a lot of those plays," says Stevens. "In football . . . a lot of it is very, very, very scripted, and it's incredible to watch that thought process up close."

Because of the differences between the two sports, their exchanges tend to focus less on X's and O's and more on coaching as a craft—leadership, communication, structure, team building, culture setting. They treat every life experience as a learning opportunity they can apply on the field or on the court.

"Ultimately why you win in sports many times is the same reason," says McDaniels, launching into the clichés that are both the staples of their public personalities and tentpoles of their teams' successes. "Don't beat yourself, work hard, be a good fundamentally sound team, and go out there and play the game to its completion and put your best foot forward every night and see what happens."

Dressed in a cutoff hoodie and a Patriots hat after a February 4 Celtics win, Stevens held a press conference that lasted just three minutes. "Football game to watch," he told reporters before rushing home to catch the Super Bowl.

While McDaniels has helped Stevens see the game through a different lens, mostly the Celtics coach just enjoys following football as a fan. "And I think he'll tell you, sometimes it's harder to be a fan than to be a coach," his wife says, "because it's totally out of your control."

One of the topics they obsess over most is how to relate to and keep up with their players—many of whom are part of a younger generation that feels light-years different from their own.

McDaniels helped steward Tom Brady's evolution from Super Bowl-winning system quarterback to record-setting MVP and, arguably, the greatest player in history. The bond between Brady and McDaniels played a role in the Patriots' push to retain their offensive coordinator this past February, though McDaniels maintains it was ultimately a "family decision." It was a move to stabilize a dynasty that appeared to be in turmoil.

"Life is about the quality of your relationships," Brady, who has worked directly with McDaniels for 12 of his 19 seasons, says in an e-mail, "and Josh and I will be friends for the rest of our lives."

Stevens was the first to tell star player Gordon Hayward he had NBA potential when he lured him to play at Butler. Together, they reached the 2010 NCAA title game. The narrative that bound their careers, even as they parted ways, may have been overplayed, but Stevens "was always a phone call away," says Hayward. And when Hayward visited the Celtics in 2017 free agency, it felt like picking up where he left off with an old friend.

"He's always been so prepared, and I think that's what makes him so successful and so calm on the sidelines, too," says Hayward, who has similar appreciation for McDaniels after spending a day with him at Gillette Stadium last season, courtesy of Stevens. "He kind of knows the answers to the test before he takes it."

Both McDaniels and Stevens finished in the top 10 of their high school graduating classes, and that drive has carried over into their coaching careers. McDaniels was the architect of one of the most prolific offenses in NFL history at age 31, and Stevens was 33 when he shepherded Butler to within inches of an unthinkable NCAA upset. They have been labeled geniuses in some form or another by everyone from fans to their own players to historically great coaches like Tony Dungy and Gregg Popovich.

If fans understand anything about McDaniels and Stevens, they know the coaches deflect praise and are quick to credit their players for their teams' successes, which include 10 conference finals appearances between them as offensive coordinator and head coach, respectively.

Stevens says he's happy McDaniels will remain with the Patriots. "I'm glad he stayed, because it's easier to find a golf course to go play when you only live 15 minutes apart."

"When you go and watch Bill up close, Josh up close, some of the other great coaches who I've gotten to see, there are no stones unturned, and there are no steps skipped," Stevens says. "The work that they put in to be prepared for

that day is enormous. There are certainly geniuses I'm sure out there, and I think that those guys are as smart as they come, but they're also as hard-working as they come. And that's what I try to emulate from those people — how much it takes to be good."

"None of us have cured cancer," says McDaniels. "We coach a game. Brad is really special in terms of his ability to get guys to do certain things well. Coaching takes on a lot of forms, man. It's not just strategy. It's motivation. It's leadership. It's inspiration. It's handling adversity. It's teaching. It's communicating. It's a lot of things. Don't ever put me in that category. Bill's special; Brad's special. Those guys are tremendous at what they do, and I think ultimately would say the same thing: We win because we've got good players and our players play well."

Their close proximity nearly came to an end in February. Less than 24 hours before McDaniels was about to be introduced as the Colts' next head coach, he made a dramatic about-face and decided to stay in New England. Stevens says he didn't talk to his friend very much during that time.

"You make yourself available, and if they want to call, they can. Otherwise, I know how crazy it gets, so I try to stay out of that unless people need to talk to me," Stevens says. "I was just like everybody else. I was curious to see what he ultimately decided to do, and I'm selfish — I'm glad he stayed, because it's easier to find a golf course to go play when you only live 15 minutes apart."

For Stevens, the NBA draft and summer league preceded a brief break that will allow him to explore New England and maybe another Patriots practice. For McDaniels, offseason workouts sandwiched an early June mini-camp, and then he traveled in search of more coaching lessons before training camp started in late July.

"If you ever stop learning at the levels that we're at, somebody's going to catch you and pass you by," McDaniels says. "I have so much more ahead of me, and I think he would feel the same way in terms of: What are we going to be 10 or 15 years from now? Hopefully we continue to grow and get better. I know I have through my relationship with him."

Stevens sometimes wishes he had stopped to smell the roses more often.

"To go from age 23 until now, I just feel like these 18 years have flown by, and there have been a lot of fun times and the relationships have been great, but it's a whirlwind right now," he says. "I think I'll probably reflect better on it when I'm done and rooting for whatever football team Josh is coaching at that time."

Maybe still in New England. "Hopefully," Stevens says. "Hopefully."

Secondary 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 keeperNo 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 Boutsellis 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 Nelson Agholor



Model Citizen: WR Agholor strives to set positive example

By Erik Scalavino

Inured as we've become societally to associating professional sports with bravado and bombast, we're genuinely taken aback when someone therein downplays his or her own athletic attributes. In pro football, it's uncharacteristically rare, if not unheard of, for skill position players to do so.

Yet, listen to Nelson Agholor recount his ascent from shoeless immigrant child unfamiliar with English to polished National Football League wide receiver. He doesn't consider himself naturally gifted, even when he was a kid or a five-star recruit in high school.

"No. Not at all. If anything, the thing I had going for me at that age was my mind. I feel like I became a cerebral athlete. I studied other people and tried to emulate them. Still, to this day, I'd say my talent is my mind... Obviously, God gives us all different gifts. The gift he gave me was to think about ways to get better and ways to work hard and then to execute."

Case in point: Since discovering Pilates in college as a way to lengthen and strengthen his muscles and core, Agholor has become a passionate practitioner of the physical fitness regimen often identified with middle-aged moms.

By his own admission, this young man has always been a bit different. Agholor turns 28 in May, but sounds much older. He speaks with a thoughtfulness and an eloquence beyond his relative youth. "I hold myself accountable," he explains, "because that's what I had to do as a child."

A LOTTO LUCK

Years ago, students at the University of South Florida may not have given Felix the Janitor much thought if they passed him in the hallway. Perhaps it never occurred to them that this gentleman of humble appearances could be more learned, more worldly than any of them. In fact, before moving to Tampa, Florida, Felix earned a degree from a university in India.

As the 1990s were drawing to a close, Felix and his equally erudite wife, Caroline, wanted more out of life for themselves and their then-four children. From their native Nigeria, they set their sights, as many dreamers do, on America.

Lacking necessary funds to pursue the requisite legal channels, but still wanting to play by the rules, Caroline entered her family's names into the U.S. State Department's Diversity Immigrant Visa program, known colloquially as the green card lottery... and won. Granted permanent resident cards, the Agholors would soon leave Lagos, Africa's second-most populous city, and arrive in New York. After a couple months' stay in a hotel there, they eventually settled in Tampa, where Caroline's brother already lived.

"If it wasn't for her luck, we wouldn't even be able to be here," Agholor points out. Earning a respectable living, though, did not come easy for Felix and Caroline, who each worked multiple jobs to support their children. Often, they were both absent from home at the same time and for long periods.

"It actually made me more independent, and it's the reason why I think I have my own sense of accountability," Agholor reflects today. "Sometimes I had to fend for my own food, to figure out a way to eat, honestly. Sometimes, I might go over to friends' houses. Other times, I might find a couple coins around the house and eat whatever I could buy at a corner store.

"It taught you how to hustle a little bit. It also taught you how to value money at a young age. What you had, you saved and used wisely. You used it because you needed it."

Faced with eviction at one point early on, the Agholors stayed in Tampa, but moved to a more costly three-bedroom bungalow. Life in America versus Nigeria may not have looked much different for Felix and Caroline, but the couple remained determined to give their children a more promising future. They found a way, by working hard, to afford both their home and tuition for Nelson, their youngest at the time, and his siblings at Berkeley Preparatory School, an 86-acre campus for day students pre-kindergarten through Grade 12.

Felix and Caroline also made ends meet well enough that Nelson – or Nelly, as many still refer to him – would eventually be supplanted as the baby of the family. When his youngest sister came along, Nelly was smitten. With a grin that's discernible even over a phone line, he admits, "Yeah, that's my baby," and goes on to explain how, in her, he found inspiration to do the off-field work he's known for today.

WATCH AND LEARN

Making friends in America initially proved challenging for Nelly.

"That was a tough one," he concedes, "because it was just me and my family, me and my brothers and sisters. You're a true foreigner. You don't know the culture, don't know what's acceptable, really. You don't really know how to communicate because you don't speak English well. You also might be looked at as a little bit odd, you know, because of the cultural things you do, how you dress. Growing up, I didn't wear shoes much. I didn't have shoes."

Sports helped "bridge the gap," as Nelly refers to it. Particularly American football, which he knew absolutely nothing about until he saw his older brothers playing two-hand-touch in the street with other neighborhood kids. Joining in helped jump-start Nelly's assimilation process, and while he might not have seen a future for himself in football at the time, others quickly did.

Berkeley's longtime football coach, Dominick Ciao, promised to turn this once 170-pound high school freshman into a can't-miss college prospect. A bold claim, for while Florida may be a hotbed for football talent, a school like Berkeley rarely saw such students matriculate.

Yet, Nelly listened, learned, and believed in everything Ciao had to teach him about football. By the time his senior season rolled around, Nelly was turning down powerhouse programs like Florida, Florida State, Oklahoma, Notre Dame, and even perennial champion Alabama. He chose to accept the offer from the University of Southern California.

"That's always been my thing, to be able to find a model, an example, and then execute what I see from those people."

EVANGELICAL ABOUT EDUCATION

As a true USC freshman in 2012, Nelly contributed immediately for the Trojans, appearing in all 13 games as a reserve wide receiver. A starter the next season, he came achingly close to the thousand-yard mark in receiving yards – a threshold he'd easily surpass as a junior, with 1,313 yards and 12 touchdowns on 104 catches.

Those numbers led all USC pass catchers and convinced Nelly to forego his senior campaign in favor of the 2015 NFL Draft. Philadelphia subsequently made him the 20th overall pick in Round 1.

Even as far back as ninth grade, long before he became nationally known, Nelly recognized that he wasn't just trying to emulate his role models, but also becoming one himself. Younger Berkeley students looked up to him, both as a football player and, more importantly to him, as a person. He did his level best to live up to their expectations.

Yet, he also had a protégé much closer to home and to his heart. His baby sister, the apple of Agholor's eye. "I would always talk to her about life," he recalls, "and having true control over her decisions."

She would inspire Nelly, once he became a professional athlete with a powerful platform, to create a nonprofit organization called Our Kids, Our Responsibility.

"Education and experience are key. If you're educated, you put yourself in position to have more experience. Exposing kids' minds to more is what education is," he reasons. "It's just access to information that can be used to want to do more, to accomplish more, to be more. To be more than what you might be able to see. The more kids know, the more places they know, the more they're able to do."

Charity, as the saying goes, starts at home, and Agholor's mission is no exception. He's putting his kid sister through college, helping her become the psychologist she's studying to be so she can make her own way in the world. Along the way, he's also worked and continues to work with numerous middle and high school-aged youths to give them the type of direction he had to learn on his own at their age.

"Not enough, though. I'd say [I've helped] a lot, but not enough. More can be done," Nelly insists. "I look forward to being integrated in our Boston community and nurture the minds of the kids there."

A NEW ROLE

After five seasons with Philadelphia that included a Super Bowl title, Agholor briefly moved on to Las Vegas as a free agent in 2020. When his one-year deal with the Raiders expired this spring, he inked a two-year pact with New England, eager for a chance to continue competing and helping the Patriots return to their winning ways. There's much more he wants to accomplish in football as well as away from it. Both are recognition of how far he's come and where he wants to go next.

"The little memories I have [of Lagos] are obviously my family and I living in a compound that a landlord owned. We had a small house in that compound, a small little humble home. We were a tight group of people. Mom and Dad did everything they could then to provide for us."

Today, he's the one providing for Felix and Caroline and his siblings. He's even helped his mother visit their homeland a number of times, a journey he longs to make himself someday.

"My return [to Nigeria] is long overdue," he admits. "I do have a desire to go back. I have not been back yet. Right now, I don't have any plans, especially with COVID. It's been tough. But I'd say a random goal I have now is to do it for my little sister's graduation. I think that'd be a really cool thing for her. She's never been because she wasn't born there... That'd be a cool little deal."

In the meantime, Nelly Agholor will do whatever he can here in the States to be the best Patriot, the best person he can be. He learned by example. Now, he wants to be one.

"I know my parents are proud of me," he asserts. "I'm super happy to be able to make them proud and provide for them and represent the Agholor family."

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."

P Jake Bailey



Taking flight: Patriots' Bailey draws from family aviation tradition to elevate punting game

By Mac Cerullo
July 31, 2019

FOXBOROUGH — Jake Bailey has always been at home in the skies.

From a young age, the New England Patriots rookie punter developed a fascination with flight, fostered by a family tradition of aviation that stretches back generations.

"My great-grandfather was a private pilot, my grandpa flew for TWA Airlines for many years and was in the Air Force. My dad flew privately and during college it was something I was trying to pick up," Bailey said. "I got 40 hours in, 20 hours solo and it's something eventually down the road I'll try to finish up."

Through his flight experience, Bailey has developed a keen understanding of aerodynamics, and that has proven useful as he's put his pursuit of a pilot's license on hold to chase his NFL dream.

Bailey, who the Patriots traded up to draft in the fifth round this spring, is battling veteran Ryan Allen for the starting punter's job, and his unique understanding of how the ball moves through the air has given him a leg up compared to your typical rookie. While fans at training camp will immediately notice Bailey's booming leg, there is a lot more going on than simply booting the ball as high as possible.

"Lift with airplanes is the same as lift with punting," Bailey said. "You've got to make sure the plane cuts the wind and the ball cuts the wind. There's a lot of similarities."

Unlike Corey Bojorquez, who also boasted a huge leg but never mounted a serious challenge to Allen last summer, Bailey possesses both a scientific understanding of what makes the perfect punt and the ability to consistently execute on the field. He also has the ability to take kickoffs, and taken together, that combination has made him a serious threat to the veteran Allen's job.

"I think one of the things that should jump out is Jake does a great job of getting up through the ball, so his hang time-distance relationship is really good, and that's a ratio you look for to help your coverage unit," said Pete Alamar, who was Bailey's special teams coach at Stanford. "He's got exceptional leg speed and he combines that with exceptional flexibility. When you watch him punt it looks effortless."

During Bailey's time at Stanford, Alamar and his staff went to extraordinary lengths to try and help him perfect his mechanics. They teamed with Stanford's sports science department to track Bailey's leg speed in the same way a golfer might track their swing. They developed a proprietary statistic called the True Punter Index, which aimed to take into account everything that goes into a punt and produce a single, quantifiable number. Sort of like a punter's equivalent of QBR.

Using that statistic, Alamar graded Bailey's senior season and compared him to that fall's NFL punters. It wasn't a perfect comparison — they didn't have the directional figures for the NFL punters — but when taking everything into account, they found that Bailey's production would have already put him in the top five in the league.

That lined up with the eye-test as well. Among his highlights, Bailey recorded a school-record 84-yard punt against Cal, and on kickoffs he only surrendered four returns, sending the rest through the end zone for touchbacks.

Bailey will have a chance to make his NFL case in the coming weeks, starting next Thursday during the Patriots first preseason game against the Detroit Lions. The battle between him and Allen will be one of the most hotly contested of training camp, but whether it's in New England or somewhere else, Alamar believes Bailey has the tools to enjoy a successful career at the professional level.

"The three things you have to answer are is he physically capable of performing at that level, mentally capable and emotionally capable?" Alamar said. "And I think Jake checks all of those boxes."

If all goes well for Bailey, he may have to put his dream of becoming a pilot on hold for a bit longer.

DB Justin Bethel

The Boston Globe

Justin Bethel of the Patriots can also get the job done in the kitchen

By Nicole Yang

Posted October 23, 2021

FOXBOROUGH — When Justin Bethel isn't downing punts or practicing the drums, chances are you can find him in the kitchen.

Taking a spin through his camera roll, you'll find photos and videos of his creations. Last May, for example, he documented his process for pan-seared salmon topped with garlic cream sauce, along with a side of mashed potatoes with bacon and chives. Two weeks later, he was back at it, making pan-fried chicken, with a baked sweet potato and broccoli.

On this Thursday afternoon inside his home, Bethel is preparing an asparagus parmesan risotto with pan-seared chicken.

Justin Bethel prepares the pan-seared chicken.

"You have to be patient," he says, as he gradually adds a cup of broth to his pan. "You can't rush anything. The trick to it is every time you add liquid to it, you have to let it slowly absorb everything. Otherwise, you're going to mess it up."

Bethel, wearing a navy blue apron with his name and Patriots logo embroidered on the front, has two burners on his stove top in use. One warms a pot with the broth, while the other has the pan with the risotto in progress. He pays close attention while stirring the rice, sampling it until he's happy with the consistency.

Risotto is just the latest dish of interest for Bethel. A few years ago, he went on a ramen kick, where he made everything from scratch — the broth, the flour, and the noodles.

"If you would have come to my house at the time, I had noodles all over, hanging everywhere, trying to dry them out," he said.

Bethel has always had an interest in cooking, having watched his father, Chris, prepare food for their family of five growing up. Bethel enrolled in his first formal cooking class his junior year at Blythewood (S.C.) High School, primarily because the period was scheduled right before lunch.

In the class, Bethel learned how to make a variety of dishes. His favorites were always desserts — not necessarily because he had a sweet tooth but because he loved the presentation. He still bubbles over in excitement when recalling one particular sweet treat: a three-layered chocolate cheesecake covered in ganache and almonds.

"It looked so pretty," said Bethel. "I was like, 'I love this. This is what I want to do.'"

The finished product: Asparagus parmesan risotto with pan-seared chicken prepared by Justin Bethel.

As graduation neared, Bethel initially planned to study culinary arts at Johnson & Wales University in Providence. He enjoyed cooking so much that he wanted to become a chef. He also considered attending the University of South Carolina and walking on to the football team.

But Bethel ended up getting a scholarship to play football at Presbyterian College in Clinton, S.C. Blythewood's coach, Jeff Scott, with whom Bethel won a state championship in 2006, had just gotten hired as Presbyterian's coach and offered him a spot.

Bethel, who didn't garner much other interest at the Division 1 level, couldn't pass up the full ride. He became a starting cornerback at Presbyterian, while maintaining an important role on special teams, and graduated with a degree in business administration.

After the Arizona Cardinals drafted Bethel in the sixth round in 2012, his plans obviously shifted to professional football.

Now in his 10th NFL season, Bethel is a key member of New England's special teams unit, playing 82.4 percent of the snaps this season. Because of the team's shaky secondary depth, he even logged some snaps at cornerback last Sunday against the Cowboys, and he broke up a potential touchdown pass that led to safety Kyle Dugger's first career interception.

"JB is so athletic," said safety Adrian Phillips. "He's probably pound for pound one of the strongest people on the team. He's just super athletic. He's one of those guys you can pretty much plug in anywhere. He might not get a whole lot of reps in practice or whatever it may be, but when he gets in a game, he knows what to do."

"He's just a vet. He's also one of those guys, like, if you tell him, 'Hey, go guard him, go shut him down.' He'll be like, 'All right,' and he'll just go about his day."

Justin Bethel wore a navy blue apron with his name and Patriots logo embroidered on the front as he prepared dinner.

Even though his NFL career has taken off in ways he never could have imagined as a high schooler, Bethel still finds time for his love for cooking.

During the offseason, he tried to make at least one dessert per a week — triple mousse mud pie, strawberry shortcake, and pineapple upside-down cake were some of the highlights — and other meals more frequently.

His approach is simple: "If I see something I like, I'll try it."

Just as he does when playing the drums, Bethel likes to experiment. He hasn't signed up for any more cooking classes, nor does he follow any recipes that closely. He's also not a fan of utilizing shortcuts, such as Instant Pots or Crock-Pots, preferring to do things by hand.

Added his wife, Breanna: "He can put things together randomly, and it'll still taste good. Whereas if I just did random spices, who knows what it's going to taste like?"

Desserts remain Bethel's favorite things to make because he likes to dress them up. Cheesecake, the confection that first caught his eye back in high school, became a staple. Back when he was with the Cardinals, he even bought cake boxes so that he could bring some to the facility.

For dessert, Bethel made sugar-coated, caramel-filled, baked peach pies.

"When I first got to the league, cheesecakes were my thing," Bethel said. "I would make a different cheesecake pretty much every week."

On this day, Bethel has prepared sugar-coated, caramel-filled, baked peach pies. He's particularly pleased because he was able to successfully blanch his peaches — a peeling technique that involves putting ripe peaches first in boiling water and then ice water.

For Bethel, the fun is in the process, especially when he gets to cook for multiple people. He's looking forward to cooking more as his family grows — he and his wife just welcomed their first daughter — and is happy he can keep it up as a hobby.

"The more people I'm cooking for, the better," he said.

When Bethel looks around and takes in the counter of empty plates, he smiles.

"Ah, that's what I like to see," he said.

PROVIDENCE Journal

Justin Bethel excited for his shot with Patriots

By Eric Rueb

Posted Oct 25, 2019

FOXBORO — After being released by the Baltimore Ravens, special-teams star Justin Bethel took a visit with the New England Patriots. A quick one.

"First, I wasn't sure it was going to be a signing now. I thought I was going to show up, see what happens and talk to them, but then it was like 'Yeah, OK, we're signing with them,'" Bethel said. "I was like 'oh, I don't have any clothes, but let's get to it.'"

When you think of weapons the Patriots acquired this week, Bethel probably wasn't a name that came to mind. As one of the NFL's top special-teams player, Bethel was more than happy to team up with Matt Slater, whose reputation on special teams is well known around the league.

"I was excited just to be in the AFC with him when I was with the Ravens. When I got here [during the visit] I was talking to him like 'what do you think the chances are of being on the same team with the man?' Bethel said. "It's exciting to finally get here and work with him hand-in-hand."

"He's been good. He's great. He's a great kid, he works hard, has a passion for his job. He understands what it is and understands his role," coach Bill Belichick said. "... He's embraced the positions we've put him in and like Sanu, trying to get up to speed as quickly as he can to be ready to go on Sunday."

Most don't dream of becoming a special teamer, but Bethel's been doing it for a while. He said he's been covering punts and kickoffs since high school and while at Presbyterian College. He was drafted in the sixth round of the 2012 NFL draft by the Arizona Cardinals and continued to work on special teams while spending some time at corner back. He was a Pro Bowl special teamer for the Cardinals in 2013-15.

"It just starts off with the want to. You have to want to do it," Bethel said. "... It's something where if you enjoy it and you're willing to actually put the effort in for it – no matter how tired you might be from defense – you can be a great special teams player."

Prior to this week, Bethel said he hasn't spent much time talking to Slater – "I met Matt at the first or second Pro Bowl when he was there, I mean one of the times they weren't in the Super Bowl" – but has already latched on to Slater and the rest of the group.

"He's definitely helping me. Him and Nate [Ebner], they're both doing good. They're making sure I'm coming along," Bethel said. "They're making sure I know what's going on."

Bethel should be on the field Sunday against Cleveland and against next week when the Patriots travel to face the team that just released him, the Baltimore Ravens.

"It's going to be interesting," Bethel said. "I was just there not too long ago and I'm sure those guys are ready to play against me. ... I'm sure they're dialing up whatever they can for me and Slater and everybody else we have. It'll be exciting. I know a lot of the guys because I was there for a while, so it'll be good to see them."

LB Ja'Whaun Bentley

The Boston Globe

Ja'Whaun Bentley, Carsen Edwards friendship just gets stronger

By Nicole Yang

November 15, 2019

FOXBOROUGH — Patriots linebacker Ja'Whaun Bentley sort of crinkles his nose when I say the word “friendship.”

“You keep saying ‘friendship,’” he points out.

It's not the preferred term to describe his relationship with Celtics rookie Carsen Edwards.

“That's my brother,” Bentley says. “We were never really friends. We were always brothers. Everybody else says ‘friends’. We say ‘brothers.’”

Bentley and Edwards met as student-athletes at Purdue in 2016. Bentley was a junior on the football team, while Edwards was a freshman on the basketball team. Neither can pinpoint the exact circumstances of their initial introduction, but Bentley was already friends with Vince Edwards (no relation to Carsen), a junior forward on the basketball team.

From there, the pair started hanging out more and more. They overlapped at Purdue for two years before Bentley graduated and was drafted 143rd overall in the fifth round of the 2018 NFL Draft. When Bentley left Purdue, however, his connection with Edwards didn't fizzle.

“We've literally talked ever since,” Edwards said. “Literally every single day.”

Bentley has continued to return to campus in West Lafayette, Ind., including a surprise visit for Edwards's 21st birthday this past March. A few months later, he also made a trip out to Texas to watch the NBA Draft with Edwards in his hometown.

Knowing Bentley, who played only three games last season before getting placed on season-ending injured reserve with torn biceps, had a busy recovery schedule ahead of training camp, Edwards cherishes the memory as one of his favorites.

“For him to make it out and be there for a moment like that, it meant a lot,” he said.

For Bentley, though, the gesture was a given.

“That was definitely a top priority for me to be down there,” he said. “It was nothing for me to come out there.”

Together, alongside family, they watched NBA deputy commissioner Mark Tatum call out the 33rd overall pick: the Philadelphia 76ers had chosen Edwards. Only the selection actually belonged to the Celtics, who acquired the pick in a trade earlier in the night.

“I definitely remember after they said I was going to the Celtics, we were just sitting there and I kind of looked at him,” Edwards recalled. “Ja'Whaun is so low-key. He's a dude where he wants the day to be about me. So, after it all happened, he didn't really say much.”

“Then, we were leaving, and he was like, ‘Bro, you know you're going to be right with me’ . . . I thought about it right then, but I didn't want to say anything.”

Now professional athletes in the same city, the two have only continued to strengthen their bond. They do what friends do: talk about the highs and lows, try new restaurants, shop, and chill at each other's apartments. (Bentley even spent the night at Edwards's place earlier this week.) Navigating his first year in the league, Edwards has also turned to Bentley for advice.

“His mind-set was something we always talked about, how he works hard and things like that,” Edwards said. “It's cool to follow somebody that has the same dreams in a way. He was like that at Purdue as well. He was low-key but worked real hard.”

They know more about each other than most. When Bentley flashed his impressive vocals at teammate Duron Harmon's karaoke charity event in September, for example, Edwards wasn't surprised.

"Ja'Whaun and I will be in the car, singing and stuff, messing around, and he'll sound really good," Edwards said. "I'll always be like, 'Bro, you understand you sound really good?' That's one thing he's real shy about, but he can really sing."

Despite their demanding schedules, they'll support each other at games whenever they can. Bentley attended the Celtics' season opener at TD Garden, and was in the house for Boston's game against the Knicks a week later.

Edwards went to both preseason games at Gillette Stadium as well as New England's Week 3 contest against the New York Jets. Although Edwards couldn't make the Week 8 matchup against the Cleveland Browns, his parents braved the rainy weather to support Bentley, who talks to Edwards's older brother, Jai, on a daily basis, too.

They'll still make cross-country trips for the right occasion — Bentley flew out to Las Vegas to watch Edwards ball out during Summer League in July — but having each other nearby goes a long way. Edwards's family still lives in Texas, while Bentley's resides in Maryland.

"It's helped me a lot, especially coming to a city by myself," Edwards said. "It helped my mom, too. She doesn't like that I moved out here by myself and things like that."

"There's nothing like having family that's closer," added Bentley. "It's a God thing. God knows who to put in your life."

WR Kendrick Bourne



Musical Score: WR Bourne Hooked on a Feeling

By Erik Scalavino

He wears his emotions on his new short sleeves. With a smile as bright as California sunshine, he runs drills and pass patterns while proudly modeling a New England t-shirt and accompanying ball cap for the very first time. Just days after inking a reported three-year, \$22.5 million contract with the Patriots, Kendrick Bourne meets and gathers in the Golden State with some of his new teammates to work both on his craft and their burgeoning relationships.

With quarterback Jarrett Stidham and fellow wide receiver Jakobi Meyers, the pass catcher openly talks hooks, also known as curl routes, to help himself understand concepts of his new playbook. With an inquisitive member of the media, he also talks frankly about other kinds of hooks.

"I can make a full song off just making a hook," Bourne insists. "I have my own sound. I know what I want to do when I'm in the recording studio. Maybe when I'm done playing football, I'll spend more time there."

In the interim, he works. And works. And works. Making songs only serves as an occasional escape. In musical parlance, hooks are those elements of pop songs, often in the chorus, that are repetitive and catchy. Repetitive and catchy. Repetitive and catchy. Not unlike the time and effort he's putting in now to prove that his new team's investment in him will not go for naught.

The 25-year-old recently took a break from his on-field preparations to make conversation, rather than music, and discuss a particular pattern. Not the variety he runs on the field, but one that has proven successful as it's developed over the course of his life.

IN TUNE WITH HIMSELF

Before they married and she formally took his last name, Eric and Luica Turner had three children together, all of whom, to this day, keep their mother's maiden surname, Bourne. In church, the family prayed and performed together. Eric played keyboard while Luica sang. Their son, Kendrick, accompanied on drums. They gave Kendrick and his brothers a solid foundational start to life in Portland, Oregon.

Yet, a teenaged Kendrick realized he'd begun heading down a dead end. The company he kept outside his home was proving a destructive influence. He accepted full responsibility for his bad behavior, but refused to be content with where it would inevitably lead him if he didn't reverse course. He knew he could do better. Knew he could be better.

So, after three underachieving years at Benson Polytechnic High School, he begged out. "I needed to isolate myself," Bourne recalls, "I just needed to get out of that situation, my friends, and the crowd I was around... I was in a tough position."

Only seven miles separate Benson from Milwaukie (Oregon) High School and Academy of the Arts, but they were more than far enough away for young Kendrick, who needed multiple bus rides to get there each day. Administrators in the school district, recognizing a student truly serious about reform, agreed to his senior-year transfer and playing football for his new school.

"It wasn't a specific talent that got me in," Bourne admits today. "They knew I was trying to make a change for myself and they accepted me and helped me turn my life around."

Entering his senior year of high school, Bourne was exposed to a new, art-focused curriculum, a world apart from the one he'd been studying heretofore. He also encountered a new style of teaching, along with a new brand of teachers who paid greater attention to him.

"Which was what I needed," he adds. "I remember one of my teachers, he tested me every day, challenged me, and it made me better. He made me want to be better. The decision for me to move was the best decision for me. Overall, my life changed with school, doing the right things, getting my grades up, being on time."

On the gridiron, Bourne also flourished. He went from a virtually unknown player to one being recruited by numerous FCS-level (formerly known as Division I-AA) college programs, many in the Big Sky Conference. Ultimately, he chose somewhere cold and remote, as he puts it, where he could be relatively obscure and focus only on football. Eastern Washington. Once again, he understood intuitively that if he stayed too close to home, temptations might overcome him.

"Before I got ahead of myself, thinking I'm the man, going to the [National Football] League already," he explains. "Because kids get like that."

But Bourne needn't have been concerned about falling victim to the spotlight at Eastern Washington. Because there, the star who shone brightest was a teammate in the same class, at the same position.

SECOND FIDDLE

From a statistical standpoint, Cooper Kupp's least productive college season came in 2014, as an Eastern Washington redshirt sophomore. While his 104 receptions were 11 more than the previous campaign, Kupp "only" amassed 1,431 yards receiving and 16 touchdown catches, the lowest totals in those two categories during his four-year career at the university. His longest catch that season went 61 yards, also a college career low.

Meanwhile, true sophomore Kendrick Bourne's 52 catches for 814 yards and 10 scores dwarfed his freshman-year output and might've been team-leading numbers were it not for Kupp. Over the next two years, Bourne would see his productivity steadily increase, despite Kupp's outrageous output, which broke numerous school and national records and earned Kupp a ridiculously long list of honors. The L.A. Rams eventually selected Kupp in the third round, 69th overall, of the 2017 NFL Draft.

Singing backup to Kupp's lead, Bourne nonetheless helped give the EWU Eagles a high-flying aerial attack. By the end of his senior year, Bourne achieved his first 1,000-yard season and gained notice by NFL scouts.

Bourne knew he could be a better player and needed a new challenge to prove as much. Venturing further afield, yet remaining somewhat close to the Pacific Northwest, he signed as an undrafted rookie with the San Francisco 49ers in 2017. Two years later, Bourne suited up for the biggest game of his career. In the Niners' eventual loss to Kansas City in Super Bowl LIV, he snared a pair of passes for 42 yards.

Re-upping with San Fran on a one-year deal, he enjoyed a career-best season in 2020, finishing with 49 passes caught for 667 yards. As he entered free agency in 2021, Bourne again heard that familiar refrain inside his head – that he had something to prove and improve.

"No [disrespect] to the Niners organization. It was an awesome four years for me," he maintains. "They let me in and accepted me my first year, so, that's always appreciated. All four years are appreciated. I'm just trying to elevate my game to another level and I felt I wasn't being used that way over there... I just needed to be around something different."

FINDING HARMONY

Whenever he finds time to drop by a music studio, Bourne knows he'll be there just a couple hours, but leave having made two or three new recordings. "I've seen guys go in there for six, seven hours, and I'm like, 'I've got things to do,'" he laughs. Someday, he might spend more time indulging himself, but right now, he refrains from staying out late making music, to avoid being too tired the next morning for his football training regimen.

Bourne has plenty of reason to smile now. And not just because of the dollars New England's throwing his way, which he reveals are far more than any other club offered. He's chosen to play football this fall further away from home than he's ever been based, for a head coach in Bill Belichick who, like that memorable high school teacher, will constantly test and push him to be the best he can be on a regular basis.

"That's a great comparison. I definitely like how you put that together. That's really how I feel about it, too," Bourne asserts. "I feel like I needed something new, needed a change. Change is always good. I needed a new challenge, new goals, new organization. I'm ready to earn the respect of my peers, my coaches, all the staff, and just do what I need to do."

New England is providing Bourne the greatest challenge of his life thus far, and he's committed to rewarding the team's faith in him.

"I know that the Patriots are going to make me a better player, a better man, a better overall life expert. That's my main thing. I just want to be good at life. The New England Patriots are about excellence. They work hard, and that's how I made it [this far], by working hard."

And by listening to that persistent inner voice.

S Kyle Dugger

The Providence Journal

COMING OF AGE: Kyle Dugger went from a Division II player to a second-round draft pick of the Patriots
By Mark Daniels
Sep 25, 2020

It didn't take long for any coach at Lenoir-Rhyne University to recognize Kyle Dugger as an NFL prospect. That was evident every time he stepped on the practice field. It was clear when a player of his size returned every punt. You're not supposed to move like that when you're 6-foot-2, 220 pounds.

The fact that a player of his caliber was playing at the Division II level was uncommon, but not rare for a late bloomer. Dugger was hiding in plain sight of the NFL until March of 2019.

That's when Seattle Seahawks scout Ryan Florence traveled to Hickory, N.C. In the NFL, most teams subscribe to one or two scouting services — BLESTO or National Football Scouting. It's up to the scouts to measure and time underclassmen a year before they are eligible for the draft and then upload the information to the website.

Florence measured Dugger's arms, height and weight for the NFS service. For a safety, Dugger's wingspan (78.5 inches) was extraordinary. Then he had him run the 40-yard dash. Then again. And again. Florence looked at the watch and back at Dugger. That was the moment he knew that this kid from Decatur, Georgia, was special.

This is also how Dugger got on the radar for the Senior Bowl and NFL Combine.

That spring, Jim Nagy, the executive director of the Senior Bowl, was in the process of identifying players for the next college All-Star game, which features prospects for the upcoming draft. Nagy scouted in the NFL for 18 seasons,

including for the Patriots. He worked with Florence in Seattle and called to ask about Dugger after an agent tipped him off.

Florence told him he timed Dugger three times and the stopwatch read 4.41, 4.45 and 4.5.

"He really liked him," Nagy said. "And he had him as fast as 4.41. Well, now he goes from being a really good Division II player to being a legit pro prospect. When you're talking about a kid that's 6-2, 220 pounds, that's flying."

Dugger's life changed on that day. As soon as Florence uploaded his report, the Division II safety was on the NFL's radar. Soon, he'd be coveted by Bill Belichick and the Patriots.

Early impressions

When David Cole first laid eyes on Dugger, he saw the potential. It was in 2016 and the underclassman was still growing into his body. He did things on the practice field that were rare at the Division II level. The reason Dugger wasn't in Division I was because he was a late bloomer. He was 5-foot-9 as a junior at Whitewater High School but grew to 6-feet as a senior. He added two more inches in college.

Cole was Lenoir-Rhyne's secondary and special-teams coach at the time. He had previously coached seven NFL players as an assistant at California (Pa.) University and did an internship with the Pittsburgh Steelers in 2013. He saw a future NFL player in Dugger. He set out a plan to make Dugger the first player drafted from Lenoir-Rhyne in 20 years.

First, Cole had to convince Dugger to switch from cornerback to safety — after he was named the conference Defensive Freshman of the Year.

"I had to talk him into being a safety because he fancied himself the next Jalen Ramsey," said Cole, who's now at Mercer. "We just talked about making that move that would be the best to get him to the next level. ... We really just talked about refining the skills, footwork, being more aggressive, being a better open-field tackler, and becoming more of a student of the game and loving it."

Two years later, Drew Cronic took over as Lenoir-Rhyne's head coach. He knew Dugger when he was a student at Whitewater. Cronic was an assistant at Reinhardt University and recruited Dugger to the NAIA school, but lost him to Lenoir-Rhyne. Those were the only offers Dugger had.

When Cronic took the new job in 2018, he heard the stories about Dugger. There were moments in the secondary that defied logic. There were times in practice he'd hit someone so hard, he'd knock a teammate out for the day. Then there were the punt returns. At his size, Dugger's returns were legendary.

"(When I recruited him), he was probably 6-foot, 185 pounds," said Cronic, who now coaches at Mercer. "When I saw him again, he was 218-220 (pounds) and he looked like he belonged at Clemson or Alabama. Then they start talking about him returning punts. I'm going, 'OK, whatever, a 218-pound guy returning punts.' Then I watched film on it. And I got to see it live and in color that fall ... and I was a believer."

The NFL soon was as well.

All the right things

Lenoir-Rhyne was a popular destination for NFL teams in the fall of 2019.

After Dugger's times were posted, NFL teams raced to Hickory to see him. There were an estimated 10 scouts a day at practice. Front office personnel came to games. The Carolina Panthers' general manager visited. The Buffalo Bills were there more than anyone.

"That fall was crazy. All NFL teams came to practice," said Cole. "That doesn't happen at a lot of smaller collegiate programs. It was just neat. It was a time to always remember, you know, but it was definitely crazy."

"It was the normal process of scouts checking in on us. We obviously were pretty high on Kyle and they'd get a little film," added Cronic. "Then one team comes a couple of times and it blows up. All the guys can share information. By that fall, every team in the National Football League came by."

Dugger was named the Division II defensive player of the year last season, but it was how he handled himself that fall that truly impressed those around him. Scouts were on him every day. He was bombarded with calls from NFL agents. It was stressful, but Dugger handled it like a professional.

When players were coming off the practice field, he stayed in the end zone to work on his technique. He was the first player in the meeting room and kept copious notes in a black notebook. He was the first person to raise his hand. He took coaching and didn't get down when a coach ripped into him.

There was no baggage here. He took care of his body, was careful in what he ate and when the weekends came, he usually stayed inside to watch movies.

"He just stayed away from the wrong things and he absorbed information well, very intelligent," Cronin said. "All the pieces kind of lined up. If you saw a kid like that at a Division II school, you would assume he was transfer that came from a big school because he has problems."

The final testing ground

The Patriots earmarked Dugger as a potential draft pick in the spring of 2019. That fall, they sent scouts on multiple occasions to Hickory to get a closer look. By the time January came, they saw Dugger play in several games.

Still, they needed more.

That's where the 2020 Senior Bowl came in. It wasn't just the game on Jan. 25, during which Dugger made a game-high seven tackles, but the week before in practice. That's where they saw the safety go up against top Division I players.

"I knew he would stack up physically with the guys here. And I knew he would stack up athletically," said Nagy. "What you never know with the small school guys is how they're going to step up against competition, just from a mindset standpoint. ... Some guys are wide-eyed. Some guys, they get down here and it's a little too big for them. They don't have that self-belief. They don't have that self-confidence and it shows and it shows on the practice field."

"With Kyle you saw it the first day, like this was not going to be too big for him at all. He's a confident guy. He came down here ready to compete."

Dugger put on a show in front of Belichick, Nick Caserio and other scouts. Even before the NFL Combine, where Dugger shined, the Patriots had enough information to put him high on their draft board. When they selected him with the 37th overall pick, Belichick and Caserio noted how important it was for them to see Dugger perform well at the Senior Bowl.

The moment wasn't too big then. It's not now.

Dugger is already playing meaningful snaps as a rookie for the Patriots. He's doing this after playing Division II football and having a shortened offseason with no preseason games.

"He never shied away from anything because this is what he wanted," said Cole. "From the day I met Kyle Dugger, we talked about this and trying to achieve it. He was really ready for this moment."

Kyle Dugger's time

DL Davon Godchaux



Davon Godchaux was served well by his Patriots connections

By Karen Guregian
March 24, 2021

To hear Davon Godchaux tell it, he was almost destined to become a Patriot in free agency.

As a defensive lineman for the Dolphins, he was familiar with the scheme having been coached by Brian Flores and Patrick Graham.

But there's so much more to the Godchaux story, other factors that drew him to New England.

One of his mentors throughout the years has been former Patriots' great Vince Wilfork. And, former Patriot Andre Carter, who was an assistant defensive line coach with the Dolphins, has also worked with Godchaux, telling him he'd be a great fit in New England.

"It was a no-brainer for me because of the scheme," Godchaux told reporters via Webex call on Wednesday. "I'm familiar with the scheme with Brian Flores in Miami. I played the same scheme in college, too ... I feel I fit best in the scheme. I've thrived in the scheme. I feel like this scheme best fits my skill set."

Godchaux acknowledged the "standard" was set pretty high by players who have previously played the nose tackle position, namely Wilfork.

"I'm here to write my own legacy," said Godchaux. "Big Vince Wilfork, you can't take for granted what he's done for this program, and what he's done for the NFL in general. He dominated the game at that position. Hopefully God bless me to do the same thing, to dominate this game at that position."

"He's one of the guys I look up to when I talk about striking with your hands, he dominated that."

Godchaux said he's spent time with Wilfork in South Florida, and the former Patriot has given the defensive lineman an open invite. He said Wilfork has been "like a mentor" to him.

Same with Carter, who had two stints with the Patriots. Carter raved about New England being the ideal destination for him.

"Andre told me I would love this place," said Godchaux. "He said it's fit for me, I would love it, and I would thrive in the scheme."

Godchaux understands his role is an unglamorous one that doesn't get a lot of accolades or attention, but he doesn't downplay its significance.

"You guys had Big Vince. He was the masterpiece of that defense for a long time. I think a lot of people don't value that position in football because you don't get the stats, you don't get the accolades, you don't get the numbers the Aaron Donalds get," he said. "But when it comes down to a 3-4 defense, the nose guard, in my opinion, is the most pivotal position because it sets up everything ... in the 3-4 position at nose tackle, you gotta have a dog in the middle, somebody who's going to take up double-teams, somebody who's going to win one-on-one blocks ... somebody you can't deal with. A wrecking force."

Godchaux, who is an LSU product, is one of a half-dozen or so free agents signed on the defensive side of the ball. He hopes to be that wrecking force for the Patriots.

"You bring guys like Jalen Millis, and other guys like (Matt) Judon in the class that we got, it's going to be exciting," said Godchaux. "I think each one of those guys we picked up are hungry. They got something to prove, and I definitely got something to prove."

DL Lawrence Guy



Patriots' Lawrence Guy tackled learning disabilities to thrive in NFL

By Mark Daniels

Posted Dec 10, 2017 at 11:56 AM

FOXBORO — Lawrence Guy, as a child, struggled with words and numbers. He had trouble reading and retaining information. He had trouble keeping up with his peers. To make it worse, he wasn't getting the help he needed.

Guy's early memories of school are full of angst. Growing up in Las Vegas, he was placed in special-education classes in elementary and middle school. The teachers didn't know how to help him there. They thought he was dealing with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), but without the proper testing, no one realized Guy had more hurdles to overcome.

"In middle school, they put you in a self-contained class because they didn't want to deal with it," Guy said. "Like every kid who has a learning disability, it was difficult. If we had the proper testing, we would've taken different measures. It was challenging through elementary and middle school."

At Western High School, Guy turned into a legitimate football recruit. But in order for him to qualify academically, he had to take the same classes as his peers. He struggled but got through it. He still didn't have a name for his disability.

That came a year later, in 2008, when he accepted a scholarship to Arizona State University. Because of the school's willingness to help students with disabilities, Guy picked the Sun Devils over several top-tier football programs. When he enrolled, they gave him the proper testing. For the first time, at age 18, he learned he had dyslexia, which caused him to read letters backwards, and dyscalculia, which caused him to confuse numbers.

"I wouldn't want someone else to have gone what I've gone through," Guy said.

Nine years later, the Patriots defensive lineman is a different person.

Stubborn first step

Growing up, Guy was bullied for being different and in special-education classes. In college, the thought of attending the school's Disability Resource Center gave him that same feeling of embarrassment.

Guy was unwilling to step foot in that building and that first semester was a disaster. In danger of failing and being ruled academically ineligible, his father was called and a meeting was held. Among the people there was Jean Boyd, the associate athletic director for student development.

"Athletes, elite athletes especially, because they gain so much positive feedback from people based on their athleticism, they feel like they're super heroes. He felt like he was Superman," Boyd said. "When you go over to a Disability Resource Center, there's not just people who have learning disabilities, you have folks who are maybe blind or they have physical disabilities and things like that. ... He was fighting it because he didn't necessarily look like other people there."

"Because he was struggling, we had to sit him down and communicate that, whatever goals you have yourself or whatever goals you have for your family, those things are being jeopardized because of your stubbornness or lack of willingness to evolve your thought process about what you were born with."

That meeting was an eye opener for Guy. Afterward, he went to the Disability Resource Center and received the proper help for the first time in his life. ASU paired him with a learning specialist, who communicated with his football coaches.

With the help of specialists, Guy discovered how to learn again. For example, he had trouble retaining information with assigned reading. He found out that he had the option to listen to books on tape, which helped him better retain information.

"Before, you're hesitant [because] of the name of [the center]," Guy said. "You're hesitant of being in there. When they said give it a shot, I said, 'I have nothing else to lose.' ... It was more guidance through the process. I could do everything, but it wouldn't be in the exact order it needed. So, it was, 'Hey, switch this around. Look at what you read.' That helped me out."

New outlook

Guy's transformation at ASU was dramatic. By his sophomore year, he was thriving academically and was enjoying classes for the first time in his life. He took advantage of every tutor offered and was allowed extra time to take his exams.

Before long, Guy was a dual major in education and sociology. After nearly failing, his grade-point average rose to 3.5. He was named a “Scholar Baller” for his efforts. By the time he was an upperclassman, he was an advocate for the Disability Resource Center.

“By the time he got to be an upperclassman, he was sitting with our athletes, even from other sports, who were reluctant to use the services,” Boyd said. “Then he also got involved with the community and would talk to young kids about the importance of education.”

“It was what I struggled with,” Guy added. “I knew if I was able to go to it, why shouldn’t other people go to it also? There shouldn’t be a stigma about, ‘Hey, don’t show up to the building because of the name.’ There’s nothing wrong with the building. ... At the time, I was like, ‘Well I’m going, you might as well join me. Don’t let the resources sit there and waste. You’re not going to get it back.’ ”

His coaches took note. ASU defensive line coach Grady Stretz remembers Guy’s struggles early on. Often in meetings, he’d be goofing off or watching YouTube videos. A couple of years later, Guy was in that room 30 minutes early, studying film.

“Over the months and years at ASU, he really did mature,” Stretz said. “When you evaluate him in high school football, he was a man among boys. Unfortunately, on the flip side of it, when it came to the classroom and academics, due to his disabilities, it was kind of the polar opposite. But as time went by and he got dialed in and dedicated himself, you could really see him grow as a man. He’s one of those guys, you never forget about.”

Lifelong learner

This year marks Guy’s seventh in the NFL. The Patriots are his fifth NFL team. This season, he’s started a career-high 11 games on the defensive line. With four games left, he’s seven tackles away from setting a career-high.

When asked about how well Guy has learned the defense, Bill Belichick was quick to note that the defensive tackle “picks things up well.”

“I think he was really in a good place in the spring,” Belichick said. “He’s really been great. He knows his job, works hard at it, communicates well, understands what the offense is doing, has a good awareness of blocking schemes and tendencies and so forth.”

Now 27, Guy learns differently, but his ADHD, dyslexia, and dyscalculia haven’t affected his ability to pick up the Patriots system. When the Patriots signed him to a four-year, \$20-million contract, he took his lessons from ASU and applied them to learning the fifth playbook of his NFL career. For Guy, it’s about “studying and grouping.”

When tasked with learning 200 plays, he places them in groups. That helped him learn the play’s names and aspects of each call. With each play, he’ll write it down multiple times, which helps him remember. When he’s in a meeting room, Guy acknowledges he’s usually one of the first people to ask a question.

“Football’s easy. Football’s a whole different [story],” Guy said. “Classroom is a lot different. Football is a whole lot of X’s and O’s. That’s repetitive. You’re going out there and moving through the stuff. You’re not moving through anything in the classroom. You’re reading. You’re trying to retain.

“A playbook is easy to me. That’s one of the easiest things. It’s like, ‘How can you pick this up and struggle [otherwise]?’ Well, it’s different. I can learn 200 plays. It’s very simple to do. I’m going to go through it repetitively every single day.”

Guy takes pride in telling his story. He’s no longer embarrassed. He’s no longer afraid to learn.

“The journey hasn’t stopped it,” Guy said. “I’m continuing to learn more and more every day I live. Going through what I went through, I look at it and I’m glad I went through it. It built me into who I am as a person.”

RB Damien Harris



Damien Harris Became A Redshirt For The Patriots, But A Sophomore Year Approaches

By Oliver Thomas

Jan 22, 2020

The April night Damien Harris became a New England Patriot, the position he played became secondary.

"This guy has been a pretty consistently productive player," Patriots director of player personnel Nick Caserio said of the Alabama running back. "So this more, I would say, falls into the 'good football player' category relative to the other options that we were looking at on the board. That's where he kind of fell."

Arizona State wide receiver N'Keal Harry, Vanderbilt cornerback Joejuan Williams and Michigan defensive end Chase Winovich fell ahead of Harris on New England's list of draft cards.

But Harris amassed 3,477 yards and 25 touchdowns from scrimmage for the Crimson Tide. He had been the only back in school history to average 6.4 yards per carry while eclipsing 400 career carries. He'd been in for 56 games and a pair of national championship victories.

And to lead Alabama's ground game as a sophomore, junior and senior.

"I think I'm just a dependable player, somebody that whenever you ask me to do something, I'll do it," Harris told reporters on his introductory conference call. "I think I just show a lot of great attributes on the field, things that help me be a great running back and they can help the team be successful. There's a lot of things that I can do well, there's a lot of things I can still improve on, so I'm just ready to come in and be my best me and get to work Day 1."

It became a difficult position to sort. And not only because the Patriots had called Georgia running back Sony Michel's number in the first round the spring prior to reaching a \$3.631 million rookie pact with Harris.

But because of the "good football player" the war room turned to at a position not running short on them.

Harris went 63 spots after college running mate Josh Jacobs – the Pro Football Writers of America's eventual NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year – went to the Oakland Raiders. And as Jacobs went on to finish his regular season with Oakland's franchise record for rushing yards by a rookie, Harris went on to finish his among New England's inactives.

A hamstring issue left Harris listed on injury report ahead of two games. The second-team All-SEC selection by the conference's coaches appeared in as many.

Harris made his debut on special teams in September and made his debut on offense in October. Both were victories for New England over the New York Jets.

"He does a good job in practice and has continued to work hard in his roles – offensively on second and third down and the kicking game," Belichick said of Harris during a fall press conference. "It was good to see him get a little action against the Jets. We have pretty good depth at that position, so we'll have to see how that goes, but he's done a good job. I'm glad we have him."

James White was missing from the gameday roster for one Jets matchup, and Rex Burkhead was missing from the gameday roster for the other. But the aforementioned Michel and Brandon Bolden remained. The four would tally a combined 1,269 snaps on offense and 605 snaps on special teams by campaign's close. They'd tally 394 carries and 120 catches while accounting for a 2019 cap number of \$11.5 million altogether, according to OverTheCap.com.

In contrast, Harris saw five snaps in the kicking game and five snaps in the backfield.

The depth chart helped dictate the redshirt. Each of its members remains under contract through 2020. The contracts of White, Burkhead and Bolden then expire in the league year of 2021.

"We've been very healthy, and it's kind of hard to carry five backs to the games," Patriots running backs coach Ivan Fears told ESPN's Mike Reiss in December. "We've got some guys that do a lot of work on special teams. ... Damien's done a great job. He really has. Love to see him. I think he's got a great future. I really do. I think he's going to be a real good back in this league."

The trajectory isn't uncommon.

White was taken in the fourth round of the 2014 draft out of Wisconsin, and played in three games during his rookie campaign with the Patriots. Shane Vereen was taken in the second round of the 2011 draft out of California, and played in five during his.

As for Harris, he took one handoff from quarterback Tom Brady in 2019. It gained 13 yards on third-and-14. His next handoffs arrived via fellow rookie Jarrett Stidham. Those netted no gain, then a loss of four yards, then a pickup of three yards on consecutive plays to take the Patriots to the warning track of a 33-0 win.

The rest went on as those of a redshirt do.

THE ATHLETIC

Rookies Damien Harris, JoeJuan Williams looking to their elders to handle first-year blues

By Jeff Howe
Dec 28, 2019

FOXBORO – Patriots running back James White knows exactly what Damien Harris is going through.

At the same time, safety Devin McCourty can't necessarily relate to Joejuan Williams.

But however they've done it, two of the Patriots' most trusted leaders have found ways to guide a pair of rookies who have primarily spent their first season on the sidelines.

"It helps a lot," Harris said of the veteran reinforcement. "Everybody's path is different. Everybody comes from different backgrounds, and everybody road to get onto the field isn't the same. A lot of people have always talked about comparing my situation and James' situation. Seeing how successful he is now and how important he is to the team, seeing it firsthand, it's really encouraging. It's easy to get down on yourself when you're not on the field, not making plays, questioning yourself – why am I not playing, what am I doing wrong?"

As a rookie in 2014, White was a healthy scratch in a team-high 16 of 19 games, including all three in the playoffs. The fourth-round pick had a strong career at Wisconsin's running back factory but watched as a rookie while Jonas Gray, Shane Vereen, Stevan Ridley, LeGarrette Blount, Brandon Bolden and even Julian Edelman and Tom Brady racked up more rushing yards that season.

White leaned on Vereen throughout that process. Vereen was a healthy scratch 12 times as a rookie in 2011, so he also understood what his understudy was experiencing.

Now, White can pay it forward to Harris, a third-round pick who led Alabama in rushing for three consecutive seasons. But after a couple injuries in training camp, Harris has been stuck at the bottom of the depth chart, and he has been inactive 13 times, which is tied for the most on the team. That includes 10 healthy scratches and three due to a hamstring injury from practice, though he likely would have been scratched in those games as well.

"It's definitely not an easy position to be in," White said. "But just don't take the opportunity for granted, work hard on the practice field, in the weight room, watch the film but know it's not easy not seeing yourself out there on the practice field and stuff like that. But just compete in individual drills, and stay locked in at all times because you never know."

Harris was active for the first time in Week 3 against the Jets when White attended the birth of his child. The most frustrating moments for him were likely the three games when Harris was inactive despite an injury to another running back – twice when Rex Burkhead was out with a foot injury and once when Bolden was down with a hamstring ailment.

White didn't dismiss the difficulty of the situation but knows what Harris needs to hear.

"You practice and doing all that stuff, but not going out there on game days is tough week to week when you're not playing," White said. "But you're still in the NFL. You're still on the football team. There are a lot of guys who wish they could just be on a football team, so you can't take the opportunity for granted. And whenever you get the opportunity, you've got to make the most of it."

Harris did have a solid stretch during organized team activities and into the start of training camp before the injuries hit, so the foundation is in place for some optimism when he gets a shot, whether it's this year or next.

In his current situation, Harris said it's been more advantageous to lean on White, just because his advice is backed by experience. It's a challenge to sit and watch, and Harris' five offensive snaps this season are the fewest among anyone who has seen the field. But Harris comprehends the bigger picture.

"It's different," Harris said. "I think I wouldn't be a competitor if I just said, 'Well, I love not playing.' That's just not true. I love being part of this team, and I love trusting in the coaches and my teammates that whatever is best for the team is what's best for us. I love being part of this team no matter what the outcome is. But not playing, coming from (Alabama), starting for three years, leading the team in rushing three consecutive years, then coming here and you're back to square one, it takes a toll on you mentally."

"But the more you sit back and watch these guys, the more you learn from the coaches, the more you trust people and people start to trust you, the more you can mesh and jell with everybody," Harris continued. "Then you start to understand it's what's best for the team. All the coaches who are in position to make those decisions, they have to put the team first – not one guy, not one person's best interest. It's about what is most important for the team. Once you understand that, it makes sense."

Williams has had a slightly bigger role than Harris. He has been a healthy scratch seven times this season, including six of the Patriots' first nine games when there weren't any injuries ahead of him on the depth chart. Williams has played 65 snaps on defense, including a career-high 29 Saturday against the Bills when Jon Jones and Jason McCourty were sidelined with groin injuries, as well as 69 on special teams.

The second-round pick was terrific in training camp and the preseason, and it sounds like that has carried into regular-season practices. He had an interception and seven pass breakups during team drills in training camp, getting his hands on more passes than anyone else.

Quarterbacks were 1 of 8 for 10 yards in the preseason when targeting Williams, who broke up two passes. The Vanderbilt product has been targeted in two games this season, with Sam Darnold and Josh Allen a combined 2 of 5 for 23 yards when throwing his way, and he has one breakup.

The 6-foot-3, 212-pounder has consistently looked the part, but it's been hard to find a role for the rookie when everyone else has played so well.

"It reminds me of my freshman year of college," Williams said. "I didn't play until the end of the season. This level, this is the pinnacle of your sport. No matter what happens, I'm always going to have the mindset of, I want to compete with these guys. I want to be better than these guys. I'm going to make sure I train so I'm better than these guys, but also soak in everything I can because these are some great guys, some great leaders to look up to. I'm very fortunate that I have these guys. Soak in as much as you can and be ready when your number is called."

Devin McCourty is one of the best leaders to ever play for Bill Belichick, and Williams' locker is sandwiched between McCourty and cornerback Stephon Gilmore. He doesn't have to look far for guidance.

But unlike White and Harris, McCourty didn't encounter the same challenges as a rookie in 2010. Far from it, actually, with McCourty earning a Pro Bowl honor during his fantastic first season at cornerback.

There are different ways to lead, though. McCourty preaches the importance of developing a routine, and that's something he learned from former running back Kevin Faulk when he tore his ACL in 2010.

McCourty has also instructed Williams to soak up experiences from the veteran corners around him, whether it's Gilmore, a first-round pick who signed a prized contract in free agency and has been an All-Pro. Or Jason McCourty, a sixth-rounder who has made nearly \$50 million in his career. Or undrafted free agents like Jones and J.C. Jackson.

"I always tell him to use those guys," Devin McCourty said, "because at some point in your career, you'll look around and you'll be that guy, and you'll be able to think of the stories of the things they told you."

There's one aspect McCourty can definitely relate to Williams' experience. He joined a defense that was captained by defensive lineman Vince Wilfork and linebacker Jerod Mayo, and Williams is also surrounded by plenty of star power.

"When you're a young guy, whether you're playing or you're not, I always feel like you're trying to earn the guys' trust around you," McCourty said. "When I played as a rookie, I told (Williams) when I first went out there, I'm looking at Vince, Mayo, all these guys, and I don't want to F up. I don't want to be the reason something goes wrong out here. That's pressure as a rookie that sometimes people don't understand."

Patriots veterans remain optimistic about each rookie's future because they see what the outside world can't during the middle of the week. There's often a rush to label a rookie as a draft bust due to a lack of playing time, but patience is important in many cases.

For instance, Jackson finished strongly last season as a rookie but was again supplanted over the summer by Jason McCourty. Jackson kept a cool head and has been solid in his role this season, particularly in McCourty's absence.

Williams could do something similar next year if McCourty doesn't return for any reason or if someone gets injured. And if Harris can stay healthier next offseason, he could cut into the starters' snaps, as he did for a time over the summer with Sony Michel.

The rookies have also appreciated the honesty in the coaches' communication. They know their roles on a week-by-week basis, and that's eased their burden as they've adapted to life at the bottom of the depth chart.

"I love that in this organization, they do speak up front," Williams said. "I'm coming in to compete. I'm coming in to get better. I'm coming in to be one of the best in the league. That's my goal. When I'm on scout team giving all these guys looks, from Julian (Edelman) to Tom (Brady), I'm going to give them my best look possible. Then when I'm on the defense, I'm making sure to play sound football and to do my job. That's pretty much it. Do your job, and you'll be fine."

Harris felt much the same. This is just the beginning for them.

"I do still think things are going well now, first and most importantly for the team, but for myself as well," Harris said. "I think I go out there and do a good job of trying to compete every day, trying to get better every day, trying to make the most of every rep I get. Regardless of that, mentally, I know I can play at a high level. I know I'm here for a reason."

THE ATHLETIC

As he transitions to pro ball, Damien Harris' Alabama glory days — and his helmet — are never far away

By Jeff Howe

Nov 6, 2019

Damien Harris only needs to look as far as his locker to see where he's been.

Inside his stall at Gillette Stadium, the Patriots rookie running back has his old Alabama helmet sitting prominently as a reminder of the glory days on campus. It's also a symbol, reassuring him he can get through any challenges in his transition to pro ball.

The crimson helmet with the white No. 34 hangs on a hook in the back amid the rest of his Patriots gear, the current equipment parted to the side to keep the old helmet in full view.

"It's kind of just a reminder every day to be thankful of where I came from," Harris said. "Sometimes, it's not about where you're going. It's how you get there. That was a big part of my life, so I like to keep it with me."

After the last game of Harris's college career – his fourth consecutive appearance in the national championship game – coach Nick Saban gave each graduating senior and draft-eligible junior a care package stuffed with gear to carry their Alabama pride into the NFL.

Harris, who led Alabama in rushing in each of his last three seasons, received his helmet and jerseys from the national championship and the 2018 Sugar Bowl, when he rushed for 77 yards in a victory against Clemson.

"Cool stuff that I can put up and pull it out in 10-15 years and think about all the good times that I had while I played there," Harris said. "College was just a special time for me. I was real appreciative of the four years I spent there – my coaches, my teammates, the fans, everyone who played a part in me ending up where I am now."

"I felt like I had a special relationship with the university, and it was more than just football. I was really close with the administration throughout the university, professors, the fans, students on campus. I tried to be really involved with anybody that I came into contact with, anybody I had the opportunity to speak with or run into on campus, walking across to class. I just tried to leave my mark on everything I did."

"I wanted to be a captain. I wanted to leave my footprint. I always wanted to be close to the administration. Those are the types of people that, if you need something, if you're kind to them, if you show them respect, they'll help you out no matter what you need. It's a place you can always go back, and they'll welcome you with open arms. I tried to leave my mark on that university, and hopefully I did."

Harris, who was viewed as a second-round prospect, surprisingly fell to the third round of the draft. Director of player personnel Nick Caserio said the Patriots weren't necessarily drafting Harris for need as much as they had to pounce on the value of the player at that juncture of the draft.

Harris got off to a strong start for the Patriots in organized team activities and training camp, to the point where it looked like he might even challenge Sony Michel for carries. However, a couple of injuries in camp and the preseason derailed his progress, and he hasn't been able to dig out of the hole with seven healthy scratches in nine games.

It doesn't help that the running back depth chart is loaded with trusted veterans like James White, Rex Burkhead and special teams ace Brandon Bolden alongside Michel, the team's reigning rushing leader who dominated on the way to Super Bowl LIII.

For some additional perspective, the Patriots essentially redshirted Shane Vereen and James White during their rookie seasons before each blossomed.

Harris endured similar circumstances as a freshman when the Crimson Tide also had running backs Derrick Henry and Kenyan Drake, and he competed for carries with Josh Jacobs and Bo Scarbrough in other years. That, along with Saban's hard coaching, should help Harris overcome this hurdle.

"It wasn't an easy process by any means," Harris said of his time at Alabama. "Going through that program was really tough, really challenging, but it also prepared me for the challenges that are going on here. It just reminds me of so many different things. It's really special to me. I like to keep it everywhere I go."

"Coach Saban, first and foremost, was very tough. He had our best interests at heart, but he didn't make it easy for us. In order to play, you had to earn your way to that point. Practice was hard. Games were supposed to be easier because of how hard we prepared and how hard we trained. Things like that, the mental grind of it, the physical grind,

there were a lot of different things. But all the players who come through there and make it to the next level, it's because of what we did while we were at Alabama."

The helmet can mean so much to Harris at any given moment – home, pride, the fun, the challenges and the lessons learned.

As for those lessons in Tuscaloosa, he was asked which one was most beneficial for his time in New England.

"Just developing the mentality that every single day, I'm going to go into work with the mindset that I'm going to get better," Harris said. "I felt like when I was in college there were times when I was worried about all the wrong things – why am I not doing this right, why is this happening? I feel like once I finally realized that nothing is going to get better until I just go in with the mindset that every day is a new day – there are going to be new challenges, new adversity. And I just have to take each day as a new opportunity to get better."

And of course, there's that Roll Tide pride.

Harris, a two-time national champion, has known Dont'a Hightower since he arrived at school. The Pats linebacker attended Alabama from 2008 to 2011 and regularly returns to campus, so the pair crossed paths a number of times before they became teammates.

"That's my guy," Harris said. "Obviously one of the all-time greats to ever play there. He kind of started that dynasty. I remember when I got drafted here, he texted me and was talking about how excited he was. We were able to carry that relationship, and it's just gotten stronger."

Second-ranked Alabama is again in the hunt for a national championship, winning each of its first eight games by at least three touchdowns and gearing up for Saturday's rivalry game at home against No. 1 LSU. The Crimson Tide have already taken down Stephon Gilmore's South Carolina Gamecocks, Bolden's Ole Miss Rebels, Jakob Johnson's Tennessee Volunteers and Deatrich Wise's Arkansas Razorbacks. It's a safe bet Harris has also reminded Michel and David Andrews of Georgia's loss to South Carolina.

There's been a bit of disappointment Harris and Hightower don't have any teammates from LSU to jab at before the game. They'll just have to let out that pent-up frustration on Auburn's Jarrett Stidham and Jon Jones before the Iron Bowl.

"We don't have anybody here from LSU, so I don't really have anybody to talk smack to this week," Harris said. "I talk to Sony, David Andrews all the time. Me and Deatrich talk all the time about how bad Arkansas is. It's a friendly rivalry. It'll probably get more competitive once we start playing teams, when we play Georgia (potentially in the SEC title game). I know we played Tennessee. I gave Jak a little bit of trouble. Those bigger games, SEC Championship Games, games that really matter, I'm sure the rivalry will be a little more intense."

Kevin Faulk, at least, comes around often enough.

"We talked a little when he was here in training camp," Harris said of Faulk, the ex-Pats rusher and—— LSU legend who now works as the Tigers' director of player development. "He talks about how the days were when he was there. I'm like, 'Well, how about right now?' It's cool."

Harris might have to display that helmet more prominently when his school's stakes become even greater. But for now, the subtle self-reminder is all he needs.

WR N'Keal Harry

THE ATHLETIC

N'Keal Harry has new trainer aiming to better prepare him for rigors of NFL

By Jeff Howe

May 7, 2020

Former first-round draft pick N'Keal Harry has adjusted his workout routine this offseason with the goal of meeting the high expectations that come with that draft status.

The Patriots wide receiver dealt with a pair of injuries last summer in training camp that derailed his rookie season, and he is hoping the emphasis on his new workouts will remove undue stress on his lower body. Harry began training last week in Houston with Justin Allen, the younger brother of former Patriots tight end Dwayne Allen.

"Everybody knows he has a God-given body," Justin Allen said. "He's a physical freak, and he is a hard worker, very competitive. We've been working on fundamentals. I've been taking him back to what you were doing when you were first playing the sport as a kid — just those little details, basic fundamentals of getting in and out of your breaks, staying low, eliminating steps in and out of breaks, loosening up his hips, teaching him how to use his hips, be more fluid and move faster than he does. We're trying to get him to play a little bit faster so he can give a little different look next year."

Physically, the 6-foot-4, 225-pound Harry looked the part last offseason. He distinguished himself among the Patriots' receivers with his size and power, making an acrobatic catch or two nearly every practice, although his chemistry was spotty with quarterback Tom Brady.

Harry suffered an ankle sprain and another leg-related injury in Detroit that wiped away the remainder of his training camp and preseason, and the Patriots placed him on injured reserve for the first half of the regular season. The injuries weren't serious, but the Patriots weren't prepared to waste a roster spot for several weeks until he returned, recognizing the steep learning curve that was also in play.

By missing two and a half months of practice at a crucial stage of his development, Harry fell way behind and managed only 12 receptions for 105 yards and two touchdowns and five carries for 49 yards in seven games. He added two catches for 21 yards and a 7-yard run in the playoff loss to the Titans.

Allen, who owns Nike-sponsored All-En Sports Performance, said Harry is healthy and they're working to prevent those types of nagging injuries from reoccurring.

"Just teaching him how to control his body a little bit better, understanding his foot placement, where his foot should be," Allen said. "A lot of people step outside their frame, not understanding the foot comes through the hip. So if the foot comes outside of your frame, your hip is driving the leg down to generate that force and that power. It's going to cause you to reach and have you be a step slower than you should be. Just working on the little things with him, working on his steps, staying within his body frame."

Harry and Allen met in 2017. Allen, who previously played for New Mexico State, attended his alma mater's season opener at Arizona State. Harry caught his eye with six receptions for 69 yards, so Allen introduced himself after the Sun Devils' victory.

They remained in touch over the years and crossed paths again in 2019 at the combine in Indianapolis. Harry finally had enough free time this offseason due to the coronavirus restrictions on team workouts, so he set up a program with Allen, whose other notable clients include 2019 wide receiver draft picks Mecole Hardman and Deebo Samuel.

Harry flew to Houston last week, returned home to Arizona over the weekend and got back with Allen again this week. He arrives at 7 a.m. for a workout in the weight room before a late-morning break and hits the practice field in the early afternoon.

Harry plans to continue working out with Allen throughout the offseason, or at least until the Patriots can officially return to work at Gillette Stadium.

"He's a fast learner," Allen said. "You can see the corrections happening within his workouts. It takes repetition. The more we repped, the better he got. He is definitely learning fast."

DB J.C. Jackson

The Boston Globe

Undrafted rookie cornerback J.C. Jackson has been a real find for Patriots

By Nora Princiotti

JANUARY 19, 2019

FOXBOROUGH — It was May, and Stephon Gilmore was keeping an eye out for one of his new teammates at OTAs. He was helping out his agency, which was also representing a cornerback named J.C. Jackson, an undrafted rookie who'd just signed with the Patriots.

Gilmore was happy to play big brother, but he knew there were no guarantees Jackson would be his teammate for long. Everyone in football knows what undrafted free agent means. He took the praise he heard of Jackson with a grain of salt, until he saw him play.

"I'm like, 'Sheesh. How did this dude go undrafted?' " Gilmore said.

The answer to that question is simple: April 18, 2015.

That evening, Jackson and two companions entered the apartment of a marijuana dealer in Gainesville, Fla. According to the Gainesville Police Department, Jackson left quickly. After he did, one of the two remaining visitors pulled out a handgun and robbed the place, leaving with \$382, some drugs, and two video game consoles. All three were arrested and, though he was not part of the burglary itself, Jackson was charged with four first-degree felonies. Life in prison was on the table.

A jury found him not guilty of all charges that November, but Jackson's reputation had been tarnished. Before the arrest, Jackson was a freshman at the University of Florida who had been highly recruited, and penciled in to start the following season. After it, he got kicked off the team and set off on a path unrecognizable from the one he'd imagined for himself, but one that's wound its way to the destination he always hoped for.

"I just believed," Jackson said. "I have to get to the NFL."

Talent stood out

Football was Jackson's way out of Immokalee, Fla. A handful of current and former NFL players, most notably running back Edgerrin James, once called the South Florida town home, so making the league felt attainable. Jackson's father, Chris, had his son running sprints on sand when J.C. was 5 years old, the beach sculpting calves capable of propelling his frame high in the air.

Jackson was a four-year starter on both sides of the ball at Immokalee High School. Those teams were loaded with Division 1 talent, but Jackson stood out, collecting more than 1,000 all-purpose yards, 15 touchdowns, 53 tackles, 2 interceptions, and 1 forced fumble as a senior.

Immokalee won the district championship that year but for Rich Dombroski, then Jackson's coach, it's a play from a Monday practice that stands out, a play when Jackson ran into trouble and still found a way to get where he was going.

"We had him beat on a hitch and go," Dombroski said. "He bit up on the hitch and our receiver blew by him. Well, J.C. stopped on a dime, caught up to the kid, and knocked the ball out of the air. It was one of those things where we looked around as coaches and were like, 'Did we just see what we saw?'"

Recruiters saw plenty from Jackson — fluid hips, long arms, a short memory, and ridiculous ball skills — to want him to play cornerback in college, even though he'd played more receiver to that point.

He was a four-star recruit and 247Sports' No. 136 overall prospect in the class of 2014. The Sunshine State's holy football trinity — Florida, Miami, and Florida State — all offered scholarships, and they weren't alone. One afternoon, Jackson opened his front door and found a line of cars waiting outside, college coaches sitting in each.

"It got crazy," Jackson said.

Jackson is exceptionally confident, but he's also a people pleaser. This made choosing a college difficult, because he couldn't please everyone. He'd ask Dombroski where he should go almost daily, until the coach sat him down in the weight room one day and said he needed to choose for himself.

He chose Florida, which was also the favorite of his mother, Lisa Dasher. He'd grown close with then-Gators coach Will Muschamp and got to Gainesville feeling like things were falling into place. On a team with seven other defensive backs currently in the NFL, including Patriots second-round pick Duke Dawson, Jackson was expected to play as a true freshman.

Then he hurt his shoulder in the first game of the season and needed surgery. Muschamp got fired. Jackson, 19 at the time, lost his mentors and gained too much free time. He didn't use it wisely.

"That's when everything went sideways," Jackson said.

Change of plans

For the first time, Jackson questioned himself and his plans. It was the only time in his life he ever considered quitting football. He might have, had the thought of letting his family down not stopped him.

His father played a year of college football, then left school, and he'd pushed his son hard so that the ending of J.C.'s story would be different from his.

And both his parents had supported him through his trial. They'd given up their home to keep up with legal fees.

Jackson didn't quit. He enrolled at Riverside City College in California. He'd played all of one college football game and had gone from sought-after recruit to sleeping on his friend's couch, playing junior college football, hoping another D1 opportunity would find him. He went to class and got good grades, but Jackson was sad, bored, and lonely.

"That was the last thing on my mind was to go away to Cali and go to JUCO," Jackson said, still incredulous. "When I was just at the University of Florida? It was hard. But I made that decision so I had to pay for it."

Where he saw a fall from grace, those back home saw Jackson putting up a fight.

"A lot of kids from Immokalee, if something happens, they end up coming home," said Dombroski. "And now you're working in the fields. I didn't want to see J.C. waste his talent."

The talent was still there, as was the network of college coaches keeping tabs on whether they could use it. D.J. Durkin, then the head coach at Maryland, had been the defensive coordinator at Florida during Jackson's time there. He sent his defensive backs coach, Aazaar Abdul-Rahim, to Riverside to meet Jackson. Abdul-Rahim had coached now-Lions cornerback Jalen Tabor, Jackson's roommate at Florida, in high school, and Tabor vouched for Jackson.

"They're kids. You're talking about 18- or 19-year-old kids," Abdul-Rahim said. "They're going to make mistakes, you know? And the reality of college football and the reality of student-athletes is that their mistakes are shown to millions."

Abdul-Rahim wound up bringing Jackson to College Park in August 2016. Jackson picked off three passes in his first practice.

Jackson started every game in 2016 and 2017 for the Terrapins. He made 80 tackles, intercepted four passes, and defended 13. He was close with his coaches and never got in trouble at Maryland. When he declared for the 2018 NFL Draft, he'd heard himself graded as high as the second round. He expected to hear his name called at some point.

It wasn't. Teams had character concerns. The Rams, Broncos, and two other teams had called Dombroski about Jackson before the draft, asking if he could be trusted to stay out of trouble. Dombroski swore up and down that he could, but they still stayed away. Jackson watched the draft at home, nerves giving way to sadness and anger with every round gone by.

Landing with the Patriots was a small consolation because Jackson knew the team's history of playing undrafted rookies. When he got to Foxborough, though, it became clear quickly that he wasn't a typical undrafted rookie. By training camp, he was getting time with the first-team defense, and it wasn't just Gilmore wondering how he'd fallen.

"I remember like a day or two into training camp, I went up to him and was like, 'How did you not get drafted?' " said veteran cornerback Jason McCourty.

Seizing opportunity

By the numbers, Jackson has been one of the best cornerbacks in the NFL this season. He's played in 13 games and has been starting since Week 13. According to Pro Football Focus, opposing quarterbacks have a 42.0 passer rating when targeting Jackson, the lowest for any corner in the NFL with more than 25 snaps in coverage. Jackson has yet to allow a touchdown, and he's intercepted three passes and broken up three more.

Yet as well as he's played, his draft status follows him like a shadow. Opposing quarterbacks keep throwing his way, long after he's shown that his is not a favorable matchup for their offenses. When the Patriots played the Steelers in Week 15, Jackson locked down JuJu Smith-Schuster all game long, but Ben Roethlisberger still targeted him deep on a critical third down near the end of the game. Jackson broke up the pass.

He'd given up just one catch to Smith-Schuster at that point. He was in tight coverage. Would Roethlisberger have thrown that pass if he hadn't looked at Jackson and thought "undrafted rookie"?

Meanwhile, Jackson looks at those matchups and sees battles he's supposed to win.

"He's fearless," said Abdul-Rahim. "He doesn't look at who he's going against, he looks at the opportunity to be a great player. I think that helped him with the Patriots. He walks in there and he's out there, he sees Tom Brady. You see so many people, so many wide receivers that have had storied careers that you have to shut down, but he has an important trait as a corner, and that's a short memory. He exudes confidence."

"I think now, every time I walk on the field I think, I'm here," Jackson said. "I think, I've been through so much and now I've got a chance to do big things."

Some of that confidence is God-given, but much of it is the swagger of a four-star recruit stepping out his door and finding a caravan of coaches waiting to court him. Jackson has been a great player for a long time. He expects success.

"He's not Malcolm Butler. He was an Under Armour All-American," said Abdul-Rahim. "But the whole deal isn't where you start, it's where you finish."

Football teams are big organizations. They need labels and hierarchies to make sense of it all. But when those labels mislead, they can be hard to shed. Consider all the times Jackson has been compared to Butler, the most famous success story for an undrafted Patriots corner, despite the fact that going undrafted is about all the major recruit and West Alabama product have in common.

Jackson wants a long career so he can support his family, which includes a young son. He doesn't have hobbies outside of football, or a Plan B if it doesn't work out. But it will work out, because he'll make it that way, because he's always made it that way. When he does, he won't be surprised, even if everyone else is. The surprising part, to him, is the winding path he took to get here, but where Jackson is now is where he always planned to be.

QB Mac Jones

The Athletic

Has Mac Jones always been this selfless? Let's travel back to his Pop Warner days

By Steve Buckley
September 16, 2021

For a guy who has quickly learned the fine art of ladling out carefully chosen words when speaking with the media, Patriots quarterback Mac Jones opened a window into himself late Wednesday afternoon.

Jones was participating in one of those standard-issue, middle-of-the-week pressers as part of the run-up to the next game on the schedule, which happens to be Patriots versus Jets, Sunday at 1 p.m. at MetLife Stadium. At some point during the session, amid all the questions about the Jets defense and moving on from Sunday's season-opening loss to the Dolphins, he was asked to comment on his "selflessness," a trait various members of the Patriots have been attributing to the rookie quarterback.

"I wasn't necessarily that way when I was really young," Jones said. "I can honestly say that sometimes it was more about me than other people, and that's not how it should be."

How young are we talking here?

"I was probably like six or something," he said.

Chances are that lots of NFL players have referenced their pee wee football days to make a point. It's just that I can't remember the last time it happened. So naturally, then, a query was sent to the world of Jacksonville Pop Warner Football to learn more about Mac Jones' youthful days as a self-described more-about-me-than-other-people kind of kid.

Guess what? Jones wasn't kidding when he said his early struggles with the team-first thing began when he was "probably like six or something."

It was more "something" than "like six," actually. He was seven, according to Eric Yost, a former coach with Greater Jacksonville Pop Warner Football who coached Jones during his age 7, 9, and 11-12-13 seasons.

Yost, in fact, was watching the press conference on Facebook when Jones made those comments.

"But what he's saying, it's not just him, it's a lot of kids that age," said Yost, whose son Mason was teammates with Jones all through their childhoods.

"But I'm going to give you a little secret sauce about Mac," he said. "Ask him to talk about wearing the white socks."

Yost was asked if he wouldn't mind talking about the white socks.

Turns out there's a tradition at The Bolles School, where many of the Greater Jacksonville Pop Warner Football kids aspire to play one day: Everyone on the team wears white socks and white cleats. This Bolles School tradition has filtered down to Pop Warner, with the kids wearing white socks and white cleats. The older kids, anyway. The younger players just wear the white socks because, according to Yost, white cleats are not available in little-kid sizes.

"We always had the rule that nobody is bigger than the program," said Yost. "And Mac, at age seven, was a kid who fought it. He was saying he wanted to wear wrist bands on his socks, I want to wear multicolor, I want to stand out, and all that. And we said, no, white socks only or you're not going to play."

"And he wasn't the only one. Others tried as well. It wasn't an issue. It was just kids learning, kids testing you."

Yost believes that's what Jones had in mind during Wednesday's press conference when he made those cryptic comments about how "sometimes it was more about me than other people," and that he was "probably like six or something" during this rebellious streak.

"But we need to talk about when he was age 10, when he played for the city championship and they lost it," Yost said. "There was a lot of booing and crying and all that stuff."

But, Yost said, "Mac's attitude entering his age 11 season was, 'OK, we gotta focus to win the city championship.' For Mac, losing it the year before, he became the guy to everybody. It was all let's do this, let's practice that way, those kind of things."

"He's always been a team guy and everyone loved him, everyone loved being around him. But as far as the selfishness, where, you know, I want to stick out more than the other guys by wearing different things, that was age seven."

Yost has followed Jones' career from The Bolles School right through college, including his Alabama years. He'll tell you Jones had already matured significantly as his Alabama career was winding down, but he sees an older, wiser Mac Jones now that he's an NFL quarterback — even if he's only 23.

"It's so funny, I listen to him now that he's with the Patriots," he said. "His voice and his tempo have changed since he was with Alabama last year. He's a lot more reserved, which is fine. He's in the NFL now."

Which is a long, long way from Pop Warner football in Jacksonville.

The Boston Globe

Patriots rookie Mac Jones wrote a letter to himself in the fifth grade. In it, he predicted his future

By Nicole Yang
August 2, 2021

When Patriots rookie Mac Jones was a fifth-grader at the Bolles School, he wrote a letter to his future self as part of a school assignment. His teacher, Dawn Collins, looked forward to this activity every year. She instructed students to try to capture both their thoughts at the moment and their hopes for the future. The completed notes would then be sealed until the spring of their senior year of high school.

"Dear Mac," a 12-year-old Jones penned in neat cursive, "This is me in fifth grade on the last day of school."

Jones's letter, dated May 28, 2010, began with his optimism about his girlfriend and closed with his potential plans on whom he hoped to bring to prom. (His girlfriend was merely one of three options he listed.)

"I'm very funny," Jones wrote. "Mrs. Collins says I'm quite the ladies' man."

While the commentary on his love life may have provided a few chuckles, other lines from Jones's letter now seem quite prescient.

"I just won an award for most likely to become the best all-around athlete in the class of 2017," Jones wrote, triple-underlining "best all-around athlete."

"Mrs. Collins said by now I will have a full athletic scholarship," he continued. "I probably will play QB, just like now."

Read the letter Mac Jones wrote to himself in the fifth grade.

Seven years later, when it was time to open the letters, Jones already had left Bolles early to attend the University of Alabama for spring football.

"He's almost like a prophet, if you will," quipped Tom Collins, head coach of the Bolles middle school football team and Dawn's husband.

Although Jones wasn't able to open his letter among his peers ahead of high school graduation, Dawn reached out to Jones's mother, Holly, to ensure he would still receive the letter and enjoy the experience of re-reading his youthful musings.

"It was such a precious letter, beautiful little cursive," said Dawn. "He predicted his future. He did."

Living the dream

The fifth-grade letter wasn't the first time Jones had documented his football dreams in a school assignment. When he was in second grade, Jones imagined even loftier aspirations: to make it in the NFL.

"When I grow up I want to be a football [player]," a 7-year-old Jones wrote on a worksheet dated Nov. 3, 2005. "I [might] be in the NFL. I do not [know what] team I will be on."

Even as a seven-year-old, Mac Jones thought he'd make it to the NFL.

That year, Jones started playing quarterback for a Pop Warner team in the Mandarin Athletic Association, a league in his hometown of Jacksonville, Fla. His talent was evident from the get-go.

"He could throw it," said Eric Yost, who coached Jones for seven years in Pop Warner. "At a young age, he could throw it."

Added teammate Matt Johnson, who played with Jones both in Pop Warner and high school: "Most Pop Warner teams really couldn't throw the ball downfield well. There weren't many quarterbacks we played against who could throw it as far and as hard and as accurately as Mac could. That always made teams game plan for us differently."

Jones was always an active kid, one that loved recess and juggled multiple sports, from football to soccer to baseball. Athleticism ran in the family, as his father, Gordon, played college tennis and later competed in a men's singles qualifying match at Wimbledon in 1978. His brother, Will, played Division 1 soccer at Mercer University, while his sister, Sarah Jane, played Division 1 tennis at College of Charleston.

Mac's sport, however, was clearly football.

"I've seen him throw a baseball from center field to home plate with no accuracy," Yost said. "Like, he airmailed it home. He had the arm strength to get it home, but it was like 6 feet over the catcher's head. I'm like, 'How can this kid throw a football so dang good and so accurately?'"

"Mac was that kind of kid. It was natural. He picked up the football and he could throw it."

It didn't take long for Jones to take football seriously. When he was 9, he started booking personal training sessions with Darin Slack of the Quarterback Academy. Two years later, he started working with DeBartolo Sports University's Joe Dickinson, now a quarterback consultant for the Buffalo Bills.

"Mac was always very coordinated and very athletic early on," said Slack, who still works with Jones. "The skills and mechanics, they can always tend to be a little rough as you can imagine, being a young boy. We don't really start to see anything forming up until 12 or 13 years old."

"But he really came on quick. He always had a very coachable heart. That was the one thing that set Mac apart, that he was always very teachable."

Even at the youth level, Jones began to develop important habits, showing up to practice early, studying the playbook, and breaking down film with Yost at age 10.

More than anything, his coaches and teammates say, Jones had begun to assert himself as a competitor, so much so that his emotions would occasionally get the best of him.

"It's like John McEnroe," Yost said. "McEnroe pouted and threw little fits, like those things. That's all part of maturing. He's a competitor. Highly competitive people, when things aren't going their way, they're really not happy. They hate losing."

In time, Jones channeled that competitiveness into more subtle displays.

"He always had a knack for getting under the skin of opponents," said Johnson. "He did it in kind of clever ways, with a little laugh or a smile. Maybe a defensive lineman would almost get him, and Mac would slap him on the butt as he went by, just to get in his head a little bit."

Student of the game

Jones finished his Pop Warner tenure with only eight losses in nine years, according to Yost. That was just the beginning of a fruitful football career.

He would go on to post impressive numbers at Bolles after being named the starting quarterback as an upperclassman. His junior year, he threw for 2,150 yards and 26 touchdowns. As a senior, he led Bolles to the Florida 4A state championship game and finished the season with 1,532 yards and 29 TDs.

Jones, a four-star recruit, originally planned to play college football at Kentucky, before reneging on his commitment in order to attend Alabama. After redshirting his freshman year, biding his time behind Jalen Hurts and Tua Tagovailoa, Jones was named Alabama's starting quarterback for the 2020 season. He finished the year with 4,500 passing yards and 41 touchdowns en route to the national championship.

As his game developed, what facilitated Jones's success? Yost immediately pointed to his head.

"The brain," Yost said. "He learned. He's a learner. There's no secret. He's not like the fittest, slimmest, trimmest, most muscular guy. But he's worked hard. He's learned the game. He understands what mistakes not to make a second time."

Added Slack: "Mac has the ability to process very quickly and very intelligently to make good decisions. He doesn't have a tendency to fixate. He can come off receivers and make good decisions. He doesn't feel the need to drive the ball into multiple-defender situations. Throwing into triple coverage isn't his thing. He'll check down and hit the proper guy. He has very disciplined decision-making, which allows him to go to the right guy at the right time."

With Slack, Jones continued to refine his mechanics. The pair honed in on basic elements, such as developing a sound base so he can generate more power on his throws, and perfecting his arm path and footwork.

"Mac was always very particular about what he wanted to see," Slack said. "If there was something that was a little off, he would give me a call, he would reach out and say, 'Hey, I'm just not feeling this,' or 'I'm not sure if this is right. Can you help me here?'"

"These were things that, probably to the average observer, they wouldn't think they're that big of a deal. That just shows you the heart of Mac. He's always concerned about making sure that he's getting the most out of his mechanics."

Waiting his turn

As Jones prepares for the next step in his career — competing for the Patriots' starting quarterback job — the parallels in each step of his football journey are difficult to ignore.

At Alabama, Jones played for Nick Saban, widely considered the greatest college football coach in history, with a record seven national championships.

At Bolles, Jones played for the late Corky Rogers, the winningest high school football coach in Florida with 465 victories and 10 state championships. Rogers, who died at 76 in February 2020, was known as a disciplinarian.

In New England, Jones will play for coach Bill Belichick, who requires no introduction to Patriots fans.

"Mac's never had that guy that's the warm and fuzzy, soft, hands-off coach," Yost said. "He's always had guys that have really challenged him. He's always risen to the occasion."

With the Patriots, Jones will also be presented with a situation he's encountered twice before: potentially having to wait his turn. Even before he left for Alabama, some wondered whether he was making the right decision because they all assumed he would earn little playing time.

"I'll be honest," Slack said. "When he went to Alabama, I had questions. I wasn't sure. I was like, 'Mac, is this the best option because you're not going to play right away?' I think he had it in his heart that he knew he could play at that level."

Added Yost: "Everybody wants to play now. We all do. But he's OK taking the time to learn. When he got his opportunity, we've seen what he can do."

More than a decade has passed since Jones wrote that letter, when he fantasized about his future.

Even as he's accomplished far more than what he had written, Jones hasn't forgotten. The night of the NFL Draft, amid the festivities in Cleveland as a first-round pick, he remembered to reach out to Mrs. Collins.

"He's the kind of kid that you don't forget, but the kind of kid that doesn't forget you, either," she said.

LB Matthew Judon

The Providence Journal

Pats' Matt Judon made an impact long before the NFL working with people with disabilities

By Mark Daniels

FOXBORO – Matt Judon stood on the outside of the dance floor underneath a tent with several other college teammates. As the music played and people danced, Judon easily stuck out thanks to his 6-foot-3, 255-pound frame.

This was the first night at Camp Sunshine, where volunteer counselors provide a special experience for people aged 12-to-50 with mild to moderate cognitive impairments. A dance is put on to break the ice and back in 2014, people had no idea Judon would turn into an NFL Pro Bowl pass rusher. It was here on the shores of Lake Michigan where Judon was about to make one of the biggest impacts of his life.

He just didn't know it yet.

"You know they're 21-22-year old and standing on the edge of the tent like, 'what the heck did I just get into,'" said Doug Ammeraal, the camp's former recruiter. "But by the end of that, they're leading the Congo line and they're in the middle of everything... Matt truly set an example for so many people that were around. He was so much bigger than everybody. A big personality. A big spirit. This big heart."

Camp Sunshine creates a unique experience where a camper works with one counselor for their entire stay at Camp Blodgett, located in West Olive, Michigan. Ammeraal's job was to find volunteers for the four-day, three-night experience. With Grand Valley State sitting about 25 minutes from the camp, the recruiter met with the football team that year. He explained the impact they could have on someone's life.

All it took was stepping out of your comfort zone.

"They were like it'll just be one on one pairing up with the camper and it gets pretty intimate. It gets spiritual," Judon said. "And then you kind of get close with your camper. And that it's a wide range of disabilities that they have, but every single one of them loves coming to Camp Sunshine. I'm just sitting there and I'm a big like, 'why not guy.'"

Seven years ago, Matt Judon stepped up to help others. In return, the experience shaped his life.

Here's how Matt Judon made an impact at Camp Sunshine

Matt Judon was on the cusp of greatness. People just didn't know it yet. Coming off a season-ending knee injury, he was about to take the Division-II football world by storm. But before he became a record-setting All-American, Judon showed a different side of himself at Camp Sunshine.

When the activities started, camp employees were overjoyed with Judon's help. He immersed himself in the life of his camper. He stood arm-and-arm singing songs. He was patient and compassionate. The memory makes Cindy Terlouw, who was the Executive Director of Camp Sunshine for 22 years, choke up thinking back on it.

"He was so humble... The program has one camper, one counselor. So Matt Judon had his own camper and Matt would sleep on the top bunk and then a camper would sleep on the lower bunk and 24/7 they were together," Terlouw said. "They ate together. They did arts and crafts together, did their sports, did their spiritual stories, did everything together, all their free time and so on. This is a partnership. This is a buddy."

Judon needed to put two beds together since he wasn't fitting on a twin mattress, but he made it work. By the end, he was on stage dancing during his camper's talent show. He became so enamored by the experience, he volunteered his time again the next summer in 2015.

"You just kind of fall in love with camp and the idea of you giving your undivided attention to a person with needs," Judon explained. "You know a lot of people with disabilities, and my two campers, they actually helped me learn lessons and helped me out as much as I was helping them."

Following a standout season at Grand Valley, when Judon returned the next summer, people naturally followed in his lead.

"I know he impacted the campers that he worked with because he has such a gentle spirit to him," Ammeraal said. "And I know that he impacted the lives of so many of our counselors who were young men who watched him. Who said I don't have to have a certain persona to play football to come out here to serve and impact the life of someone else. And I can let that guard down because look at Matt Judon do it."

Why Matt Judon has a different perspective on disabilities

The word disability comes with a stigma in our society. Matt Judon knows about that all too well. Born in Baton Rouge, Matt Judon grew up in Michigan. At one point in his youth, he remembers going to a new Elementary School where his teachers thought he had a disability. As a boy, he spoke slower with a drawl.

His speech made teachers question his learning ability and he had to take tests to prove otherwise.

"I got a couple family members (with disabilities) and my drawl - I talk slow so my teachers thought I was slow, but I just talk slow," Judon said. "So they had me take tests and like take IQ tests and all that stuff. But you know, I did well. I just talked slow. I'm just not in any rush to get my words out."

Between his own personal experience and his two stints as a counselor with Camp Sunshine, Judon had a different perspective on people with cognitive impairments. That stuck out to his coach at Grand Valley State, Matt Mitchell.

Back in Allendale Charter Township, Michigan, Judon left a huge impression. There was the way he worked himself back from a season-ending torn ACL in 2014. During his 2015 senior season, he led all college football with 20 sacks. Judon went from Division-2 player to Pro Bowl NFL pass rusher.

You don't forget about players like this.

Another moment Mitchell will never forget is when one of his Grand Valley players used a derogatory 'r-word' inside the building. That set Judon off. He stood up and passionately explained why that word should never be used.

"He was really vocal about that. He stood up and really made a huge point about that, and I'll never forget that moment either," Mitchell said. "He did a lot of community service projects. The dude is full of life and full of energy. He's not afraid to speak his opinion. He has a lot of self-confidence. He was the main guy that got a bunch of our players over there every summer to spend a week with developmentally disabled, adults and kids."

Here's how Camp Sunshine made an impact on Matt Judon

Doug Ammeraal was in the car with Matt Judon and his teammate Matt Mosley when he started talking about what they did at Camp Sunshine. They provided an unforgettable experience to a person who had been through a lot. Moments like that are priceless.

"I said, 'You guys will probably never fully understand the impact that you're having on Camp Sunshine and they said 'no, we do, and that's why we come back and that's why we give,'" Ammeraal said. "For me, that speaks to the heart of Matt. We can watch him go and get after Tom Brady and get sacks, but that's how I know Matt.

"He was a godsend in terms of who he was as a person and the impact he had on our camp."

Judon learned a lot about himself, too. For a man who creates chaos on the football field, he found a gentler side to himself. He discovered the joy that comes with helping people. He thinks about the experience and says it helped him become a better father to his daughter, Aniyah and son, Leonidas.

"It helped me just have patience. You have to have a lot of patience with that group," Judon said. You have to be kind, be gentle, be loving and sometimes you gotta be stern, but it just helped me kind of like with my own kids... Just being gracious and have gratitude, the compassion to show another person. Those three-four days just gives you a little glimpse of how you can handle the world and affect the world. I enjoyed it."

Judon never stopped giving back. After he was drafted by Baltimore in 2016, he worked with the Maryland Special Olympics. He's still involved in other charitable endeavors to help people with disabilities and others who need help.

Judon saw firsthand how that could affect your life.

"I'm not doing it for anything to come back to me. I'm not doing anything just to hear my name in the paper and stuff like that," Judon said. "I'm doing it because so many people helped me out growing up, I just feel like that's what a good person is."

Now in his first season with the Patriots, Judon, 29, is currently second in the NFL in sacks. He is a two-time Pro Bowler and on his way to another. He also learned that he could make even a bigger impact off the field.

Matt Judon showed that ability a long time ago.

'Happiest Place On Earth': Matt Judon signed with the Patriots while at Disney World

'I'm excited every day': Josh Uche is doing his best to emulate Judon

OL Ted Karras

The Boston Globe

How the Patriots' Ted Karras was able to change roles for a night

By Nora Princiotti
November 14, 2019

FOXBOROUGH — Ted Karras has played in Super Bowls, but stepping onto a small stage in the South End on Tuesday, he still had major butterflies.

The Patriots offensive lineman had a cameo in "The Office! A Musical Parody," a, well, musical parody of the former NBC sitcom that's running at the Boston Center for the Arts' Calderwood Pavilion. So, the evening of his offday, Karras went into the city with his wife, learned his choreography, and made his on-stage debut.

"It's a different kind of nervous," Karras said. "I'm glad we practiced."

Karras was part of the opening number, called "Welcome to Scranton." He got to the theater about an hour before curtain and ran through what he'd be doing three times with Madeline Glenn Thomas, who is the dance captain and also plays Pam Beesly.

"[Karras] came out with Devina [Sabnis], who plays Kelly Kapoor, and he had a little moment with her and they were able to have a little moment and then he had an interaction with Dwight and with Roy, as well," Glenn Thomas said.

The main thing Karras needed to do was take a piece of paper from the character Roy Anderson that was made to look like an order form for the infamous Dunder Mifflin Party Planning Committee and pin it on a piece of corkboard that was part of the set. Then he had another moment with the entire cast before exiting. ("Stage right," Karras said.)

It all went off without a hitch, though there was almost a little mishap with the set. Most likely through some combination of nerves and adrenaline, Karras must have pressed the pin in much harder in the actual performance than he had in rehearsal.

"I pressed really hard live and I felt the wall kind of shake and I put my hand on it," Karras said. "I was talking to a cast member and I was like, what a football guy thing to do, goes to the theater and knocks the set over."

The set did not actually fall over, though, and Glenn Thomas said she didn't notice a thing.

"I never would have known, he was a natural," she said.

A thespian streak runs in the family for Karras. His great-uncle, Alex Karras, followed up a 12-year NFL career with a TV and movie career that included roles in "Blazing Saddles" and the ABC sitcom "Webster."

Ted Karras took a couple of theater classes in college and would like to do more when he's done playing football, but Tuesday was his first experience on a live stage.

Karras got involved after the show reached out to him a few weeks ago. He'd met Kathy Rochefort, who counts "The Office! A Musical Parody" among her public relations clients, in the spring because of another show she works with, the Big Apple Circus. The circus asked the Patriots if there was a player who might want to be the ringmaster for one night, the team suggested Karras, and he donned a tophat and did the honors in Peabody this past April.

It went well, so Rochefort reached back out about having Karras take part again when she had another client show in town.

What they didn't all realize is that Karras is a massive fan of "The Office" and can quote its lines at will. The cast figured that out quickly, though, when they were hanging out backstage before the show and Karras wound up beating them in Office trivia.

A recent tour date in Binghamton, N.Y., coincided with an Office-themed trivia night nearby, which the cast went to. They did pretty well, but lost when they bet all of their points on one question and got stumped. The question, which they posed backstage to Karras: In Season 8's "Doomsday" episode, Jim sees flights to where on Robert California's phone?

"Ted goes, 'Oh, Buffalo. JetBlue,'" Glenn Thomas said. "We were like, 'Yes, how did you know that?'"

Perhaps the AFC East connection made it extra memorable.

Karras said the cast did stump him on one trivia question: Who was the manager of the diet pill company Michael Scott works for? (Answer: Nick Figaro, manager to the stars!)

All in all, the fact that Karras was already a lover of the show's source material made it the right place for him to get involved with professional theater for the first time.

"They incorporated pretty much every reference you can get in the whole show," Karras said. "They had some really good songs. The vocals were unbelievable and it was really funny."

LB Harvey Langi



A Langi story: Patriots LB's faith-filled life

By Erik Scalavino
September 17, 2021

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — On the orders of Philip IV, their king, medieval French troops rounded up hundreds of astonished Knights Templar, many of whom were subsequently put to death as a result of the monarch's jealousy of the group's growing wealth and influence. This actual historical event not only propelled the Templars into legend, but also helped give rise, in part, to our modern superstition about the particular day on which it occurred: Friday, October 13, 1307.

Indeed — coincidence or not — bad luck has since befallen many on Fridays the 13th of various months over the ensuing centuries. In the past hundred years alone, these high-profile stories made headlines: Nazi Germany's bombing of Buckingham Palace during World War II; a deadly cyclone that claimed hundreds of thousands of victims in Bangladesh; rapper Tupac Shakur succumbing to complications from gunshot wounds days earlier; the fatal capsizing of the Costa Concordia cruise ship in Italy.

More recently, precisely 710 years after the Templar raid, on Friday, the 13th of October 2017, one such incident occurred right here in Foxborough at the intersection of Commercial and Fisher Streets, not far from Gillette Stadium.

Remarkably, the young married couple to whom it happened can now look back and maintain they were lucky — blessed, in fact — not only to have survived and fully recovered from the catastrophe, but also that it unfolded when and how it did.

A UTAH YOUTH

"People don't think of 'the ghetto of Salt Lake City,' but we didn't have much," recalls Havea Hikuleo Langi, the second oldest in a Polynesian family of 10 children. Most people know the Patriots linebacker by his nickname, Harvey. Long before he arrived in New England four years ago, Harvey called Utah's capital and most populous city home. "My parents came here in the '80s and both worked three or four jobs trying to find any type of money. My older brother and I had to grow up quick."

From what he could see back then, growing up in his community meant taking one of three paths.

"You either join sports," Langi explains, "or hard labor or the street life to find easy money. I felt like a lot of my influences at the time were sports or the street life."

For the big, athletic Harvey (now 6-2, 250), football seemed like a way out. At running back, he led his Bingham High School to consecutive state championships in 2009 and '10, rushing for nearly 4,300 yards and 55 during his prep career. The nearby University of Utah in Salt Lake gave him an opportunity to continue playing while advancing his education. Yet, privileged though he may have seemed, Langi could feel dark forces at work in his life.

"My brothers," he continues, "were getting locked up [in prison], and I started falling into some patterns and lifestyles that started to go down that road, and I thought to myself, 'Man, I do not want to be like them. I don't want to waste my time behind bars. I need to change my actions and the things I'm doing.'"

Langi's parents raised their children in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known to many as the Mormon Church or LDS, but gave them a choice as young adults to make their own decisions about religion. Around age 16, Langi drifted from LDS and reveled in the extra day to play on weekends.

Yet, by age 18, during his freshman year at Utah, he chose to ground himself in his religious roots. He inquired about a missionary trip and the following year accepted an opportunity to serve a two-year LDS mission in Tampa, Florida, as he describes it, "to try to find myself spiritually and start from there ... to forget myself for two years and find out who I am as a person."

MAN ON A MISSION

Non-LDS members might be surprised to learn that Mormon missionary trips aren't free, nor entirely subsidized by the Church. Langi's two-year sojourn in Tampa would cost him \$10,000 up front to secure his various living accommodations. He'd always have a roommate – another fellow young Mormon man – but every so often, he'd have to switch. Sometimes he moved in with someone else; other times, a new person would move into Harvey's apartment.

"That was one of the hardest things," he admits. "Every two months or so, you get with a new person, they do things differently, they eat differently, they have their tendencies, little things you have to learn to communicate and adjust."

"It was cool because ... he's out there for the same purpose, to share the Gospel, but we also got deep into the community serving everybody and anybody in any capacity that they needed."

Langi's mission involved very little stereotypical proselytizing by knocking on doors and more serving by example. To be more effective, Harvey and his dozen or so different companions, all fellow elders (male Mormons aged 18 or older), thrust themselves into the Tampa community, introducing themselves to Mormons and non-Mormons alike to figure out what was needed and how they might assist.

The tasks they undertook varied greatly: moving people in a new house, mowing their lawns, cutting their hair, going grocery shopping for the elderly, visiting the disabled, walking people's dogs, praying for folks, giving blessings ... to name several. They even helped some who struggled with addiction.

"You'd think, what does a 19-year-old do to help a person stop an addiction? It was accountability," he adds, "telling a person, 'Hey, I'll text you every single night to keep you accountable for you to see how many cigarettes you smoked. If you want to stop smoking, I'll call you every day at these times, we'll pray for you, figure out other programs we can get you in to stop smoking.' If you just want to talk to someone and know that there are people out here to help you and love you, we're here."

"It was tough at times," Langi confesses, "but great lessons learned. I wouldn't trade those two years for the world."

However, after two years, he would be forced to trade missionary life for a return to the real world. One in which he wasn't yet sure if football would still play a part in his life.

"My mindset at the time," he reveals, "was, 'If I can just do good here [in Tampa] and serve, I'll be blessed in the long run. If football is in my path, I'll be blessed with that. If it wasn't in my path, I'd be blessed otherwise.'"

What Harvey knew in his heart, though, was that he wanted to become a husband and a father – and fast.

THREE WISHES

Upon returning to Salt Lake City, Harvey decided to leave the public University of Utah and transfer to the privately-owned, LDS-operated Brigham Young University, about an hour south in Provo. At BYU, Harvey realized he not only longed for football, but that he also harbored NFL aspirations.

History told Harvey that Polynesian running backs are few and far between at the highest level, that defensive players are more prevalent among people of his heritage. So, he stunned his then-head coach, Bronco Mendenhall, by asking for a switch to linebacker. Mendenhall informed Langi that he'd planned to make him the Cougars' starting running back, but agreed to let him change positions anyway.

Along the way, mutual friends introduced Harvey to Cassidy Wahlin, a Texan volleyball player and fellow Mormon who attended Utah Valley University, just down the road from BYU. After an 18-month courtship, they married during Harvey's junior year. Married life suited him just fine.

"I'm not saying I'm the best husband in the world, but [my mission trip] really set me up to communicate and be an adult to deal with things when I met my wife, understanding that it's not only you living under the same roof."

But Harvey and Cassidy wanted more than just the two of them in their house. They desperately wanted to start a family of their own. As Harvey racked up 139 tackles, 6.5 sacks, two interceptions, a forced fumble, and three passes defended over the course of his 36 games with BYU, his college football career flourished. At the same time, he and Cassidy suffered as their first two pregnancies ended in miscarriages.

"I was pissed," he recalls. "It happened once, now it's happened again. What the heck's wrong with us? Are we not fertile? It's been three years [of trying]. We easily could have had a little youngin' running around."

The God to whom Harvey prayed had granted two of his three wishes: a wonderful wife and a job with the then-Super Bowl Champion New England Patriots. Langi originally made the 2017 Patriots' 53-man roster as an undrafted rookie and was expecting to be called into action for a Week 6 encounter in New York against the Jets.

"I was just so sad," he continues, "because I just wanted my baby boy or girl to be here already. I wanted to be a cool young dad, something I never had. My dad was always working, so, I'd rarely see him."

Only with the benefit of hindsight would Harvey come to understand why his third wish had been withheld.

FRIDAY THE 13TH

"I always try to keep one day a week when I take my wife out for just a small date," says Harvey, "even if it's a walk or something."

That particular week in October 2017, New England's then-linebacker coach, Brian Flores, had hinted to Langi that the team might activate him for the upcoming road game against the Jets. Flores wanted Langi as mentally prepared as possible for that eventuality. Consequently, Harvey neglected his weekly commitment to Cassidy.

Then, a phone call from friends came with an invitation to dinner on Friday night. Langi initially declined, but after seeing the disappointment in Cassidy's eyes, he changed his mind a few minutes later. Besides, the restaurant was less than half a mile away.

After dinner, the friends asked if the Langis wanted to get dessert elsewhere, but by then, both Harvey and Cassidy were tired and decided to head home.

While the couple sat in their car at a traffic light on Commercial Street, waiting to turn left onto the road where they lived in Foxborough, another vehicle, going an estimated 60 miles per hour, slammed into them from behind.

"It was like a movie scene ... it was terrifying," he remembers about his next memory – blood all about, broken glass, mangled car parts, his wife unresponsive as rescue crews extracted them from their vehicle with the "Jaws of Life" tool.

"They marked her as deceased, but I didn't know that," he adds. "They separated us, took us to different hospitals."

Harvey suffered neck, head, and knee injuries. Cassidy had in fact survived, but sustained fractured hips, broken ribs, and other internal injuries.

"They are hurt, but they are alive, and that's a blessing we are grateful for," Cassidy's father, Rick Wahlin, told the Deseret News of Utah at the time. "The Patriots helped us get [from Provo, Utah to Boston] as fast as possible. Many tender mercies have come their way the past 12 hours ... All Harvey has cared about is how Cassie is doing. That's been his biggest concern, and we are grateful for him and all the prayers that have been directed toward our families."

UNANSWERED PRAYERS

In one of his most popular recordings ever, country superstar Garth Brooks sings:

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers

Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs

That just because he may not answer, doesn't mean he don't care

Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.

These are sentiments the Langi family has come to embrace. Despite missing the remainder of the 2017 season while on New England's injured reserve list, Harvey made a full recovery, as did Cassidy. He took part in 2018 Patriots training camp and, after being released following the preseason, joined the Jets a month later. Over the next three seasons, he worked his way up from the practice squad to the active roster. In 2020, Harvey started six of 14 games in New York, then re-signed with New England as a free agent during the 2021 offseason.

As the Patriots prepared to face the Jets yet again in Week 2 of this regular season, Langi took a moment to reflect on all for which he is thankful today.

"I needed to ground myself back in my spirituality in order for me to move forward as a man. If I hadn't gone on that mission, I would have never switched over to BYU and [Cassidy and I] would have never bumped paths. Coming back from my mission, that was one of my goals, to get married and start life with somebody. If it wasn't for that mission, I don't know where I'd be ..."

As his voice trails off on the other end of a phone line, two others chime in from the background. They belong to Harvey and Cassidy's children, a 2-year-old son and 10-month-old daughter.

"Right away, I wanted to be a young dad and have kids ... Crazy thing," he observes, "we were struggling to get pregnant, we get injured, and right when we both recovered from the accident, we got pregnant with my son. If we hadn't had those two miscarriages, those first two kids would have been sitting in the back of our car that night. That was our blessing. That built our faith, knowing it's not our time, it's His time. We do what we can for God and He'll always have our back, like He did there."

Harvey Langi hopes it's this message from which anyone who hears his story can benefit.

"Keep on pushing on," he advises, "even if the odds are against you, you'll be surprised."

OL Shaq Mason



Shaq Mason's drive came from watching mom

By Mark Daniels

Updated Oct 20, 2018 at 8:23 PM

FOXBORO — Alicia McGuire always stressed the importance of academics to her son, even if it came at a cost.

Anytime her boy received good grades, she rewarded him. That usually meant a special meal at a restaurant of his choosing. Since Shaq Mason was a straight-A student, there were many dinners, usually at Ruby Tuesday.

There in Columbia, Tenn., Mason flipped through the menu. He usually settled on cheesy fries for an appetizer and then a nice entree. For a single mother, working up to three jobs to stay afloat, it wasn't easy to pay for these special nights. That's why McGuire only ordered an appetizer. On other occasions, she'd just sip on water.

When her son asked why she wasn't eating, she'd hide the truth.

"I'd just let him eat and I'd get some water and be like, I'm not hungry," McGuire recalled. "As a kid, all he knows is that I'm working and he's getting everything that he needs. He wouldn't have known that we were poor. He probably thought we were rich. He may have not known that I was working paycheck-to-paycheck sometimes. He just knew that mama took care of him. He didn't know what was going on behind the scenes."

When Mason was teenager, he asked his mom about those nights. She explained that she didn't eat because she couldn't afford to. It was always more important that he enjoyed those dinners, since her goal was to reward her son and shield him from her own struggles. When the truth hit him, it opened his eyes to just how strong his mother really was.

"There's things that, growing up, that you didn't know, that she hid from us," Mason said. "But once I got older, in high school, I was like, 'wow, this is really how we're living.' It was something I didn't know. I thought it was normal."

Little did McGuire know, her work ethic rubbed off on her oldest son, who's now living his dream with the Patriots.

'No alternative'

McGuire was a 21-year-old student at Martin Methodist College when her son was born on Aug. 28, 1993.

She briefly stopped her education to focus all her time and energy on her boy. She knew it wouldn't be easy and part of her was worried. McGuire saw firsthand what could happen when a male strayed down the wrong path in life. So, with no financial help from her son's biological father, McGuire began working two, and sometimes three, jobs to pay the bills. Her main source of income was factory work, but that wasn't enough, so she did side jobs like cleaning houses.

"It's just one of those situations in which once becoming pregnant, knowing that now that I have a child to take care of, you have to hit the ground running and it's all about him at that point," McGuire said. "That was my focus — take care of my son. I looked at it as not having an alternative, but to work and work and work and work."

She preached education and hard work to her boy. When times were tough, she taught him that things could get better. When the factory closed, the company offered employees a chance to go back to school. She did that and eventually got into the corporate world.

Growing up in that environment wasn't easy, but Mason soon realized how his mother's work ethic influenced him.

"The hardest working person I ever met is my mom. I never met anyone who worked harder than her," Mason said. "She provided for me and my [younger] brother. All those years with no help. I just learned from her to always, she told me at a young age, 'it always can get better.' We know what the bottom feels like, so it can only go up from here. That's something that always stuck with me."

Learned from mistakes

When Mason was a boy, he was involved in nearly every sport offered each season. He played football in the fall, basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring. If that wasn't enough, he even took karate lessons.

McGuire was always a sports fan — that's why she named her son Shaquille Olajuwon Mason, after her two favorite basketball players. However, turning him into an athlete was never the goal. She wanted to keep him safe, and needed to keep him busy.

"Growing up, the way we grew up, my most important goal was to not let him be a statistic," McGuire said. "I've always been a sports person. I love sports. But I couldn't care less if he played a down of football or shot a hoop in regards to his education. So I always pushed his education first but I always wanted to occupy his time because I felt like I didn't want the streets to get a hold of him."

McGuire saw what could happen. Two of her brothers went down the wrong path and ended up in and out of prison. She knew if he got into the wrong hands, he could've easily been interacting with drug dealers instead of football coaches.

As Mason grew up, he witnessed several events that turned out to be teaching moments. That's why every day his mom told him the same thing — and still does — “make good choices.”

“I was exposed to a lot. You get the picture. I was exposed to a lot of things at an early age,” Mason said. “Thankfully, thankful to god, I didn't fall victim to those things. Likewise, my uncles had been in prison, but one thing I can say, they always thought me — ‘don't do this. This is not the route you want to take.’ They were role models to me as far showing me the route not to take. They told me, ‘you want to be better than us.’ Things like that. I could've easily feel victim to it, but thankfully I didn't.”

Mason never strayed. He was a great student and excelled in sports. His focus is what set him apart among his peers. Before you knew it, Mason approached academics and football like his mom approached her work — he hit the ground running and never turned back.

He beat the odds

When he was 5, Mason would tell anyone who asked, he wanted to be a football player, but no one really thought it was possible. That story usually doesn't happen in Columbia. It was a pipe dream.

“That was always a goal of mine,” Mason said. “That's every kid growing up, but coming from where I come from, that's not realistic.”

Even after he earned a scholarship to Georgia Tech, it didn't hit him or his mother that he was actually going to the NFL until his senior year.

The truth is Mason's an outlier. When you combine an elite work ethic in an elite athlete, you usually get positive results. Like his mother, this offensive guard never stop working. When the Patriots drafted him in the fourth round in 2015, he was considered raw. Sure, he was already a solid run blocker, but he was far from being a complete offensive linemen. Before you knew it, Mason was just that and a full-time starter by his second season.

That didn't happen by mistake.

Mason always put the effort in. McGuire saw him putting in the extra work — before practice, after practice. He even ran on the weekends and made sure he ate right. Of course, it's easy to see where that comes from.

“A lot of my drive comes from her,” Mason said. “Just from seeing what she did. She motivated me to want to take an extra mile — like she did.”

Last year, Mason bought his mother a new house in Columbia. This year, he was rewarded for his hard work with a five-year, \$45-million contract from the Patriots. On the field, he continues to get better. Mason's arguably the most talented offensive linemen on the team and one of the best guards in the NFL.

“Hard work pays off. He worked so hard. He always just strives so hard to do better and better,” McGuire said. “He's always just push, push, push. I think it's because he always wanted to be better.”

Like mother, like son.

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."



Meet the McCourty twins' mighty mom: How Patriots Devin, Jason got to Super Bowl LIII

Ian O'Connor
Jan 29, 2019

RIVER VALE, N.J. -- To this day, nearly three decades after the tragedy, Devin and Jason McCourty will suddenly do something, or say something, or express a strong opinion that will stop their mother cold and remind her of their late father.

"Isn't that funny?" Phyllis Harrell says.

She was sitting in her northern New Jersey home, her corner of lakeside suburbia, preparing for a road trip to Atlanta to see her twin 31-year-old sons try to help the New England Patriots beat the Los Angeles Rams in Super Bowl LIII. Harrell said she just smiles when that happens, when one of the twins makes a remark and it feels like the words came right out of Calvin McCourty's mouth. Harrell keeps those thoughts and the sweetest memories of her longtime companion to herself because, she said, "it wouldn't do me good to say anything to Devin and Jason."

The boys were 3 years old when their father, an Army veteran, reported to work at Lederle Laboratories in Pearl River, New York, on Oct. 16, 1990. A former basketball star at Nyack High School, Calvin McCourty was a 36-year-old supervisor in the Lederle computer department and an asthmatic who had been recently hospitalized. Calvin and Phyllis, a former cheerleader, didn't start dating until after high school. They loved each other and loved their life with Devin and Jason in their home inside the low-income community known as Nyack Plaza.

Phyllis was working as a nurse at the time, and she doesn't want to recall too much about that day. She remembers doing laundry in the evening when the phone rang with news that Calvin had gone into cardiac arrest after suffering an asthma attack. He died before Phyllis could get to the hospital, before she had a chance to say goodbye.

Her oldest son, Larry White, was overseas fighting in the Gulf War, leaving Harrell all alone with Devin and Jason. She repeatedly asked herself, "What am I going to do?" Harrell took a week off to grieve and accepted an offer from Calvin's parents to help with the kids whenever they could. "And then I went back to work," she said, "and life rolled on."

Sunday evening in Atlanta, it's quite possible Tom Brady will win his fifth Super Bowl MVP award at the expense of an opponent he defeated in his first MVP performance 17 years ago, back when the Rams were representing St. Louis. But in the lead-up to New England-L.A., another MVP -- Most Valuable Parent -- will be conspicuous for her infectious laugh and the navy and white half-Devin, half-Jason jersey she stitched together for the 2018 NFL season, the first that found her sons on the same team like they had been at Rutgers, at St. Joseph Regional High School in Montvale, New Jersey, and at the Pop Warner level in Valley Cottage, New York.

On willpower, Harrell drove Devin and Jason to this moment. It started with her method of parenting. "Iron fist," she said. While she worked as a nurse at Rockland Psychiatric Center, Harrell ordered a taxi every day to take the boys from elementary school directly to their grandmother's home in Nyack Plaza. The community looked after its own. Sometimes the Irish-born woman who lived downstairs, Mary Brady, would babysit Devin and Jason and, as they grew older, would report back to their mother if she saw them doing things they shouldn't be doing.

"I was very strict, and I kind of chose their friends," said Harrell, who would load neighborhood kids into her station wagon to drive them to practices and games. "I've never had to go to a police station to pick my kids up, because I just think they'd say, 'Oh no, leave me here. I don't want to go home with her.'"

Harrell didn't allow her sons to spend time at the wrong hang-out places, and they didn't dare cross her. She was -- and is -- a tough woman, a fighter. Harrell was once a passenger in a car returning a couple of residents to the psychiatric center when the car was involved in a crash, causing the driver to accidentally hit the gas instead of the brakes and compelling Harrell to struggle for control of the steering wheel as they crossed two lanes of traffic. She suffered a knee injury that would lead to surgeries and a knee replacement and long-term disability.

When the boys were young, Harrell also weathered a serious health scare -- doctors grew concerned over her white-blood-cell count and mistakenly thought she might have leukemia. "If something happens to me," she kept thinking, "who is going to raise my kids?"

As the twins entered their Catholic high school, Harrell fretted over tuition and the possibility that her illness would compromise her ability to pay for college. Devin told his mother that she shouldn't worry, that if they attended a football powerhouse like St. Joe's, "we're going to get scholarships, so you won't have to worry about college." Harrell responded, "Yeah, OK, Dev." Four years later, Jason was the more heavily recruited McCourty. Rutgers coach Greg Schiano really wanted him, and when asked whether she leaned on Schiano to offer a full ride to Devin, Harrell broke into a mischievous smile. "Yeah, kind of," she said. "I was telling him, 'If Devin gets his opportunity, he's going to be fantastic. When you see J, you see Dev.'"

Realizing he was on the less desirable end of a package deal, Devin told his mother he wasn't sure about accepting Rutgers' offer. "Stop the B.S.," Harrell shot back. "This is your opportunity to play Division I football." And that was that. Jason played four years for the Scarlet Knights and got drafted by Tennessee in the sixth round in 2009. Devin redshirted, played the next four years for the Scarlet Knights and got drafted by New England in the first round in 2010, making his mother a prophet by getting picked 176 slots earlier than his brother.

"I didn't tell my sons this, but I did tell their wives: If they win the Super Bowl together, I'm going to grab some of the confetti and lay out on the field and do an angel."

Phyllis Harrell, whose sons Devin and Jason McCourty are NFL teammates for the first time

Devin's career in Foxborough became a blur of Super Bowls and AFC Championship Games, while Jason's in Nashville became a maddening exercise in missing the playoffs and tagging along (in street clothes) as his older brother (by 27 minutes) chased championship rings. Devin had appeared in 19 postseason games, including four Super Bowls, before Jason recovered from an 0-16 season in Cleveland, joined him in New England and landed in the tournament for the first time.

Harrell was cooking in her kitchen when Devin FaceTimed her the news that his brother was traded to the Patriots; she didn't believe it until Jason texted the confirmation. "I prayed all this time," Harrell said, "and I never thought it would happen."

Having missed the trip to the AFC Championship Game in Kansas City to attend funeral services for her aunt, Harrell grew emotional when she watched on TV as her sons celebrated their first Super Bowl appearance as teammates. "This is what I came here for!" Jason shouted into his brother's ear as Devin was being interviewed on the Arrowhead Stadium field.

Their 48-year-old brother, Larry White, also choked up as he took in the scene from afar. Larry played football at Nyack High, though he said he wasn't as talented or as focused as Devin and Jason would be at St. Joe's and beyond. White joined the Army out of high school, fought for his country in Desert Storm and returned home a changed man. He doesn't like to revisit his combat experience, other than to say he was blessed by being part of a team of soldiers defined by its good chemistry and its ability to successfully carry out dangerous missions. Now employed by a car dealership, White undergoes counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder, something he said he will likely face for the rest of his life.

Larry said Devin and Jason have always provided him unwavering support. "I look up to them," said White, who wanted it known he sees the twins more as great husbands, fathers and brothers than he does as great athletes.

White also wanted it known that he finds Harrell chiefly responsible for the fact that Devin and Jason were worthy of being nominees for the Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year Award given annually to a player who serves his community.

Devin and Jason McCourty were 3 years old when their father, Calvin, died. Ian O'Connor/ESPN
"My mother is the strongest person I've ever known," White said. "She gave us everything, taught us everything. We're not the men we are without our mom."

Along with five siblings, Harrell was raised on the values of an honest day's work. Her father kept two jobs most of his life, working for a piping company and doing landscaping work on the side. Her mother was a cook in a children's home, and then a nurse's aide.

In later years, Harrell adored her time as a nurse at the psychiatric center, where she tended to mentally ill geriatric residents and savored the moments she connected with them in conversation. But her primary job revolved around the clear mandate to raise her sons to be better people than they were defensive backs, and she needed to take a forceful approach to that job.

"If you are raising boys who want to play sports," Harrell said, "you have to be tough."

Now 66 with seven grandchildren, Harrell is touched by the twins' fundraising commitment to finding a cure for sickle cell anemia, the disease that recently claimed the life of their dear aunt Winifred. Harrell is also overwhelmed by the sight of her sons playing for the same NFL team, and by the flashbacks to where it all began on that Valley Cottage Pop Warner team.

"I'm so grateful because I get to see them live out their dream," Harrell said. "I didn't tell my sons this, but I did tell their wives: If they win the Super Bowl together, I'm going to grab some of the confetti and lay out on the field and do an angel."

Devin and Jason were stars at Rutgers before being drafted to the NFL. Ian O'Connor/ESPN

Win or lose, it will be a hell of a family reunion for the first set of twins to play in the same Super Bowl, and the best sibling story in the big game since John Harbaugh beat Jim six years ago. The McCourty brothers will be missing only their father, Calvin, the high school basketball star who had them dribbling a ball at age 3. The man who died at 36 and whose newspaper obituary was surrounded by those that memorialized locals who lived into their 70s, 80s, and 90s.

"A hard worker and a nice, kind person," Harrell said. "Really reminds me a lot of my sons."

So on Super Bowl Sunday, the McCourty twins will stand as living tributes to their late father, and to the woman in the crowd whose resilience and love drove them across the goal line a long time ago.

WR Jakobi Meyers

The Boston Globe

Jakobi Meyers's rise shouldn't surprise you. The people who know him have been ready for it for years

By Nicole Yang Globe
November 22, 2020

A few weeks ago, Patriots quarterback Cam Newton wanted to have a chat with Jakobi Meyers.

What about?

"I just remember him pretty much telling me that I was selling myself short, that I have potential," recalled Meyers. "All I have to do is just live up to it and go out there and show the coaches what I can do."

At the time of their conversation, Meyers had just one catch through New England's first five games of the season. Behind Julian Edelman and N'Keal Harry on the depth chart, Meyers had played no more than 11 percent of the team's offensive snaps in any game.

After that conversation, though, his opportunity came. After Week 7's loss to the 49ers, Edelman was placed on injured reserve following a knee procedure, and Harry was sidelined with a concussion. Meyers has since emerged as Newton's most reliable target, totaling 23 receptions for 286 receiving yards with a catch rate of 74.2 percent over the past three weeks.

Pro Football Focus has Meyers graded as one of the top three receivers in the league, behind only Green Bay's Davante Adams and Minnesota's Justin Jefferson.

"You would've thought I was a prophet or something," Newton said.

For some, the rise is unexpected. For those that know Meyers, his story is far from surprising.

Baseball and books

Growing up in the Atlanta area, Meyers was initially known for two things: baseball and his brains.

While math was his specialty, he also loved to read, and, as a kid, could often be found in the dugout with his nose in a book. For several years, including high school, Meyers participated in Georgia's annual Helen Ruffin Reading Bowl, a competition in which students are quizzed on 20 pre-selected books. (The only genre he didn't like was horror.)

With academics and baseball as his top two priorities, football was secondary. Meyers assumed the role of the backup quarterback at Arabia Mountain High School, but he occasionally had to miss practices because of travel baseball commitments. Still, his athleticism and strong arm caught the eye of coach Stanley Pritchett.

"I told his mom, 'Look, don't write off football,' " Pritchett said.

Meyers wanted to focus on baseball, though, as a shortstop and a pitcher. His mom, Tonija, remembers going to his games with a tally counter in order to track his pitches. Once he reached his max, typically around 80 pitches, she'd ensure his day was over so they could preserve his arm.

"I put all my energy and all my work into him playing baseball," Tonija said. "I thought, I really thought, that's where he would end up."

Meyers's junior year of high school, however, the football team's starting quarterback sustained a concussion, thrusting him into action for the rest of the game. Pritchett liked what he saw — and wanted to have Meyers continue at the position for the rest of the season. But Meyers's sights were still set on baseball.

"If the other quarterback didn't get hurt, he would not have played," Tonija recalled. "Kobi called me one day and said, 'Mom, the coach is going call you and ask you if I can play football. Just tell him no.' I was like, 'I'm not telling him no, you tell him no.' "

Despite his initial hesitation, Meyers decided to give quarterback a try — and put up impressive numbers. Even when the starter, an All-State senior, was ready to return, Pritchett stuck with Meyers. Arabia Mountain finished the season with a 7-3 record, its first winning season in school history.

In five starts, Meyers completed 68 of 126 passing attempts (54.0 percent) for 1,147 yards and 13 touchdowns with four interceptions. He also ran for 120 yards and three more scores.

With each win, Pritchett said he could see Meyers start to believe in himself.

“His confidence started to grow,” he said. “He could make any throw. He had the strongest arm I have ever seen. He could throw the ball 80 yards, flat-footed. He could really throw.”

Meyers returned as the starter his senior year. Although the team wasn’t very good, turning in a 4-6 record, he continued to post noteworthy individual numbers. As a senior, he completed 110 of his 170 pass attempts (64.7 percent) for 1,834 yards and 23 touchdowns.

His performances earned him an invite to the regionals of Elite 11, an event for the premier high school quarterbacks across the country. Even though he didn’t advance beyond the initial rounds, quarterback guru Tony Ballard took a liking to him.

“He had an arm, but most kids who come in at that level with a strong arm really can’t control it,” Ballard said. “They might be able to throw this or throw that, but when you need them to hone in on ball placement or take some temperature off the ball, those are things he was able to do.”

Ballard kept in touch with Meyers, and began to work with him on the nuances of the position.

“Why do you want to use your legs to throw?” Ballard said. “What does a wide base consist of? Why do we ask for a quick-foot strike to speed up the delivery to fire your hips? Things like that. He didn’t know those things because he didn’t really have that type of teaching. He was just a kid that was naturally talented.”

Added Tonija: “From there, Kobi was like, ‘I think I like this quarterback thing.’ ”

Switch to receiver

Getting the attention of colleges wasn’t easy. Meyers had received some mid-major offers and initially committed to Kent State, where he could play both baseball and football.

“We were just trying to get him recruited and get his name out there because people around here knew him, but nobody else really knew him,” Pritchett said.

Late in the process, six schools visited Arabia Mountain to watch Meyers throw — and he secured offers from Florida, North Carolina State, and Wake Forest. Meyers opted to attend NC State because the school would allow him to play both baseball and football, in addition to pursuing a pre-med career path.

Things didn’t exactly go according to plan, however. Quarterback Ryan Finley, now on the Cincinnati Bengals, transferred to NC State from Boise State, and the program planned to make him the starter.

Meyers also had suffered a knee injury that forced him to redshirt his freshman season. When he returned the following year, the coaching staff wanted to find another opportunity for him to get onto the field. Given Meyers’s athleticism, along with injuries to the team’s receiving corps, coach Dave Doeren talked to him about transitioning to wide receiver.

“Quarterbacks generally want to be a quarterback,” Doeren said. “Sometimes that’s hard to give that up.”

But his experience as quarterback still ended up proving to be a valuable experience. NC State’s wide receivers coach George McDonald saw several skills translate to the new position.

“He understands what holes the quarterback is trying to get the ball to, and just has a really good understanding of timing of routes and when he needs to be open and how he needs to set the angles for the quarterback to deliver the ball,” McDonald said.

With each year, Meyers’s production increased. As a redshirt freshman, he caught 13 passes for 158 yards. The following year, he caught 63 passes for 727 yards and five touchdowns. His final season before declaring for the NFL

draft, he broke Torrey Holt's single-season reception record at NC State with 92 catches for 1,047 yards and four touchdowns.

"Once he started having success, he really bought into the little things of being a wide receiver, and that just unlocked his abilities," McDonald said.

During the games, when the defense was on the field, McDonald said Meyers would always be talking to Finley about potential adjustments they could make on the next series. Because Meyers was already familiar with the quarterback terminology, the two were able to quickly get on the same page.

That attentiveness carried over to the film room.

"He's always listening, and he's always watching and observing," McDonald said. "Sometimes he looked like he's not paying attention, but he could regurgitate everything you said in an hour meeting. He's really a cerebral person that understands the value of education."

Even though Meyers had a smaller frame than most — Doeren estimates he gained 40 pounds during his college tenure to just reach 200 pounds — McDonald believes his experience as a passer also gave him an edge when playing through contact.

"As a quarterback, you're going to take hits, you're going to take blind-sided shots, and I think he's used to being hit," McDonald said. "That's what makes him different. He knows how not to take a full-on hit, where he can manipulate his body to protect the throw and also protect himself."

As his stardom rose, Meyers stayed even-keeled. But those around him emphasize just because he's a mellow guy doesn't mean he's not a fierce competitor.

"I think everything is more internal for him," McDonald said "I think everything just kind of boils underneath the surface. Outside, he always looks calm and collected, but, inside, he's always trying to strive to be the best at whatever it is he's doing."

Under the radar

Meyers didn't get selected in the 2019 NFL Draft, though he didn't stay available for long because the Patriots signed him to an undrafted free agent contract.

"He might have been the first free agent signed that year," Doeren said. "Because it was fast."

While battling for a roster spot that summer, Meyers was roommates with a fellow undrafted rookie in Gunner Olszewski, who was acclimating to wide receiver after playing defensive back in college. The two bonded over their shared experience, learning a new playbook together.

"That's my boy," Olszewski said. "We just talked about everything under the blue moon. We talked about football all day and talked about how he remembers stuff, because obviously he got a hold of it a lot quicker than I did."

When Meyers would call his mom, Tonija would say, "Kobi, this is your competition. Why are you helping? Why are you helping him learn the plays?" To which Meyers would respond, "Mom, everybody deserves a fair shot. Just because they know the plays doesn't mean they're going to outplay me."

Both Meyers and Olszewski ended up making the team.

"Every level of my career has been the same story," Meyers said. "I never start out on top. I wasn't a five-star [recruit]; I didn't go to high school as a football player. It was just a lot of adversity I had to work through and it taught me a lot of things on the way up.

"I was always pretty confident, I knew what I could do, I knew I just had to be patient and wait on my opportunity, because if I sat there and got down about it or cried about it I wouldn't be ready when that chance came."

Throughout his athletic career, Tonija would always tell her son, "A delay is never a denial," a motto he's seemingly embraced.

As Meyers continues to work on beating different coverages and man techniques, one thing is overwhelmingly clear from those who have coached him: He's just getting started.

"He was just doing stuff in college on pure talent," McDonald said. "I think Jakobi is still growing and still learning and still developing, where he still has a lot more that he's going to be able to do and show. If you track his history, when he gets an opportunity, he's usually going to be pretty successful."

Added Doeren: "He's always been a guy that developed later than other people, so I would say his ceiling is probably still not touched."

After New England's big win over the Baltimore Ravens last week, Meyers called his mother, as he does after every game. He had thrown a dazzling 24-yard touchdown pass to Rex Burkhead, and caught five passes, including a key fourth-quarter third-down conversion.

"Mom, this is the most fun I've ever had," he told her.

Tonija's eyes welled.

"It's a tear-jerker," she said. "He waited so long. It just did something to me. I know how hard it's been. You want to play so badly, and you don't get your opportunity. It just warmed my heart."



Jakobi Meyers, Patriots' Next Slot Receiver, Was Hidden In Plain Sight Jakobi Meyers is Cam Newton's version of Tom Brady's Julian Edelman

by Doug Kyed
Nov 12, 2020

Jakobi Meyers took an indirect path to his spot atop New England's receiver depth chart, just as the Patriots went the scenic route to finally find another promising young wideout.

New England spent the last 10 years searching the deep reaches of college rosters to find their next Troy Brown, Wes Welker, Julian Edelman or Danny Amendola clone.

The Patriots' slot receiver prototype was vertically challenged, shifty, unheralded, quicker than fast and probably carried a lunch pail to work. Jeremy Ebert, T.J. Moe, Jeremy Gallon, Wilson Van Hooser (that's a real person), Jonathan Krause, Austin Carr, K.J. Maye, Riley McCarron, Braxton Berrios and Will Hastings combined for exactly zero catches on zero targets for 0 yards in a Patriots uniform. New England seemingly never thought to look for a wide receiver of above-average height to fill the role until Meyers broke out this season.

Meyers is emerging as Edelman's future replacement as a quarterback-turned-receiver who can work from the slot or out wide and (additionally and only tangentially relatedly) has long admired his signal-caller.

The 24-year-old has caught 22 passes for 287 yards in his last three games since emerging off the bench. He had a breakout game under a national spotlight when he hauled in 12 passes for 169 yards on "Monday Night Football" in the Patriots' 30-27 win over the New York Jets.

We all should have seen this coming.

ANOTHER LOCAL QB-RECEIVER CONNECTION

Edelman grew up in Redwood City, Calif., looking up to another Bay Area product: San Mateo native Tom Brady, who became a hero to Northern Californians when he won a Super Bowl for the Patriots in 2001. Edelman played quarterback at College of San Mateo and Kent State before being selected by the Patriots in the seventh round of the 2009 NFL Draft and converted to receiver. Edelman even moved to Southern California one offseason to work with Brady. Their connection grew to the point where Edelman was Brady's favorite target from 2013 to 2019.

Right around the time when Edelman was drafted and working his way up the Patriots' depth chart, quarterback Cam Newton won a national championship at Auburn, was selected first overall by the Carolina Panthers and was inspiring young kids where he grew up in Atlanta. One of those players was Meyers, then a quarterback at Arabia Mountain High School in Lithonia, Ga., just under 40 miles east of where Newton attended high school.

Meyers impressed Newton at a football camp and was invited onto the QB's All-Star team for a 7-on-7 tournament in Florida. Newton coached Meyers in the tourney, and the connection between the QB and wide receiver (then still a quarterback) was forged.

LATE TO THE GAME

Meyers originally committed to Edelman's alma mater, Kent State, before his recruitment picked up steam. He started playing football late in high school because his mother was convinced he would be a major league pitcher. Meyers, strong-armed from his days on the diamond, watched his brothers' high school team struggling as their quarterback was throwing interceptions and thought, "Well, I could probably do that." So, he joined his high school football team midway through his sophomore year and promptly sat on the bench.

Meyers, who had started losing interest in baseball, anyway, began his junior season as the team's backup quarterback before the starter suffered an injury. He led the Rams to five straight wins, and "the legend of Jakobi Meyers was born," as his high school coach, former NFL fullback Stanley Pritchett, tells it.

So, Meyers understandably wasn't heavily recruited until his senior season. He garnered late interest from North Carolina State and decided to join the Wolfpack because he wanted to redshirt as a freshman. He figured he'd probably have to play right away at Kent State but wasn't ready after just a year and a half of starting experience at the high school level.

The premonition was correct. Kent State wound up being forced to play a freshman quarterback, George Bollas, during Meyers' redshirt freshman season at NC State. Bollas did not catch 12 passes on "Monday Night Football" this week.

PASSER TO PASS-CATCHER

Meyers learned behind future Patriots draft pick Jacoby Brissett in 2015 and was competing for the starting quarterback job as a redshirt freshman in 2016 until Ryan Finley, now on the Cincinnati Bengals, transferred in from Boise State. Finley was reuniting with his old offensive coordinator, Eliah Drinkwitz, who was hired by NC State that offseason, and won the starting job. Meyers was going to be buried on the quarterback depth chart, and head coach Dave Doeren saw no reason to stash a dynamic athlete on the sideline. So, Meyers moved to receiver.

He wasn't thrilled by the position switch.

"I actually hated it," Meyers said. "I felt like I was able to play quarterback. I thought I had the talent enough. I missed the work ethic of a quarterback and a lot of football knowledge that I needed to play that position. Originally, I fought against it and everything, and I wasn't really bought in that first year. I was trying it out. I was still listed as a quarterback or a receiver. But after that year, that summer, I was just locked in, see where it would take me, and that ended up being the best decision for me."

There was a hiccup along the way. Meyers played a big role in NC State's first two games of the 2017 season before being benched against Furman. He got kicked out of team meetings after pushing some of the wrong buttons with wide receivers coach George McDonald, who believed Meyers still was frustrated over the position switch.

The receiver did some soul searching.

Diving Deeper Into Jakobi Meyers' Breakout Showing In Patriots' Offense

"That was probably one of the most pivotal moments in my whole career, honestly," Meyers said. "I was like, 'You know what? Maybe this whole football thing isn't for me.' I was ready to quit."

Meyers caught five passes for 112 yards with a 71-yard touchdown, juking safety Derwin James and culminating with a front flip into the end zone, in NC State's next game against Florida State.

"That was the game he came back, and he went out there and played at a high level and helped us win that game," McDonald said. "And that was a lot of the things that he had inside of him, he's developed, and he's learned everything he's got the hard way, as people like to say. But it's just a testament to his character and his drive to continue to try to develop himself and continue to find ways to be successful."

Meyers led NC State in receiving over its final three games of the 2017 season before catching 92 passes for 1,047 yards with four touchdowns as a junior and declaring early for the 2019 NFL Draft. He didn't flash at the NFL scouting combine, so he went undrafted and latched on with the Patriots as a rookie free agent.

THE BREAKOUT

Meyers called his mom and laughed after the Patriots signed Newton this offseason in free agency.

"Small world."

Newton greeted Meyers in the locker room with a picture of them together from the 7-on-7 tourney days. Meyers had stayed in contact with Newton's father, Cecil, but lost touch with Cam. The Patriots' new QB had remembered the skinny kid with the big arm who was thrust into a different position.

Still, Meyers found himself back on the bench to start 2020. After catching 26 passes for 359 yards last season as a standout undrafted free agent, Meyers, who suffered a shoulder injury in training camp, didn't have a role to start the campaign, buried on the depth chart behind Edelman, N'Keal Harry and Damiere Byrd. Meyers only earned a starting spot once Edelman and Harry went down with injuries.

"When I wasn't playing at the beginning of the season, I had already been through that two or three times. I knew where I had to get to," Meyers said.

"... Just showing that I was reliable. Just trying to show the coaches that I could help the team. I knew what I could do talent-wise as far as catching the ball and getting open. But I knew that none of that mattered if coaches didn't trust to put me in there. So just trying to be reliable, being consistent, coming to practice. Not just doing it once but to go out and do it consistently was a different thing."

Meyers has proven adept at getting open over his last three games. He's mastered finding holes in zone coverages and uses his size and quickness to separate at the top of his routes.

"Jakobi's a quarterback at heart," McDonald said. "So, he understands the receiver position from the quarterback position. Just those little nuances of where to be at the right time, what windows to try to work. So, I think that's one of the things that makes him special is he understands what it means to be behind center and where he needs to get to for the quarterback to be successful."

It's not surprising that Edelman, who's on injured reserve with a knee injury, shares those same traits as a former quarterback.

"We both switched to receiver late, so we had to develop our own crafty style," Meyers said. "That's what we know how to do. We don't necessarily know how to run the most direct routes, but we know how to get open the way that suits us."

It helps that he's able to learn from a receiver like Edelman, who Meyers said, "pretty much gives me the answers to the test." From watching Edelman on film and hearing the Patriots great talk about his craft, Meyers is able to weave certain techniques into his own game.

For the past three games, Meyers has turned into Newton's version of Brady's Edelman. Newton, who gave Meyers a pep talk before the receiver's breakout, has completed 51 passes on 75 attempts for 546 yards over the past three weeks and 21 of those completions for 279 of those yards have gone to Meyers.

McDonald is not shocked that Meyers seemingly took a massive jump between his rookie and second seasons.

"He left early, so really this is really supposed to be his rookie year," McDonald said. "Last year was just really his third full year playing wide receiver. So, I always thought he was just scratching the tip of the surface as far as his potential. As he continued to develop and get reps and grow as a wide receiver, I always thought he had a huge upside and a bright future at the position."

The Patriots would be insane to put Meyers back on the bench at this point as the team's best skill-position player. They need a trusted chain-mover who's savvy enough to play multiple roles and get open regardless of the coverage.

Turns out, they had one all along.

OL Michael Onwenu

The Athletic logo, featuring the words "The Athletic" in a white serif font on a black rectangular background.

Mike Onwenu surprising many as Swiss Army knife of Patriots offensive line

By Jeff Howe
Nov 26, 2020

Patriots rookie offensive lineman Mike Onwenu's rapid development has genuinely impressed two of the most respected coaches in the business.

Legendary offensive line boss Dante Scarnecchia, who retired this year but assisted the Patriots' pre-draft evaluation of Onwenu, and Michigan offensive line coach Ed Warinner have long advocated for the former Wolverine. But even both of them have been surprised with how quickly the sixth-round pick has contributed at multiple positions.

"What a great thing for the Patriots and (Onwenu) because here's a kid who's played right guard, right tackle, left guard. How do you do that?" Scarnecchia marveled. "How do you find a guy in the sixth round who can do all that? I think that's a hell of a deal and a hell of a tribute to (Patriots co-offensive line coach) Cole (Popovich) and the job they've done with the offensive line this year. They've done an unbelievable job."

Onwenu's versatility has made him one of the Patriots' most valuable players this season. But beyond versatility, his performance has made him one of their best.

Onwenu is tied with Joe Thuney for the team lead with four clean sheets (no sacks, QB hits, pressures or blocking penalties) – one at left guard, one at right guard, two at right tackle. The rookie has allowed six disruptions (two sacks, one QB hit, three pressures), which is the fewest among the four Pats linemen who have played at least 70 percent of the snaps.

"I always told everybody that he had an unlimited ceiling," Warinner said. "His ability to play NFL football, the body and God(-given) gifts that he has and the talents he developed were off the charts. I'm glad it's working out for him."

The degree to which it's worked has been improbable.

Onwenu started 34 games at right guard and one at left guard at Michigan, with his final two seasons under Warinner's tutelage. But as Onwenu prepared for the draft, the 6-foot-3, 350-pounder didn't recall a single team asking him to play tackle.

After a remote offseason program, the Patriots didn't broach the idea of kicking him outside until they sprinkled in some reps during training camp. Onwenu rotated with starter Jermaine Eluemunor at right tackle for the first two games of the season, then got his first start at left guard in Week 3 when the Patriots reshuffled their line due to David Andrews' broken thumb.

Right guard Shaq Mason couldn't play in Week 4 due to a calf injury, so Onwenu started in his absence. After starting at left guard in Week 6, Onwenu slid to right tackle against the Broncos when Eluemunor injured his ankle. Onwenu has played well enough since to take over right tackle on a full-time basis.

"It really is impressive," Warinner said of Onwenu's workload at three positions. "I've never asked a person to do that. The fact that he's doing it at that high of a level is really impressive. He's very smart. He's very detailed in terms of his thinking and learning. It just shows his athletic versatility. No matter what you say – playing left side, right side, inside, outside – it's all different. There's a lot of carryover, but there's not as much as you think.

"There are very few people who can play (multiple positions). LeBron (James) can play point, the 2, the 3, the 4. There aren't many people doing that in the NBA. There are not many people who can play tackle on the right side, left guard, right guard, all the different spots. That's kind of amazing that he can do that. And not a full six-week training camp, no OTAs, no time with the coaches in person. It's just very amazing."

While at Michigan, Warinner never envisioned Onwenu at right tackle for two reasons. First, they had an incredibly strong group of interior linemen who were integral for their success on the ground. Second, they were healthy and deep enough at tackle that it was never necessary to consider moving Onwenu.

Warinner also never imagined Onwenu would play tackle in the NFL because teams can be such sticklers for measurables, and in that context, 6-foot-3 simply isn't that large. But the Patriots have a 6-foot-2 left tackle in Isaiah Wynn and have traditionally employed shorter centers than the rest of the league. They haven't been as confined by the cookie-cutter theory.

"I never envisioned him playing out there because I never thought with his measurables that anybody would give him that opportunity," Warinner said. "I've played 6-foot-3 tackles in college, but that's not the NFL. Shoot, I know guys who have fallen in the draft because their arm length is 1 inch too short. 'Oh, we can't draft him because he has 32-inch arms.' But we can start a guy at right tackle who is 6-foot-3, so I don't know how it works. I know this, in college, whoever the best five guys are, they're playing. It doesn't matter what their measurables are. It doesn't matter how tall or short they are. Tall players aren't necessarily good players. Short players aren't necessarily bad players. Good players are good players. Mike is a good player.

"I never thought anybody would put him at tackle, but the Patriots are open-minded enough and smart enough to realize what they saw of him at guard made them think maybe this guy can play tackle. My hat's off to the Patriots for not putting him in a box and saying you can only play this position. That's pretty cool by them. That's how they operate. They think outside the box in a lot of areas and have been so successful because of it."

The Patriots have played four prime-time games, so Warinner has had plenty of chances to lock in on Onwenu. Warinner has been particularly impressed by the way Onwenu has pass blocked, something Scarnecchia echoed.

Even in retirement, Scarnecchia worked last spring with the coaching and scouting staffs during the draft evaluation process. Scarnecchia watched tape on a number of linemen, including Onwenu, so the longtime coach has admired his game for a while.

Scarnecchia has become even fonder of Onwenu since then.

"Run blocking, it doesn't matter whether you're a center or a tackle," Scarnecchia said. "If you've got a guy in front of you, what's the difference? The key is, can you hold up out there on the edge in pass protection. The guy had a really good skill set, moves really well and he's long, has long arms and a big body. When you're long and you're big, it takes a while for those guys to get around you. So when you can prove that you can hold up out there on the edge in pass protection – and clearly he must have proven it in practice, or else they wouldn't have put him out there – I think that's a heck of a deal. Just because a guy only plays guard at Michigan doesn't mean that he can't play tackle."

Onwenu has already exceeded expectations, and he could become more valuable than the Patriots ever imagined. Marcus Cannon trended downward in his past two seasons before opting out of the season over COVID-19 concerns, and he might not be part of their long-term plans. At minimum, if Cannon returns next season, he'll have to win back his starting job to justify his \$9.6 million cap hit.

By using a 2019 third-round pick on Yodny Cajuste, the Patriots hoped they were drafting Cannon's replacement, but Cajuste has been limited to eight practices and no games in two seasons due to injuries. Onwenu seems like a slam-dunk answer to lock down the right side for the foreseeable future.

The wild card will be Joe Thuney's situation, as the left guard will be a free agent after the season and was never close to agreeing to an extension this year. While it's possible the Patriots could still view Onwenu as a long-term fit at left guard, it's undeniable how much more difficult it is to draft and develop a tackle.

Wherever Onwenu slots, he has proven his ability to do the job – far quicker than anyone ever expected.

"I really liked this kid," Scarnecchia said. "I thought he was a road grader and one of those tough, physical guys. To Cole's credit, moving him to tackle, especially out of need, right tackles are hard to find. He's not the tallest guy in the world, but neither is Isaiah. He is physical. He's tough. He has all those traits, man. I'm really happy for him. I think it's a really great thing for that kid. I've never met him. I've just seen him on tape and evaluated him like those other guys have. I think they've done a great job of developing him this year."



How Patriots OL Michael Onwenu went from 6th-round pick to one of the best rookies in NFL

By Ryan Hannable
Nov 18, 2020

Maybe there's just something about the Patriots selecting a player out of Michigan in the sixth round.

Everyone knows about Tom Brady, but there's another success story this year in offensive lineman Michael Onwenu.

The rookie has started every game thus far — Weeks 1 and 2 as an extra blocking tight end, Week 3 at left guard, Week 5 at right guard and then every game since at right tackle.

That is pretty impressive for any player, let alone a rookie and yet he's producing at an extremely high level.

Pro Football Focus has him graded at 89.4 so far this year, which is the second-best among all rookies at any position behind Vikings wide receiver Justin Jefferson. And then his 88.8 percent pass block win rate via NFL Next Gen Stats is the best among any guard in the league.

"Mike's a hardworking kid," Bill Belichick said recently. "He takes coaching well. Whatever you ask him to do, he tries very hard to do it and is a real smart kid that can correct mistakes and pick things up the second time around. ... Just he's a good football player and he's shown the versatility to play two different spots, guard and tackle – which, in this league, as a rookie, different sides of the line, it's really been impressive."

So, how did a player of Onwenu's caliber slip to the sixth round and how did he go from the 14th guard selected in the draft to arguably the best offensive lineman of the class?

It's a "big" story.

Growing up, Onwenu was always a lot bigger than his peers. Attending Cass Technical High School in Detroit he was 330 pounds as a freshman, but then 370 by the time he was a senior.

He was dominant on the field — getting offers from Michigan, Alabama, Ohio State and more — but that also came with a number of questions and some of those were beyond just on the football field.

Why is he so big? Is something wrong? Can he play at the next level?

This was never once an issue for Tim Drevno, the offensive coordinator/offensive line coach at Michigan at the time, who helped recruit Onwenu. Drevno was able to see that he was much more than just a player who was able to bully his opponents given his size.

"I just loved his demeanor," Drevno, who is now coaching at USC and spent time with the 49ers, said. "He's really calm. He doesn't panic about a lot of stuff. Just a nice young man to talk to. I really loved his mom and dad. You could see he had a work ethic and a want to be successful."

Onwenu's parents — Stephen and Roseline — were both born in Nigeria and came to the United States to better their lives. Stephen is a corrections officer in Detroit, while Roseline owns a small clothing store down the street from the family home.

Both were able to set a good example for their son when it comes to working hard and being grateful for everything there is in life.

Given his makeup and attitude, Drevno had an idea from the start Onwenu had the potential to one day play on Sundays.

"I knew. Coaching in the NFL I could see it," he said. "Just his DNA, his wiring and his makeup. He is so even-keeled. He doesn't get too excited, doesn't get too low, doesn't have any panic to him. The screen doesn't go fuzzy on him."

With that being said, the long-time O-line coach knew Onwenu's weight was something to monitor and got him to drop 20 or so pounds at Michigan, but it was never a huge issue that some tried to make it.

"I didn't really push the issue very much because I was at USC before I went to Michigan and I coached [Pittsburgh Steelers offensive tackle] Zach Banner and he weighed like 385," Drevno said. "I said, 'Zach, let's get you down to 360 or something.' I have never seen a guy so heavy he can't move, he just has to be in good shape. I made it a little bit of an issue, but not too big of an issue. He did it more to be in better shape."

At Michigan, Onwenu played as a true freshman — on both sides of the ball in fact. Against Rutgers he played right guard, nose tackle and was on the field goal protection unit. As a sophomore he appeared in 12 games, including nine starts — eight at right guard and one at left guard. Then the following year he started all 13 games at right guard and was an All-Big 10 honoree.

Onwenu continued to stay at right guard as a senior, starting all 13 games and received several honors, including being named to the Pro Football Focus College's All-Big Ten Team on offense.

It was apparent he could play at the next level, but his potential as a guard weighing 350 pounds seemed to be an issue for some scouts and teams.

At the NFL combine Onwenu weighed in at 344 pounds — almost 30 pounds less than when he was a freshman — but he was still the heaviest interior linemen in Indianapolis that week.

That, combined with his other testing numbers, likely scared away many NFL teams.

"They probably thought he was one-dimensional," Drevno said. "I think they probably thought is he just a guard? I don't know what film they looked at, what they evaluated and what they thought. They probably saw guys who were a little bit taller and ran a little bit better — the pro shuttle and different things."

But, the Patriots were not like many other teams.

Co-offensive line coaches Carmen Bricillo, Cole Popovich as well as the retired Dante Scarnecchia all did their homework and dug deeper into Onwenu.

Bricillo is friends with Ed Warinner, the offensive line coach at Michigan since 2018, so he got some insight and the Patriots were able to meet with Onwenu before COVID-19 halted all draft-related visits.

Meeting him face-to-face, they were able to realize his weight was not something to be concerned about.

"[Talking] and seeing him in person, you realize he takes it seriously and you put that to rest and were able to say, 'I don't think this will be a problem' and it hasn't been," Bricillo said last week. "He really does take his diet seriously and his weight is his weight. ... He's a big square body, he lifts and he works his butt off."

Weeks later, the Patriots selected Onwenu in the sixth round and No. 182 overall, but he hasn't allowed it to be the end of his story.

Many sixth-round picks do not make NFL rosters and either get placed on the practice squad following final cuts, or are released and forced to search for a new team.

This particular season it was especially difficult for rookies given COVID-19, which forced in-person OTAs to be canceled and everything in the spring to be conducted virtually.

Despite all this, the Patriots knew they had something in Onwenu almost right away.

Bricillo recalled during the spring when everyone was working remotely and having meetings via Zoom, Onwenu would text him at 10:30 at night with questions.

"I kind would smile and show it to my wife because it was something I knew he was watching film at 10:30 and we got in the Zoom meeting the next morning that was going to be the first question we were going to answer," he said. "It's a testament to how hard he works and it is what you have to do."

Onwenu added: "I just want to do to the best of my ability. It was especially hard over the spring and summer learning virtually and learning a whole new offense. Cole and Carm, they did a great job and they worked with all the rookies. It was successful."

The rookie carried that through the summer when the Patriots and the rest of the NFL were able to have training camp and finally meet in person. Onwenu made the initial 53-man roster and then because of some injuries on the offensive line slid around the first few weeks before making a good enough impression to settle into the starting right tackle role.

Does Onwenu have a chip on his shoulder given where he was selected and so many teams passing on him?

"Not necessarily, everyone has their reasons," he said. "I just want to do the best I can do at whatever position I am at, whatever job I am doing. That is just my mindset. I am just trying to take advantage of my opportunities."

Onwenu certainly has made the most of those opportunities as he turned filling a need on the offensive line at right tackle into a starting role for what appears to be the remainder of the season.

Each week, Onwenu seems to make at least one tweet-worthy pancake block and very rarely misses on his assignments.

Although just 10 games into his NFL career, the future seems bright.

"He's the type of guy that if he keeps playing the way he is, he's absolutely a guy that is going to play several years and if he's texting coaches at 10:30 at night to try and find out details and he's out competing at a high level, I think great things are going to happen for him because he's making an impact so fast," Drevno said. "I think a lot of those guys, if you start out strong, you're going to have a great career. He has a want-to and a desire."

Every NFL player has a story, it just so happens Onwenu's is bigger than most.

The Providence Journal

LARGE-SCALE SUCCESS: At 6-foot-3 and 350 pounds, rookie Michael Onwenu is quickly earning a place on the Patriots offensive line

By Mark Daniels
Oct 17, 2020

Michael Onwenu stepped on the scale and immediately Thomas Wilcher was surprised.

Onwenu was a 15-year-old freshman at Cass Technical High School in Detroit at the time. The teenager looked like a man already with legs like oak trees to go with a wingspan of 82 inches. When the scale read just over 330 pounds, however, his high school coach realized how big he truly was.

"That's how he got the name 'Big Mike,' " Wilcher said. "We couldn't believe that he weighed that much."

That kicked off a central theme in Onwenu's life. He holds his weight well, but his weight was a blessing and a curse. Throughout high school, he was ridiculously strong. He was able to bench press well over 200 pounds as a freshman. As he continued to grow, he developed into a legitimate Division I prospect. That scale read 370 pounds by the time he was a senior.

People always asked the same questions.

Is he too big? Is he unhealthy? Is he working hard enough?

That bothered Onwenu. That's why Wilcher, who ran track and played football for Michigan, tried to get his pupil not only comfortable in his own body, but also focused on ways he could improve his eating habits. Once he did those things, Wilcher knew the sky was the limit.

"He's created a better outlook towards life," Wilcher said, adding that Onwenu got past people focusing on his weight. "He's come to identify that's who he is and he knows how to look good, how to look healthy, and how to be supportive of himself. And that's the most important thing right there. He's a very strong character now because of who he is and what he has learned about himself."

A big part of Onwenu's journey involves that scale. Instead of the number holding him back, Onwenu has consistently used it to prove people wrong. That's what's happening in New England with the Patriots.

Family values

Stephen and Roseline Onwenu were born in Nigeria and came to the United States to make a better life. Roseline is a business owner, operating Detroit's Sterose International Boutique, a clothing store that specializes in head geles (a piece of fabric wrapped by hand around the head to form an often flamboyant head wrap.) Stephen is a hard-working corrections officer in the city.

They raised their son Michael to be a hard-working and a serious student. That's what Tim Drevno noticed when he started to recruit Onwenu for Michigan. The teenager's size was obvious, but the Wolverines offensive line coach saw more than just that.

"They're a really tight knit family that loved each other. It's one of those things — you can see why he blossomed," Drevno said. "(On the field), he moved really well. He had really good initial quickness in terms of foot speed and agility for a big guy for 370-plus pounds. Some people make his weight a big issue like, 'Oh, gosh, he's too heavy.' If he's able to move and move with functional movement things, it was good enough for me."

When Onwenu entered Michigan in 2016, no one wanted him to play at 370 pounds. At first, the goal was to get him under 365. Coaches saw unbelievable strength and athleticism for a guy this size, but trainers wanted him to be at a healthier weight.

Drevno explained that the trainers would never ask Onwenu to be 330 pounds and added that "would be strictly impossible." It was more about getting him to an ideal size to take advantage of his strength without losing any of it.

"He's a big guy. He's got really good lower body girth. Hard to move. And the D lineman at Michigan used to tell me he used to have a death grip," Drevno said. "If he got his hands on you, you're done.... He's that strong. He could probably just condition and be just fine because he's got that brute strength."

Fine-tuning his body

Ed Warinner became the Michigan offensive line coach when Onwenu was a junior. When he looked over the roster and saw Big Mike's height and weight, he thought the same thing many people did.

Was this healthy? Is he working hard enough?

Those worries went away thanks to a DEXA scan machine that measures body composition. At Michigan, along with body fat percentage, they also measure bone density.

"The assumption is that being that big, you have to be carrying a lot of fat ... and his (readings) were as good as anybody on the O-line," Warinner said. "It's his bone density, his thickness, his muscle mass, that's what's incredible on him. It's not that he weighs 360 or whatever because he has 30 pounds extra fat that he could lose."

"He's just a big, thick human being. People presume things, I being one of them. 'Oh, God, you can't play at that weight.' But we have some really science-oriented people on our nutrition and weight staff and so they did a lot of studies on him and we got him down."

Onwenu had natural talent, but Warinner wanted to see him attack practice as hard as he attacked the games. The staff also wanted him to get his weight below 360 pounds. Following his junior year, Onwenu put it upon himself to make dietary changes. When he returned to Michigan as a senior, he hit 350 pounds — dropping 20 pounds from his high school senior year.

In that 2019 season Warinner saw a player that could take on any defensive lineman one-on-one. He saw an NFL offensive lineman.

"For him, he became a really good player here when he started to practice at a high level, when he took practice really seriously and worked his [butt] off," Warinner said. "And when he started doing that, then it manifests itself in the games with better play. He took his diet and weight and conditioning to a new level."

Getting noticed

People tend to forget about the scale when Onwenu steps on the field.

A sixth-round pick, Onwenu has turned into the biggest surprise for the Patriots. He's started all four games and even more impressive, he's played four different positions — right tackle, left guard, right guard and jumbo tight end. This is after he played only guard in college.

In his last start, at right guard, Onwenu didn't allow a single pressure on the quarterback. Following that game against the Super Bowl-champion Chiefs, Pro Football Focus had Onwenu as the highest-graded rookie in the NFL. His 92.2 mark is also the highest ever given to a rookie through the first four weeks of the regular season, dating back to 2006.

How did the NFL miss on Michael Onwenu? How did he last until the sixth round, pick 182?

It turns out the rookie couldn't escape questions about his weight. Add in COVID-19 and most teams didn't get to see him in person. It hurt his draft stock.

"He probably slipped because of the measurable and maybe some people got scared of his weight," Drevno said. "But I think that the Patriots did a heck of a job. ... They started to figure out what the kid's wiring is. 'Does he process quick on his feet? Does he panic? Can he stay with the focus on the task at hand? Is he mature? Can he retain information? Can he not be a repeat offender?' Those are the things that you see in him. I knew he was an NFL guy when I got him out of high school and when I coached him."

At the NFL Combine, Onwenu weighed 344 pounds, which was remarkable considering he entered college at 370. Despite the drop in weight, he was the heaviest interior offensive lineman at the combine. For the workouts, he opted to participate only in the bench press. He didn't know he wouldn't get a chance to participate in Michigan's Pro Day due to the pandemic. He was able to visit the Patriots and Miami before the pandemic canceled the rest of his visits.

"No one ever got to put their hands on him," Warinner said. "So there was really no data and as you know, the NFL is big on all these numbers. ... All I know is he's a really good player. And sometimes, certain places and people use those numbers more than the film. If people would have worked him out, they would have [seen] what I saw every day for two years."

That number on a scale might have followed him to the NFL, but his results speak louder. Michael Onwenu is a big man. He always has been. He's also a talented football player.

That's the focus now.

DE Ronnie Perkins



Patriots' Ronnie Perkins is on a mission to prove he was the biggest steal of NFL Draft

By Jeff Howe
May 12, 2021

Ronnie Perkins was stewing.

Last October, the oft-described “alpha” edge rusher was camped inside the University of Oklahoma’s football meeting room as they combed through the film of a second consecutive loss to an unranked opponent, and Perkins was furious.

It started with himself. He failed a drug test a season earlier and was still only midway through his six-game suspension. So Perkins felt responsible for the Sooners’ skid, which took them out of contention for the national championship.

He also didn’t like what he saw from his teammates, as they blew fourth-quarter leads to Kansas State and Iowa State and had to rebound for that week’s rivalry game against Texas.

Perkins was getting ready to blow.

“His leg is shaking,” Oklahoma outside linebackers and defensive ends coach Jamar Cain said. “He’s breathing heavy. I’m like, ‘Oh shoot, OK. You can feel the elephant in the room around here.’ Ronnie just lays into everybody in the room. That’s when I knew we had a true alpha. We had a true leader. It was one of those things, I wanted to tell him to stop, but I think our guys needed to hear that.

“He didn’t just lay it on the young guys. He laid it on the starters in the room like, ‘That’s not how we do it around here. Wait until I get back. I’m going harder in practice against all of you guys. We don’t lose like that.’ I’m like, ‘OK, he’s a dude. He’s an alpha in here.’ He went off on everybody in the room. He even had me quiet for a little bit.”

Perkins backed it up and unleashed hell in practice for the final two weeks of his suspension, so much so that a couple offensive coaches asked Cain to remove him from the scout team because he was so decisively dominating the starters.

Perkins, the New England Patriots’ third-round draft pick last month, set the tone and the agenda at Oklahoma. Despite the suspension, he was the most important voice in the locker room and presence on the practice field.

He led, without being able to play, because he banked so much respect during his first two years on campus. Perkins’ rise, tumble and return to dominance marked his path to Foxboro, where the alpha will focus on validating what he hopes will be another label – one of the biggest steals of the NFL Draft.

‘Man Man’

Perkins was the youngest of Ronald and Keisha Perkins’ six children, but he didn’t look it. His mother nicknamed him “Man Man,” and he’d frequently crash his two brothers’ youth practices – jumping into drills without pads until Ronald, their coach, blew the whistle to get him off the field.

When his brothers got to University City High School in St. Louis, Ronnie served as the ball boy for coach Carl Reed. And by the time Perkins was in seventh grade, Reed had a pretty good feeling he’d be the best player in the family.

That vision took shape during Perkins’ junior year, when Reed took over the prestigious program at Lutheran North High and Perkins followed. Reed challenged Perkins to improve his strength and conditioning, and his production boomed.

“He is chasing being the best that he can be,” Reed said. “It’s special. You know what his goals are. A lot of guys say what they want to do, and then they never do it. He said it. He sought out to do it. And he accomplished it.”

Perkins turned himself into one of the most-coveted recruits in the nation. As a senior, he racked up 15 sacks and also played tight end and special teams.

Oklahoma defensive line coach Calvin Thibodeaux, who led Perkins' recruitment, recalled him "tossing dudes" as a three-way player. Perkins would blow up the backfield in a defensive series, catch a pass on offense, and Thibodeaux also recalled him recovering his own blocked punt and returning it for a touchdown.

"He was all over the field. I was like, man, this dude is an athlete," Thibodeaux said. "I remember the whole (Lutheran North) team was coming out (of the locker room), and they were talking about putting the other team in a body bag. I was like, wow, I kind of like that. It just tells they were ready to get after somebody. That type of juice was needed at (Oklahoma)."

As Perkins' recruitment intensified and he received interest from nearly every big-time program in the country, Reed appreciated Perkins' approach more than anything. Perkins got his teammates involved as much as possible, even bringing them on visits to help their exposure or just to show them what it was like to experience the red-carpet treatment from places like Oklahoma, Texas and LSU.

Perkins didn't take any shortcuts with his responsibilities at Lutheran North, either. He routinely showed up at least 10 minutes early for 6 a.m. workouts and maintained his schoolwork – creating an atmosphere that forced others to follow his path.

"He exudes leadership," Reed said. "I've had a lot of high-profile dudes. Nobody handled their recruiting situation better than he did."

"He could have gone anywhere that he wanted to go."

When Oklahoma landed Perkins, Thibodeaux believed he was the type of impact player who could help turn around a defense that had been leaking in recent years. Head coach Lincoln Riley and his staff celebrated as soon as they got the official commitment.

"Man, it was really awesome," Thibodeaux said. "The whole coaching staff came in there and was really jacked up because we knew we had gotten ourselves a really great football player. We were really excited. We knew we got a really, really good football player."

'He was leading us'

Perkins, who paced the Sooners with five sacks in 2018, broke out as a sophomore with a performance that had to warm Bill Belichick's heart.

First-year defensive coordinator Alex Grinch didn't like the way the defense had been closing games, so he got creative in November 2019 before a massive showdown against Baylor. Grinch showed them a documentary of the Patriots' comeback from a 28-3 deficit against the Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl LI.

The message: Don't be the Falcons.

In a wild coincidence, Baylor built a 28-3 lead, and Oklahoma rallied for a 34-31 victory.

"I never in a million years thought we were going to be the Patriots in the deal," Grinch laughed. "My joke (to the team) was if I knew it was going to be like that, I would have shown them clips of the '85 Bears."

Perkins had three sacks and four tackles for loss. He emerged as the clear leader on a defense that fielded four other draft picks, including 2020 first-rounder Kenneth Murray.

"By no stretch of the imagination did he make every play in the second half, but my memory of the second half is Ronnie Perkins made every play – in all those moments a play needed to be made," Grinch said. "We turned the tide and shut them out in the second half, and it had everything to do with him."

Thibodeaux added, "After that game, I said this guy is an NFL guy. It was crystal clear when I looked into Ronnie Perkins' eyes that night. He was leading us, and he was just a sophomore. He was the guy. He played his butt off. He went bananas that game."

Teammates followed Perkins because of his work ethic off the field and the production that matched it every game. He also had a personality that warmed up every room, as Grinch referred to Perkins as "an energy giver, not an energy taker."

He was a natural.

However, Perkins failed a drug test before the national semifinal against LSU. His season ended with six sacks, 13.5 tackles for loss and a drive for redemption, as he had to watch Oklahoma surrender a season-high of 63 points in a blowout to the eventual national champions.

"I'll tell you what, everybody was surprised," Thibodeaux said of the suspension. "Ronnie is on the wall in this building. He was squeaky clean. It was very disappointing, very surprising.

"It was killing him not to be able to play. He knew he hurt the team. He was just so eager to get back. He was always on that sideline and encouraging the guys, being positive, but it was killing him deep down inside to be missing action."

'You're getting an alpha'
They have a saying at Oklahoma.

The event plus the response equals the outcome.

In this specific case, Perkins' event was the failed drug test. The desired outcome was to declare for the NFL Draft after his junior season as long as he got a Day 2 grade from the advisory committee. His response would determine whether that equation added up.

Thibodeaux and Cain didn't sugarcoat their advice for Perkins as they prepared for the 2020 season.

"You're going to have to go bonkers to put yourself in that position (to be drafted)," Thibodeaux told him.

Cain, who was hired to coach the edge rushers in January 2020, helped Perkins create a list of goals, pointing out that one or two sacks wasn't going to be nearly enough to sway the NFL after a half-season suspension.

"Your film is going to need to speak so loud that people can't deny you for the suspension," Cain told him. "People have to be willing to take you because your film is so good."

Cain was immediately blown away by Perkins' willingness to be coached and even change some of his techniques for the betterment of the team defense. Grinch appreciated the way Perkins made plays against the run and pass without having to scheme ways to get him one-on-one matchups.

All the coaches enjoyed how much time and effort Perkins devoted to be successful, almost always staying after practice to perfect his rush techniques. This was common throughout his time at Oklahoma, but Perkins took it to a new level last season, even without the reward of immediate playing time.

"He was very motivated, just eager to get back on the field and prove himself," Thibodeaux said. "When he was out there practicing, you could tell he was doing it for a reason. Everyone around him could feel that."

Still, Riley wasn't precisely sure when Perkins would be eligible to return due to the ambiguity of the NCAA's half-season suspension rule as it related to a schedule that was shortened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two weeks after unloading on the team in the meeting room, Riley brought Perkins to Texas Tech with the hope that he'd be eligible. Riley finally got word the night before the game at the team hotel, just in time to deliver the news in his meeting with the players.

"The team exploded," Thibodeaux said. "They were so jacked up."

Cain added, "The whole room just started screaming and hollering. The whole team was so happy that he was back."

After the meeting, Perkins beelined to hug Thibodeaux. He could feel his redemption coming.

Despite playing just six games last season, Perkins had 5.5 sacks, nine hurries and 10.5 tackles for loss. Oklahoma had allowed an average of 33.5 points in four games (2-2 record) against FBS teams without Perkins. With him, they allowed 17.5 points per outing during a six-game winning streak.

"We were a good team, and we became a great team once he came back on the field," Cain said. "He turned our defense totally around."

Perkins then got the second-day draft grade that he coveted from the advisory board, so he declared early. The Athletic tabbed him as the 70th-best player in the draft class, while some other outlets viewed him as high as a top-50 prospect.

The Patriots got Perkins with the No. 96 pick.

"It's only the beginning for him," Reed said. "He's going to be a really good NFL player. The scary part about it, what people don't understand with him, he's so coachable and such a student of the game that playing for a guy like Belichick is going to take his game to enormously high levels. He's tough enough to take that hard coaching. He studies his stuff. He's fearless. He's relentless. I don't think you can write a better situation for a kid like him getting a chance to play for coach Belichick."

Throughout the pre-draft process, Cain told teams, "if you get Ronnie Perkins, you're getting an alpha."

Perkins only had two and a half seasons of tape at Oklahoma, but he made it count with 16.5 sacks and 32 tackles for loss in 33 games. He legitimately disrupted the backfield every time he played.

Perkins believes that's his purpose when he's on the field.

"He walks tall with his shoulders back and expects to have success," Grinch said. "There's not a whole lot a competitor is going to do against him to convince him otherwise."

DB Adrian Phillips

The Boston Globe

For three Patriots, having wives who are doctors raises the levels of COVID discussions

By Nicole Yang

October 17, 2020

When Camille Phillips first learned that quarterback Cam Newton had tested positive for coronavirus, she didn't know what was going to happen next.

"My heart just dropped," she recalled in a phone conversation earlier this week. "I didn't want it to be a big outbreak like we've seen in Tennessee."

She felt for her husband Adrian, an All-Pro safety who signed a two-year contract with the Patriots in March, along with his teammates and coaches. How many more would also test positive? Would the team shut down? Would the league postpone New England's game?

As they waited for answers, Adrian told Camille the Patriots were going to rally without Newton. He had embraced the team's motto, "Do Your Job." But Camille was skeptical.

"That was one of those times when I was like the doctor," she said. "I was really hesitant, like, 'Oh, I don't know.' He's like, 'We're going to do our jobs. Everything's going to be fine.' I was just like, 'I don't know.'"

Camille, a second-year pediatric resident at Texas Tech, is one of three Patriots wives with a background in medicine. Shahrzad Slater, wife of special teams captain Matthew Slater, and Michelle Powell, wife of fellow captain Devin McCourty, are doctors, too.

The couples' professions have never been more intertwined, as the Patriots and NFL navigate a season amid the coronavirus pandemic. For McCourty, that means he hears a lot of "Told you so" and "You should be doing this" or "You should be doing that."

"Anyone who is married knows if your wife tells you something and you don't listen, it doesn't go well," McCourty said. "I just try to tell her what I hear from the doctors in the building. If she agrees, she agrees. If she doesn't, I just try to exit the conversation the best way possible."

For Adrian, Camille has been a sounding board.

"Honestly, since February, March, I've been leaning on her because she's been on the front lines," Adrian said. "She's been on me hard because that was one of her concerns when the season started — just how everything would play out."

Camille will often give Adrian reminders that align with the recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Wash your hands properly, social distance as much as possible, and wear your mask over your nose.

Adrian has also made a few adjustments to his personal routine. Instead of going to the mall to pick out an outfit for game day, he'll online shop with Camille. And instead of picking up food at his favorite Patriot Place restaurant, Skipjack's, he'll place an order for contactless delivery.

"She's just been on me hard in making sure I isolate myself, stay on the Germ-X and Purell, and have a mask," Adrian said. "Look out for yourself as much as you can."

Including Newton, the Patriots have placed eight players on the COVID-IR list since the start of the regular season. With each positive test, Camille can't help but feel a little nervous because she's witnessed the effects of the virus firsthand.

"I know he's a super healthy athlete and if he gets it, it most likely won't hit him hard," Camille said. "But I still have seen the worst of it. I do have a sense of anxiety every time I hear there's a positive. I'm just praying he doesn't get it, too."

A typical week on Camille's current rotation, pediatric ICU, consists of a 24-hour shift, an 18-hour overnight shift, and two 12-hour daytime shifts at the hospital. She is required to wear a surgical mask for the entirety of her shift. If she's treating a patient with coronavirus symptoms, then she must wear a mask plus a face shield. If she's treating a patient who has tested positive, then she wears a portable respirator.

Because Camille works in Texas, the distance adds an element of stress. Last season, when Adrian suffered a broken arm in Week 2 as a member of the Los Angeles Chargers, Camille flew out immediately to be with him for his surgery as well as the following week. She's not sure if the same response would be possible if Adrian were to test positive.

"It's difficult being away," she said. "If he does test positive, can I get to him? Can I take care of him? Or would that be a risk for me and my patients? I also want to be there for my husband."

Overall, Camille has been pleased with how the Patriots have responded to their positive tests, particularly the speed at which they've closed their facilities.

She was also happy to see that the team didn't rush Newton's return. Prior to the second postponement of the Patriots-Broncos game, it was unclear if Newton was going to be available even though he was eligible to be cleared.

"Cam is like the heart and soul of the team," she said. "He's our quarterback. You need him. Even with that being the case, them not rushing him back even though he's asymptomatic is really commendable."

Camille approves of many aspects of the league's protocol — daily testing, for example, she says is key — but she expressed disappointment with the decision to have the Patriots travel to Kansas City so soon after Newton's positive test, a sentiment shared by several players.

"I personally don't think the game should have been played, but that's me," she said. "When there's a positive test, I would like to see a quicker delay of games."

Moving forward, Camille's advice to Adrian remains the same: Wash your hands, social distance, and wear your mask. She'll also add in more specific reminders, such as encouraging him to limit his interactions with the opposing team after games.

"Try not to go in for the hugs, the handshakes," she said. "When you see your friend, you want to hug them and talk to them, but just try and maintain that distance. Maybe FaceTime them from the locker room instead."

Since Adrian left for training camp, Camille's been able to see him in New England twice, and she plans to again in two weeks. In order for her to visit, she must produce a negative test before she leaves. Once she arrives, she has to go to the team's facility and produce another negative test.

"I feel like the Patriots overall are doing a good job and taking it really seriously, which I appreciate," she said.

Camille has yet to meet Shahrzad and Michelle, but she's hopeful the three can eventually connect and discuss their unique perspectives.

"As a wife and as a fan of football, I love the game, I love the sport," Camille said. "As a doctor, I see things that make me hesitate. I think there's a fine line."



Why Adrian Phillips could be a free agent steal at safety for Patriots

By Tom E. Curran
June 18, 2020

Almost every one of the low-profile, high-character free agents the Patriots signed this offseason can be described with this phrase: "You might not have heard of him, but you're going to love him."

Earlier this week, we profiled fleet little wideout Damiere Byrd. Now let's look at a guy with a little thicker resume: safety Adrian Phillips.

A two-year, \$6 million deal was all New England needed to secure Phillips. He could end up being a massive bargain.

He's 5-foot-11, 210 pounds, was named All-Pro and a Pro Bowler in 2018 for his special teams work, has a stack of testimonials about his massive football brain and is the hybrid box safety the Patriots have been trying but failing to secure through the draft.

Why didn't the Chargers keep the 28-year-old if he's so damn good? Safety surplus out there in Los Angeles. The Chargers took Derwin James and Nassir Adderley in the first and second rounds respectively in 2018 and 2019, which paved the way for them to move on from Phillips.

Why would the Patriots want him? Because Devin McCourty and Patrick Chung both turn 33 in August, Duron Harmon got dealt to the Lions, rookie second-rounder Kyle Dugger will need seasoning and on special teams, Nate Ebner is now a Giant.

I'm not going to get into it here, but the fleet of brilliant special teams guys this team has with Matt Slater, Justin Bethel and now Phillips (among others) is impressive. Especially if they have to punt a lot.

Jeff Miller, who covers the Chargers for the Los Angeles Times, raved this week when I asked about Phillips.

"He was tremendous in 2018 (94 tackles, league-leading 19 special teams tackles) and then got hurt last year unfortunately," said Miller. "He would have had a big role last year because of some injuries. When Derwin James went down they went immediately to Adrian, and he was gonna have a very vital role in their defense but (Phillips) got hurt early on against the Lions and that derailed his season."

The injury to James was bad enough, said Miller, but the injury to Phillips was one that hurt the team tremendously because Phillips did so many things for them.

What kind of player did the Patriots get?

"He's a guy (Chargers head coach) Anthony Lynn called one of his core guys," said Miller. "Real good player, real smart. He would call defenses and put other guys in position and know where they were supposed to be.

"He's impactful. The Chargers really loved him but they had a surplus at that spot."

The projected replacement for Phillips in the Chargers defense is Desmond King, another Pro Bowl-level defensive back.

Over the past half-decade, the complementary strengths of the McCourty-Chung-Harmon troika became clear. All were excellent tacklers. McCourty was the sheriff, getting people where they were supposed to be and helping over the top when the Patriots are seeing guys who are tough for corners to handle 1-on-1.

Chung has been the enforcer playing run-support in the box and being one of the league's best at covering tight ends, slots and running backs in the passing game. Harmon was a third safety with a knack for big plays that came from his understanding what the entire defense was doing and when to take a risk.

According to Miller, Phillips is most like Chung.

"He's that more in-the-box safety, more of an enforcer," said Miller. "He's a good tackler, he can hit but he's not in that vein of a centerfield/cover-ground kind of safety. He's a closer-to-the-line-of-scrimmage guy. You'd probably want him more on a tight end or a back out of the back field. He's got decent speed – he's not a burner – but he's certainly capable in the pass game of covering those kinds of guys."

If you're wondering whether Phillips' backstory makes him easy to root for, it does.

"All you need to know is he was cut eight times by the Chargers," said Miller. "Brought him back, cut him, brought him back, cut him - literally eight times before he stuck. He never gave up. Then, in 2018 he just blew up. He got a chance to play and had a great season and was recognized at the end of the year. He's going to be missed by teammates and the media."

And here's Phillips' defensive coordinator, Gus Bradley:

"He can play strong safety, free safety, dime [linebacker] and nickel [linebacker] for us, and we'd feel extremely comfortable if he was in any of those positions," Bradley said in 2018.

"So that intelligence, he's got a football IQ that is ... he's just one of the most elite guys in that area that I've ever been around."

WR Matthew Slater



Patriots' Matthew Slater savoring the touchdown moment he'd stopped believing would ever come

By Matt Vautour
September 30, 2019

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. - Playing almost exclusively special teams for as long as he has, Matthew Slater gave up daydreaming about an NFL touchdown a long time ago.

He's 34 years old and while he's listed as a wide receiver, he rarely ever lines up there and when he does, he's almost never targeted. He's not a kick-returner either. The chance of him ever getting the ball, let alone getting it in the end zone was minuscule. Slater's most noticeable moments are downing Patriots punts deep in opponent territories.

"I stopped thinking about getting one a while ago," Slater said Sunday after the Patriots' 16-10 win over the Buffalo Bills. He last scored in 2007 as a senior at UCLA when he returned a kick for a touchdown against Arizona State.

That's O.K. by him. The son of Los Angeles Rams standout offensive lineman, Jackie Slater, who played 20 seasons in the NFL, sacrificing for the betterment of the team is his DNA, a staple of his upbringing.

But Slater didn't look like a guy who is unfamiliar with handling the football. When J.C. Jackson raced around the right side and got his hand on Corey Bojorquez's punt. The ball bounced almost straight up and Slater fielded it off an uncertain carom like it was second nature.

He scooped the ball at the 11-yard line and raced into the end zone. He first thrust his arms out then slid on his knees leaning back and looking skyward Brandi Chastain style.

"J.C. did a great job timing it up. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time," Slater said.

Slater was modest, but when a guy, who has so few chances for adulation, actually scores, as long as it happens in a win, the celebration spreads far beyond just him. Slater scoring a touchdown seemed to give his teammates as much joy as it did him. He was swarmed by teammates right away.

"It was awesome," said James White smiling at the memory.

"That was great," Tom Brady said. "I was hoping to throw him one at some point. ... It was great seeing him get in the end zone. He'll get to keep that ball."

Even Bill Belichick seemed to appreciate the moment.

"Nobody works harder than Matt as his craft," Belichick said. "Great play by our specials teams. ... J.C. made a great play and Slater turned it into points."

Slater made sure to save the ball knowing there was no guarantee, this would ever happen again.

"I'm just real thankful for that. I thank God for putting me in position," he said grinning widely. "I guess you play long enough and you get a bone."



Is Pats lifer Matthew Slater the last great gunner?

By Kevin Van Valkenburg
August 8, 2019

THE BOYS HATED the hill. It loomed over every teenage workout like an appointment with an outdoor torture chamber. They could feel it in their lungs and in their legs well before they arrived at the park near their house in Orange, California.

The hill was almost 80 yards long, rows of houses on each side. Its incline increased gradually, until it was almost too much to bear at a full sprint. But every week, the Slater brothers -- Matthew and David -- would slog their way to the top, again and again. Their father, Hall of Famer Jackie, would stand, stoic and stern, at the base, a stopwatch in his hand. He'd give the two boys 18 seconds to reach the summit of the hill. If they didn't make it, the rep did not count. When they came back down, legs wobbling like newborn colts, they had 45 seconds to rest. Then it was time to sprint again.

"Running up that hill was no joke," Jackie says now. "If you go up it 10 times, it takes everything out of you."

This was a test of faith, and of commitment. The father did not want his sons playing football. He had endured thousands of collisions during his 19-year NFL career; he'd torn ligaments and mangled joints blocking giants of the

game like Reggie White and Joe Greene, and he didn't want that for his boys. He tried to steer them toward other sports, like track, but they kept begging to play football, Matthew in particular. Keeping them away from pads only intensified the longing. "Matthew had asthma, so I always wondered if he'd have the cardiovascular strength to even play," Jackie says. "But he said he wanted to be a pro football player, and I had to find out if he could hold up to the rigors of the game."

As a deeply religious man, the father felt a test of faith brought out the best in people. Here was the chance for his boys to prove that they were up for this. Slater had played with Walter Payton in college, and each offseason Payton famously molded his body into iron by sprinting up the dusty hills near his Mississippi home.

Most of the hills in California were concrete, but this one was grass. Jackie had run it often during his career with the Rams, his boys watching quietly at the base of the hill. When the time came, he decided to reverse their roles.

"He didn't say a lot, but I remember him looking at us like: 'Hey, you wanted this, didn't you?'" Matthew says.

If you want to understand the origin story of the most unlikely NFL career of this era, that California hill is probably the best place to begin. Matthew Slater willed himself to climb the steep grass-covered incline hundreds of times. It became a metaphor for his entire career. He might have been born into NFL royalty, but that meant nothing standing at the bottom of the hill.

THERE SEEMS NO logical reason that Slater should be entering his 12th year with the Patriots, or that the least sentimental franchise in professional sports considers Slater -- an undersized wide receiver who has caught just one pass in his NFL career -- such an important part of its team culture that it has kept him around longer than anyone besides its kicker, Stephen Gostkowski, and a quarterback named Tom Brady, a guy you might be familiar with.

Each year, Patriots come and go, many traded away or outright released the minute Bill Belichick believes their salaries (or attitudes) are outweighing their impact. But Slater, improbably, has remained.

There is a real case to be made that Slater is as good at his job -- playing special teams -- as anyone in football. He's been voted to the Pro Bowl seven times, the same number as Aaron Rodgers, Von Miller and Antonio Brown. (It's also the same number, coincidentally, as his father.) For a decade, he's been a headache for opposing special-teams coaches, consistently beating double-teams and blowing up punt returns. But just as important, he might be the best marriage of selflessness and specialization of this NFL era.

Case in point: Do Slater's skills have as much impact as, say, Rodgers' ability to throw a football or Khalil Mack's devastating pass-rushing talents? It's hard to make a leap that generous. Slater, in fact, belly-laughs at the suggestion during an interview at his home the week before Patriots training camp. But if you study the film of the Patriots' 13-3 Super Bowl win last season, you can argue he was as important as anyone (including Brady and MVP Julian Edelman) to New England's win.

The Patriots punted five times against the Rams. Slater downed a punt on the 2-yard line, knocked another out of bounds at the 6, and tackled returner JoJo Natson for a loss on a third. The Rams' offense, which came into the game as the NFL's most prolific unit, could not escape the shadow of its own end zone, and the Patriots' special teams were a big reason for that.

"I know it wasn't everyone's favorite Super Bowl, but it was definitely mine," Slater says. "It was just so rewarding to see all the years of work that we'd put in coming to fruition. ... To put our defense in a position where they could play one of the best Super Bowls in history was so rewarding."

The reality of Slater's existence, however, is that he is beginning to look like the last of his kind. With each passing year, special-teams play seems to engender greater scrutiny. For several seasons, there have been discussions -- driven by the league's desire to reduce the number of vicious, dangerous collisions -- about eliminating kickoffs. Troy Vincent, the NFL's executive vice president of football operations, admitted in an interview with Dan Patrick last year that the idea of eliminating punt returns has come up for discussion. As the NFL tries to figure out how to balance its violent traditions with the reality of the game's uncertain future, it's easy to imagine that a career like Slater's won't be feasible a decade from now.

Whether that's a worthwhile trade-off is a different debate, but the truth is evident: Slater is carrying a torch that represents a certain kind of invaluable role player (Hank Bauer, Bill Bates, Albert Lewis, Steve Tasker, Larry Izzo, Brendon Ayanbadejo) who has been a part of the league since its inception. And the torch appears to be flickering.

"If you start messing with special teams, I think you start messing with the fabric of football, and that's a little sad in a way," Slater says. "I understand the desire to make the game safer, and if you take away an area that has some of the biggest collisions, you feel like you'll be taking some of the violence out of it. But the goal line iso is a pretty violent play, right? Do we get rid of that too? I don't think anyone would argue for that. Obviously, I'm biased, and I'm not blind to that. I just think it's important to understand that for a long time, the kicking game was the whole game."

One name in particular comes to mind for Slater when he thinks about the impact of special teams: Tasker, who made seven Pro Bowl appearances with the Bills and who is arguably the greatest gunner ever on punt coverage. "To me, you can't tell the history of the 100 years of the NFL without saying the name Steve Tasker," Slater says. "If he hadn't done his role at such a high level, I'm not sure guys like me would have a job."

Tasker, who has worked in TV and radio since he retired in 1997, shares Slater's concerns about how eliminating special teams would alter the sport's DNA. "Teams have been de-emphasizing it," Tasker says. "But the simple fact of the matter is, it's changed a lot over the years with the rule changes. The wedge isn't there; you can't hit the long snapper. If you're a kickoff cover guy, you might only have to cover one kick a game. There is only so much a great special-teams player can do for you. What are you getting out of him if you're hanging on to him for 10 years? You have to ask that question."

Which makes Slater's longevity, particularly in this era, especially with one team, even more remarkable in Tasker's eyes. He also can't help but feel a bit of a kinship with Slater that links one generation to the next. Ask them both what qualities they think make a great special-teams player and they come up with eerily similar answers: selflessness, toughness, fearlessness, adaptability and a willingness to be physical. Tasker (at 5-9, 185) and Slater (at 6-0, 205) might have had physical limitations as receivers, but both possess an intuitive ability to juke defenders at the line and then track a ball they can't see, based primarily on the ability to read the eyes of the man trying to catch it-all while running at top speed in a sea of chaos.

"I have so much respect for Matthew. ... I hope he dwarfs whatever I ever did," Tasker says. "Somebody asked me about him early in his career, and I said it was obvious he knew what he was doing when he was covering kicks. He has a real gift for it."

GETTING BILL BELICHICK to gush about any of his players, including Brady, often feels like you're engaging in a contentious deposition. But over the past 10 years, Slater has been the rare exception. In 2013, when he was voted to his second straight Pro Bowl, Belichick let fly what is arguably the most effusive string of compliments of his entire coaching career.

"Matt's really ... he's tremendous," Belichick said. "His attitude, his work ethic, the example that he sets, the way he interacts with his teammates in a really good way. I don't know that a player could do any more than what he's done for us in that role for the last several years. He's embraced his role on the team, he's been very good at it and he makes other players around him better. I think that's a great compliment to him and the job he does. He's smart, he's well prepared, he works hard, he has good skill, good talent, he's tough, he's a good playmaker for us. I could go on about him all day."

When Slater's contract was up last year, he took a free agent visit to the Steelers -- only to re-sign with the Patriots a few days later when they offered him a 75 percent raise over what they had paid him the previous season. The Patriots told Slater's agent that he was as important as anyone to their locker room culture -- Brady included -- and that they wanted him back.

This came after he missed seven games in 2017 with injuries, months before his 33rd birthday -- and in the era of the latest CBA, in which GMs looking to save a penny almost always choose cost-controlled young players over seasoned vets.

Such is the degree to which the most revered franchise in football reveres Slater -- yet the most fascinating aspect of his career is how close it came to never happening in the first place.

Sure, he had the pedigree and natural football instincts, plus a thirst for contact. "Our very first parent-teacher conference, in kindergarten, was about trying to get him to stop tackling any little boy or girl with a ball," Jackie Slater says. "I know it was serious, but I couldn't help but feel a little proud."

But much of his childhood was spent anticipating the growth spurt that would enable him to match his dad's 6-foot-4, 227-pound frame -- a growth spurt that never came. Every annual trip to the pediatrician was a source of frustration.

He was 5-6 and 150 pounds when he got to high school, so the only logical position for him was wide receiver. But he didn't catch a lot of passes even after, eventually, he grew 6 inches. His team ran the ball almost exclusively, so he did a lot of blocking. Opposing players who knew who his father was would often come looking for him, eager to prove something about themselves. He didn't mind. "I was definitely aware of it," he says. "But I learned to love the competition."

A dedicated student, he got into Brown and Dartmouth and took trips to both. But when Slater, who was also a track standout, finished second in the state in the 100-meter dash as a senior, UCLA suddenly took an interest. It was impossible to resist the draw of big-time football.

Then, over the course of four years, half his career with the Bruins seemed to get swallowed up by injuries. The coaches moved him from wide receiver to corner, but he rarely played.

It wasn't until his senior year that he asked if he could return kicks. Overnight, he became one of the best in the country, ranking first in the Pac-10 in kickoff return average and setting a UCLA record with 986 yards in 13 games.

But he still wasn't optimistic about his football future. "I was really starting to think about going into the ministry," says Slater, whose faith has been an important aspect of his life since childhood. "I was looking at the next step in my life beyond football."

Then one day during his final season at UCLA, a scout from the Patriots pulled Slater aside after practice. "The conversation lasted maybe 10 or 15 seconds," Slater says. He doesn't even remember who the scout was. But it changed everything. "He told me the Patriots had been watching film on me and that I had a future in the NFL doing something. That gave me just enough motivation to finish the year strong."

He didn't get invited to the NFL combine and went on only seven predraft visits with teams. The Patriots, who eventually picked him in the fifth round, weren't one of them. "When they drafted me, it kind of felt like it came out of nowhere," Slater says.

The first several months were a blur. He felt like an impostor. Physically he could compete, but intellectually he was lost. The Patriots-unsure what position he might play-had him working with the wide receivers and safeties, and in the kicking game. Every day, he thought someone would tell him it was over. "We called the guys who would tap you on the shoulder the Grim Reapers," Slater says. "You'd sit at your locker every day after practice and just wait for an intern to find you and say, 'Hey, Coach wants to see you. Can you bring your playbook?'"

He earned a spot returning kicks, but for most of his rookie season, every week felt like it might be his last. He went back to imagining his future in ministry -- daydreaming about using his time with the Patriots as part of a future sermon, watching people's eyes grow wide when he brought up what he learned from the few months he spent in the NFL. He and his father spoke often about the Bible verse Romans 8:28 -- the idea that whatever his fate was, the journey was more important. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

His anxiety came to a head in a late-November game against the Steelers when he muffed a kickoff in sloppy conditions, the ball bouncing comically off his face mask inside the 10-yard line, igniting a blowout loss. "It was the lowest point of my career," Slater says. "I felt like I'd cost us the game, and that was just the cherry on top of a rookie year where I felt totally lost. I figured I was done, and so did the other rookies. I know a lot of New England fans wanted me out of here, and a lot of them probably still remember me for that play."

The reaper never appeared. Slater refocused on the coverage game that saw him record 25 tackles as a senior at UCLA -- he had 12 for the Pats in that rookie season -- and served as the gunner on punt coverage. For Belichick, whose coaching career began with special teams, grooming a promising special teamer into a no-nonsense blocking threat came easily: Linebacker Larry Izzo served the same role for Belichick for eight seasons as special-teams captain in the early 2000s (making three Pro Bowls himself). "To play for [Belichick] has been incredible, but that isn't to say it's been easy," Slater says. "It's been hard. His standard is high, and there is no gray area. It's all black-and-white, but I think you learn to appreciate that. No coach or player is bigger than the team."

In time, Slater blossomed in his new role. In his third season in New England, he led the team in special-teams tackles with 21. And by 2011, he was the unit's captain (a designation he's held ever since). He again led the team in special-teams tackles but added kickoff returns back to his résumé. That winter, Slater was voted to his first Pro Bowl.

These days, Slater also serves as an unofficial team therapist in the New England locker room -- including on those days when the Patriots' ruthless approach to roster turnover dispatches a popular veteran, sending shock waves through the teammates left behind.

"He keeps the locker room together," Patriots running back James White says. "He makes sure it's a family-like atmosphere in this building. There can be some tough days, there can be some easy days, but he's the guy that kind of keeps everybody locked in and keeps that great camaraderie throughout this team."

One season, Patriots linebacker Gary Guyton pulled Slater aside and asked if he'd be up for a blind date with a friend of a friend, a doctor working in Rhode Island. Guyton thought they'd be into each other. Slater was skeptical, and so was the doctor, Shahrzad Ehdaivand. Now, nine years later, they're married and have a son, Jeramiah, and a daughter, Hannah. As Slater sits in his living room before this year's camp opens, they are expecting their third child any day now.

It's hard for him to put into words how different, how much less fulfilling, his life might be if football and faith hadn't been working in tandem to steer him to where he is now.

"Again, it comes back to Romans 8:28," Slater says. "Sometimes there is going to be pain, and sometimes it's going to be tough. But there is a purpose to it all."

EVERY OFFSEASON, MATTHEW Slater tries to get back home to California, and when he's there, he tries to sprint to the top of that hill. It's as hard at 33 as it was at 13. No one outruns the football reaper forever. But the hill is the best way to try.

He doesn't know how much longer he wants to play, but he knows the day will come, eventually, when he does get a tap on the shoulder. It's going to hurt a little, even if he understands the logic behind it. The league is changing. The way teams put together their rosters is changing. Metrics don't measure locker room leadership. Even at 33, he's still one of the fastest Patriots. But for how long?

"I'm not going to lie, it will sting a bit," Slater says. "I'm human."

But when that day does arrive, he plans to devote himself fully to supporting his wife, who put her medical career on pause to stay at home with their kids while he chases punt returners. The next step, he believes, will also feel like part of God's plan.

Someday he'd like his son to run the hill with him, whether he has a future in football or not. "That hill has a lot of meaning to my family," Slater says.

It's a rite of passage, a baton passed from one generation of Slater to the next. Every trip to the top has to be earned, then earned all over again.



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.

TE Jonnu Smith



His entire life, Jonnu Smith has proved people wrong. With the Patriots, he'll look to do it again

By Erik Scalavino
October 20, 2021

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — A generation ago, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania had a problem that could no longer be ignored. A number of them, for sure — the same could be said for almost any big city — but one in particular began receiving widespread media attention and helped get the city's new mayor elected.

"Tens of thousands of junked cars litter the streets of Philadelphia, sometimes sitting for years before being towed," read an Associated Press article dated April 4, 2000. "Some are left by car thieves or unlicensed mechanics after being stripped for parts. Others are abandoned by owners who cannot afford to repair them."

As a result, aptly named Mayor John Street sought to fulfill a campaign pledge by unveiling an ambitious initiative to eradicate these eyesores in just 40 days' time. Street's self-proclaimed "zero-tolerance program" vowed to rid Philadelphia of every abandoned vehicle by towing them away at a rate of 1,000 per day.

According to that same AP story, Street's administration 1) set aside parcels of land on which to store the cars before determining if they were salvageable or not, 2) raised sufficient funds to compensate salvage companies involved in the program, 3) established a hotline for residents to call and report the locations of abandoned vehicles, and 4) secured the services of 100 tow trucks to carry out the plan.

"Officials call mayor's car removal plan successful," came a headline in The Daily Pennsylvanian two months later, after Street's 40-day promise concluded having disposed of 33,000 abandoned vehicles. The hotline would remain operational indefinitely, while a special unit of the police department would deal expressly with any future abandoned vehicle issues, to prevent the problem from getting out of hand.

Amid the congratulatory coverage, the fact that one of the many tow truck drivers accidentally died while carrying out his job seems to have gone underreported. As he loaded one such car onto his truck, Wayne Smith Sr. either didn't notice the vehicle sliding off its moorings or couldn't get out of the way in time before it landed on top of him, crushing him to death. The 40-year-old left behind his wife, Karen, and their six children – four girls and two boys. Their youngest wouldn't turn 5 years old until later that summer.

More than two decades since the tragedy, that young boy, now a 26-year-old young man, clings to gossamer memories of his late father, in hopes of thereby preserving them. "That's a lot of mouths to feed, especially when you grow up in a low-income area. Whatever he could do – the legal way, of course – to provide for his family, he made a way. Did a lot of side jobs.

"My dad was always working. I remember him coming home from work, telling me he's going to work, taking me and my brother to his job and showing us around town. My dad wore a lot of hats ... I decided to take that from him and apply it to what I do today."

What Jonnu Andre Smith does today is play tight end for the Patriots, after inking a four-year, \$50 million free agent contract with New England back in March 2021. Long before Smith could apply his father's work ethic to such a high-profile occupation, he would have to endure even more personal trauma, embrace his religion, and bid Philadelphia goodbye for good.

Wayne Smith's death had helped set in motion a new course for his young son's life, one that somewhat resembled a popular '90s sitcom. Very little about the circumstances surrounding Jonnu Smith's early years, though, could be considered humorous.

UPTOWN, THEN OUTTA TOWN

Nowadays, Philadelphians refer to it as "Uptown" – an area north of the city center that includes the Germantown neighborhood. With foundations in American Revolutionary War history, Uptown had become fraught with poverty and crime by the late 20th century. In the decade following Wayne Smith's death, it would prove an increasingly perilous place for Jonnu to grow up.

While Smith concedes there were always other children who had it worse off than him, he confesses that he sometimes fell in with the wrong crowd. "Like a lot of neighborhoods in the inner city across the country, African-American teens are sucked into this lifestyle that's not the best. We don't have the best influences around us. People my age that I hung with started getting murdered, over drugs.

"That's when it really got real. They weren't making it out of high school. It would have only been a matter of time ..." Smith doesn't need to finish his thought to make his point. He, too, would likely have met with misfortune, perhaps even a fatal end, had he remained in Uptown long enough.

Karen Smith, his mother, recognized this as well and did her best to counter these powerful, potentially destructive forces by toting her youngest child along with her to church every weekend. She also overcame her initial reluctance and eventually yielded to her child's persistent pleas to play Pop Warner football. At age 5, not long after his father passed, Jonnu first put pads on for the Northwest Raiders. Almost instantly, he fell in love with the sport and harbored ambitions to reach the highest level, the National Football League.

Karen couldn't comprehend her son's passion for "this aggressive sport," as he remembers her calling it, but a peer named Willie Jefferson sure did. Better known by the nickname "Quasim," he loved football as much as Jonnu, and the pair became fast friends, thick as thieves.

"We were at that rebellious age, doing things that could have gotten us in trouble, but not ruin our lives," Smith admits. "But if you continue to do those things over a period of time, it's only going to get worse and worse."

Indeed, trouble always seemed to lurk in Uptown. So, when he reached high school, Karen enrolled Jonnu at New Media Technology Charter School, which had everything Jonnu needed except a football team. "She didn't know too much about sports and recruiting," he explains. "She was just trying to raise a young, African-American man in the inner city with all the odds stacked against him. She really liked the school, which wasn't in the same area I grew up in."

Following his freshman year, over the course of a month during the summer of 2010, a powder keg of violence exploded too close to the Smith home. Their next-door neighbor, a boyfriend of one of Jonnu's sisters, was killed. At the same time, Jonnu's then-20-year-old brother was arrested and charged with homicide in a separate incident.

Pouring whatever limited funds she had into retaining a lawyer to help clear her older son's name, Karen realized she couldn't sufficiently provide for her youngest. To save Jonnu, she decided to send him away to live with her sister, Daria, and Daria's husband, Mike, in Ocala, Florida, 90 minutes' drive due west of Daytona.

A good kid from a bad part of Philadelphia, sent off to live with his aunt and uncle in a far-off state. Asked if he draws any parallels between himself and the fictional character portrayed by actor Will Smith (no relation) in "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," Jonnu Smith chuckles patiently for likely the umpteenth time he's had to endure someone posing the question.

"She made a huge decision to send me to Florida," he says of his mother, "and it definitely changed my life for the better. She was just trying to put me in the best situation."

A BREATH OF FRESH FLORIDA AIR

It wasn't as though Daria and Mike Kirkland were complete strangers. Quite the opposite, actually. The couple and their own children previously lived in New Jersey before moving permanently to Florida, and Jonnu frequently crossed the Delaware River to stay with them during his childhood summers.

"Then," he adds, "when they moved to Florida, I would go there for the summer. We were really close. I'd spend months with them at a time. It wasn't foreign to me. But to know that this was going to be my home base, that was a little different for me. I felt a lot of emotions having to leave for Florida. I was able to leave, but my best friend, Quasim, was stuck in the same environment."

Knowing he'd not only be able to play football once again but do so at one of the most elite high school levels buoyed Jonnu's spirits and reignited his desire to pursue an eventual career in the NFL.

"There was a point where I didn't think I would play high school football. So, I was crazy excited. When I left Philadelphia, I kind of had that survival skill. I knew that nobody [in my neighborhood] wanted to be involved with the things they were involved with or live the lifestyles there were living ... I had an opportunity, a chance to make it out, that a lot of these guys I was hanging out with weren't given."

At West Port High in Ocala, Jonnu played and received regional accolades for football, while also building up his body as a weightlifting competitor. He caught nine passes for 101 yards and two TDs as a junior, then led his team with 34 receptions, 517 yards, and another pair of scores as a senior. However, only one Division I college offer came Smith's way, from Florida International University's new head coach at the time, Ron Turner. Smith accepted.

A true college freshman in 2013, Smith started all 12 FIU games, leading the Panthers in receiving with 39 grabs for 388 yards. He also gained Conference USA recognition for his efforts. Again in 2014, Smith started every game and posted even better numbers, leading the nation in three tight end categories: receptions (61), yards (710), and touchdowns (eight).

An injury cut short the end of his junior season by four games, but following his senior year in 2016, Smith closed out his college career having hauled in at least one pass in every game he played, a streak of 43 games that ranks second all-time in FIU history.

In the spring of 2017, the Tennessee Titans made Smith a third-round pick in the NFL Draft (100th overall) – an accomplishment he understands would not have been possible without the Kirklands' generosity.

"Thank God," he says, "we had a loving family in the South that was in a better situation and more than willing to take me in and not only be an aunt and uncle to me, but like a second mother and father, and my cousins being like second brothers and sisters. I give them a lot of credit. It's not easy. They could have easily said, 'We've got our own family to worry about.' They did it out of pure love, but I always feel indebted to them."

Before achieving his NFL dream, Smith had no idea if he'd ever be able to repay the kindness afforded him by his Aunt Daria and Uncle Mike. So, throughout college, he paid it forward.

BROTHERLY LOVE

Saturday, October 1, 2016 should have been one of the most joyous days of Jonnu's senior season. He and his FIU teammates had just narrowly upended Florida Atlantic 33-31 at Riccardo Silva Stadium, the Panthers' home field, for their first victory in what would otherwise be a disappointing 4-8 campaign.

Days earlier, upon learning he was to become a father for the first time, Smith phoned a thrilled Quasim to help pick out a suitable name for the child.

"At the time, my son's mother and I came up with a first name, but we couldn't think of a middle name. We couldn't think of a full name for him. Quasim was all excited ... I kind of knew my career in football was headed in the right direction. All he talked about was coming to the games and being able to see me. 'I can't believe you've made it this far!' Those were the conversations we had."

Their talks typically happened not over the phone, but in person. At FIU in Miami, some five hours south of Ocala, Smith enjoyed a measure of independence for the first time in his life. Yet, he couldn't help dwelling on Quasim's turmoil back in Philadelphia.

"I knew his life was threatened a lot. I would tell him to come and stay with me. I probably shouldn't have done this, but I knew what he was going through. I would fly him down or he'd take the bus and stay in my dorm room with me for months at a time. I'm giving him my student books, eating in the cafeteria, whatever we could do. He was like one of my brothers. I'm letting him enjoy college without having to go to school. That's a dream come true!" Smith laughs.

"I was clearly going against dorm rules, letting someone live on campus with me, but I'm literally helping this man get away from being murdered. That's how I was looking at it. I'm a 20-year-old kid at the time, and if you ask me to make a decision like that, it's easy. His mom would call me crying, thankful that I was able to let him stay with me."

Quasim routinely stayed to watch Jonnu play at FIU, though not this particular time. Before the Florida Atlantic game, he'd returned to Philadelphia. Late that autumn Saturday, while Smith celebrated with friends and teammates, his phone rang, carrying with it the news he'd been dreading. On the other end of the line, Karen Smith informed her son that his best friend had been killed.

"That crushed me. A lot of thoughts went through my head, like, 'Maybe I shouldn't have let him go back. Maybe if I'd just tried to keep him down here ...' He goes back and ... you see what happened."

No longer able to help his best friend, Jonnu could at least honor Willie Jefferson's memory. Jaiyen Smith, Jonnu's first-born son, had finally found a middle name. Quasim.

Today, Smith is father to two boys with whom he is eager to make the kinds of memories he never got the chance to experience with his own dad. He praises his mother, Karen, as "the strongest woman in the world" for how she valiantly tried to play both parental roles for Jonnu after Wayne died. Still, he can't help but recall his late father every day and contemplate what might have been.

"It's been an empty void for me [not having a father], but with Christ, he was able to fill that void. When you're younger, you kind of just go to church because your mom makes you. You don't really know much of anything at all [about religion], but the bible says ...

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

~ Proverbs 22:6

"That's definitely my life. Growing up, I always had questions, as most children would, but as I became a man and thought as a man, I was able to experience my faith for myself and came to believe what I know on my own. It definitely was because of my family planting that seed in me.

"God is first in my life and always will be. It's who I am. It's what makes me be. It decides every decision in my life. I don't make every decision right, as none of us lives a perfect life, but that's who I am.

"I often think," he reveals, "about how proud my father would be on the sideline cheering his baby boy on. I think about my brother more than anything. Being arrested and convicted. To this day, we fight for his freedom. Prior to my brother being accused of [murder], he wasn't living the best life, but he wasn't who they say he is. That's not who he is."

Why, then, must bad things sometimes happen to otherwise good people? For better or worse, Smith has had ample time to reconcile this unavoidable truth.

"Nobody's ever lived a life without trials or tribulations," he observes. "I've had my fair share and still deal with them. In the end, it's tough to accept, but that experience builds character and wisdom, whatever you went through – I'm probably the biggest testimony to that.

"If the people around me never went through what they went through, I would never be here today. My brother having been convicted kind of served as a wakeup call for my mom. Had he still been out here, she probably wouldn't have seen it that way. Maybe I'd still be in Philly. Maybe I wouldn't have played football.

"I'm just thankful," Smith concludes, "that I'm at a point in my life where I'm on a stage, a platform where I can let the light in me shine before a lot of people so they can see the way God has worked in my life and how he's blessed me and brought me to where I am."

The Boston Globe

His entire life, Jonnu Smith has proved people wrong. With the Patriots, he'll look to do it again

By Nicole Yang
July 3, 2021, 9:09 a.m.

The Patriots kicked off free agency in March with a bang, signing tight end Jonnu Smith to a four-year, \$50 million deal.

The contract headlined an uncharacteristic spending spree for the organization. It was also a milestone in Smith's football career — one that hasn't always earned that same level of recognition.

"It's an unbelievable blessing," said Mike Kirkland, Smith's uncle. "It's what he's always wanted. It's a dream come true."

Kirkland and his wife, Darla, still remember how Smith, who turns 26 in August, would talk about going to the NFL from the moment he arrived from Philadelphia as a young teenager to live with them in Florida. But opportunities weren't handed to him. He often found himself overlooked despite his talent.

Still, Smith never shifted his sights away from his goal.

"You just have a kid who is from the inner city," Kirkland said. "He wanted to get the opportunity, and once he got it, he took well advantage of it. He took well advantage of everything that was here to offer. He did everything he needed to do and everything he could do to fulfill his dream."

On the second day of the clean-up campaign, Wayne Smith — Jonnu's father and one of the many tow-truck operators enlisted to help achieve Street's goal — was attempting to attach an abandoned sedan to his truck. According to a police report, the sedan ended up sliding backward and knocking Wayne in the head. He was taken to the hospital and pronounced dead at the age of 40, leaving behind his wife, Karen, and six kids.

Jonnu, the youngest, was 4 years old.

About a decade after Wayne's death, a series of homicides, including one that resulted in the arrest of Jonnu's brother and another that resulted in the death of his friend, prompted Karen to make a difficult decision: She sent Jonnu to live with his aunt and uncle in Ocala, Fla. She thought the move would keep him away from the violence that had beset many close to them.

"My mom always made sure she did what she had to do for us," Smith said. "It wasn't easy. I didn't understand that at the time. As I'm older, it makes me appreciate her so much more."

The Kirklands immediately embraced their nephew and his aspirations. The couple had three children of their own, including two sons close in age, which led to friendly races in the backyard as well as push-up and pull-up contests.

Once in Florida, Smith joined the football team at West Port High School. West Port was not renowned for its football tradition. But Smith quickly set himself apart, showcasing his speed in practice and strength in the weight room. His relentless work ethic combined with his natural athleticism put him head and shoulders above his teammates.

"He is Secretariat going against pasture horses," said West Port coach Ryan Hearn. "He's a Ferrari going around a racetrack with, you know, just a jalopy. It's a different speed. It's just a completely different speed."

"He is Secretariat going against pasture horses. He's a Ferrari going around a race track with, you know, just a jalopy. It's a different speed. It's just a completely different speed."

Hearn deployed Smith as a versatile tight end who could flex out and move around the line of scrimmage. As a junior, Smith caught nine passes for 101 yards and two touchdowns. As a senior in 2012, he posted a team-high 34 catches for 517 yards and two touchdowns.

His numbers did not jump off the page, but Smith showed flashes of what was to come. Years later, Hearn gushes over Smith's ability to utilize his explosiveness, lateral movement, and vision to take advantage of opportunities.

"When he catches the ball and has the ball in space — even when he was younger — he was amazing," Hearn said. "There's not a lot of people that can catch with that body, with that kind of speed and that kind of quickness."

Perhaps what Hearn found more impressive, though, was the attitude Smith displayed in practice.

"I tried certain days to beat Jonnu down — run him after practice, not because he was in trouble but because I wanted to condition him — and he would literally look at me and just laugh and say, 'Hey, you got any more?' " Hearn recalled. "I would try to make it harder, and he still just shattered whatever I asked him to do."

By the time Smith was a senior, he had begun to fill into his 6-foot-2-inch frame. Hearn said Smith could hoist 315 pounds in the clean and jerk, and competed in the state championship in weightlifting during the football offseason.

"You didn't see a lot of that," Hearn said. "To see a kid that's that tall and hold 315-320 pounds above his head, you're sitting there going, 'Man, that's a lot of weight and that's really high.' "

Going unnoticed

Coming out of high school, Smith landed only one opportunity — from Florida International University — to play at the collegiate level.

"I begged people to offer him," Hearn said.

Jonnu Smith had only one Division 1 offer to play college football, from Florida International. He signed his letter of intent to play there in December 2012.

Smith's high school coaches say the lack of interest was caused by two things: West Port wasn't highly regarded, and coaches were concerned about Smith's size.

With Smith weighing in at approximately 180 pounds as a junior, some evaluators expressed doubt he would reach the size of a prototypical tight end.

"It wasn't like he was a guy who was a can't-miss prospect in terms of his size and specs," said Dennis Smith, FIU's recruiting coordinator at the time and no relation to Jonnu. "There were questions about how big he was going to be."

Any hesitation subsided soon after a visit to West Port. Dennis Smith went at the request of FIU's then-head coach, Mario Cristobal, who strongly encouraged his staff members to check every high school in their assigned region, even if the team had a 0-10 record.

"I see this coach and he tells me, 'Man, I got this kid,' " Dennis Smith recalled. "And you know how many coaches tell us, 'Oh, this kid, he's the next great thing,' but then the kid can't play."

When Dennis Smith watched the team practice, however, he understood what Hearn was trying to tell him.

"I was like, 'Oh my god,' " he recalled.

What did he see that others didn't?

"I'd love to sit here and say I'm a smarter or better evaluator," he said. "But to be honest with you, nobody went to that school. He truly was at a place that was very underrecruited."

The talent and potential were obvious in person. Yes, he noticed the speed. Yes, he noticed the ball skills. Many high-profile recruits shared those traits. The real difference-maker? The feet.

"To this day, he has the most explosive feet I've ever recruited," Dennis Smith said. "He can create so much power, and he has unbelievable hips. If someone is really, really athletic and explosive, their body moves that much faster. They can generate so much power. He's just a much better athlete than the people he goes against."

A scholarship was finally offered, but Cristobal still wanted to see him in action, so Smith attended a camp hosted by FIU the summer before his senior season in 2012.

As he watched the tight end for the first time, Cristobal turned around and said to Dennis Smith, "Holy [expletive], where did you get this guy from?"

FIU ended up firing Cristobal, along with Dennis Smith, that December. Committed prospects occasionally will assess options if there are coaching changes prior to their arrival. But Jonnu Smith didn't have anywhere else to look.

Quick to impress

Jonnu Smith shocked his FIU teammates with his strength and work ethic during his freshman season in 2013. Within his first days at FIU in 2013, Smith impressed his teammates during a weight-room session.

"He comes in fresh out of high school and he's squatting 500 pounds," said E.J. Hilliard, FIU's quarterback. "Everybody's looking around, like, 'Whoa.' He's just sitting there smiling like it was just normal for him."

With his sheer strength and muscular build, Smith certainly looked the part.

"Ain't no telling how many packs he had," joked Hilliard.

Chad Smith, FIU's head strength and conditioning coach at the time, thought to himself: "Man, that guy don't belong here."

Still, the tight end would stay late after practice and log extra reps.

"He worked like he was the lowest man on the pole," said Chad Smith. "He worked like he had a motive behind him. There was something behind his work that was just pushing him. Every day he showed up, he just outworked everybody."

On the team's hardest conditioning days, when players would have to run the 300-yard shuttle or a half-gasser sprint workout, Smith would always be in the front.

"A lot of guys will just want to make their time, not be first, but not be last, and just get across the line," Chad Smith said. "Days like that, Jonnu would rise up and just start competing with people on these hard-ass days."

"On those tough days, where you don't really think about competition and you just think about surviving, Jonnu would be out there talking [expletive], beating everybody."

His performances — and voice — served as motivation for his teammates.

"He would say, 'Is that the best y'all got? That's as fast as y'all can run? Y'all tired already?' " recalled Hilliard. "It's really hot in Miami; the field is hot; the turf is hot. Guys would try to tune him out, but there was nobody who could tune him out when he's over there kicking your ass in sprints."

Jonnu Smith out-hustled teammates in practice, and opponents on the field.

Smith put on weight, mostly muscle, during his time at FIU. By his senior season, he measured in at more than 230 pounds and maintained a body fat percentage in the single digits.

"He always had his shirt off, too," Hilliard said with a laugh. "You could never tell where that percent was coming from."

Smith's efforts translated to the field. He ended up setting school records for catches (178) and receiving yards (2,001) by a tight end. He also finished his college career with at least one reception in all 43 games he played.

Hilliard dubbed Smith his “security blanket.” Whether the call was a bubble screen or a checkdown because the initial play fell apart, Hilliard knew he could rely on Smith to generate yardage. And if Smith wasn’t the one with the ball, he would be creating opportunities for his teammates.

“He was just one of those guys that had to stay on the field,” Hilliard said. “He could go a whole half without catching the ball, and you could watch on film, he’s just beating up the guy that’s in front of him, he’s blocking the guy and taking him 10 yards out of the play. He just brings that aggressiveness to the game.”

Smith’s best statistical season came his sophomore year, when he caught 61 passes for 710 yards and eight touchdowns.

His junior season was cut short after he tore his ACL against Old Dominion in October 2015. He sustained the injury in the second quarter but did not recognize its severity, finishing the game with 10 receptions for a career-best 183 yards and two TDs.

In October 2016, he missed a game after suffering severe burns on his head, neck, back, shoulder, and arm. His then-girlfriend, Mary Gaspar, who was five months pregnant at the time, poured boiling water over him.

According to police records, Gaspar was arguing with Smith over the amount of attention he was paying to her and their relationship. She was charged with aggravated battery. Gaspar pleaded not guilty and the charges were dropped a year later.

The incident sidelined Smith for only one game, although his role in the final two games of the season was noticeably reduced. The setback did not leave him discouraged, though.

“There’s something special in there that’s pushing him that most people can’t handle,” Chad Smith said. “Jonnu didn’t have much. He wanted to take care of his mom. He wanted to take care of his family. Every day, no matter how he felt, he put that first. He put that as his big picture.”

Under the radar

Leading up to the NFL scouting combine, there was still little buzz. Chad Smith told scouts that they should keep their eyes on the FIU tight end because he was going to outperform his competition.

“They all looked at me like I was crazy,” Chad Smith said. “Then what happened?”

At the combine, Smith weighed in at 248 pounds. He ran the 40-yard dash in 4.62 seconds, ranking sixth among tight ends. He also finished in the top five at his position in the vertical jump (38 inches), bench press (22 reps), and 20-yard shuttle (4.18 seconds).

Entering the 2017 draft, Jonnu Smith wasn’t a hyped prospect. That changed at the combine.

“He killed every aspect of it,” said trainer Pete Bommarito, who still works with Smith after meeting him ahead of the combine. “I think he came into the draft process as a relative unknown. People, I think, were unfairly labeling him the small-school guy.”

After the combine, however, no longer could NFL teams ignore him. The Tennessee Titans drafted Smith in the third round with the 100th overall pick.

With the Titans, Smith was largely overshadowed by Pro Bowlers A.J. Brown and Derrick Henry. But he was productive, putting up career-high numbers last season with 41 receptions for 448 yards and eight touchdowns.

Now that he’s about to begin his tenure in New England, Smith thinks the pairing with the Patriots is a good match.

“The culture around here is different,” he said. “It’s not like anything I’ve been around. It represents me and a lot of things that I stand for. I just believe that working hard is the key thing that’s going to get you to any success in life.”

Those who helped him reach this point only expect bigger things are to come.

“The NFL has not truly seen him yet,” said Chad Smith. “I think his best years are ahead of him. As we speak now, he’s working. He’s not relaxing.”

say, 'Stephon played the game this way.' That's one thing that sticks with me. I just take it one day at a time, one year at a time. Hopefully, one day, I have that shot."

RB Rhamondre Stevenson



Rhamondre Stevenson rebuilt a football career that nearly ended. Now the Patriots are giving him his big shot

By Jeff Howe
May 20, 2021

Rhamondre Stevenson was out of football and unsure if he'd ever get back.

He was lost. Miserable. Full of regret and uncertainty.

And finally – motivated.

"He's a warrior," former University of Oklahoma running backs coach Jay Boulware said.

Stevenson was the Las Vegas player of the year as a junior in 2014, his only full season at Centennial High School, and he established a clear path to big-time college football. It was all right there for him.

But he missed most of his senior season with a broken foot and had such poor grades that no one bothered to recruit him. In his final game at Centennial, the massive running back had eight carries for 8 yards and lost three fumbles.

It was nearly the last time he ever took the field.

Instead, Stevenson rallied. Now a New England Patriots fourth-round draft pick, Stevenson has reached the stage that was waiting for him all along.

It just took him a little more time to get there.

'A great junior college football story'

Stevenson didn't have the grades to play for Centennial until the end of his sophomore season when the team was preparing for the playoffs, but he made quite the first impression.

"He was out there for one day, and you could tell he was by far the best player on the field," said Leon Evans, the head coach at the time. "Best player, hands down. Then after you watched him for a week, I said it to a coach on staff, 'This kid can play on Sunday.'"

Stevenson debuted as a junior when he tallied 171 carries for 1,457 yards and 19 touchdowns to earn First Team All-State honors. He had 327 yards and two touchdowns through three games as a senior before he broke his foot, and his academic issues spiraled out of control from there.

Stevenson was downtrodden because of the injury. It wiped out his desire to work in the classroom, and the issue snowballed.

"(College recruiters) were looking at him, but they saw his transcript and nobody wanted to deal with him," Evans said. "When he was younger, he was a straight-A student. I remember talking to his dad. Rhamondre was going to a private school. He was a great student. I think Rhamondre just got caught up in the high school hoopla and just neglected his grades. It wasn't like he was incapable of doing it. He just chose not to do it."

Despite Evans' encouragement to attend a junior college out of high school, Stevenson decided to stay home. He believed, deep down, his football career was over.

Stevenson's parents kept encouraging him, though. A little less "Madden," a little more working out. And he connected with a mentor to get his mind right.

In 2017, Stevenson was ready again. He reached out to Devan Burrell, a friend from high school who was playing basketball for Cerritos College in California, to see if he could facilitate an introduction with the coaching staff. Burrell sought out Dean Grosfeld, the Cerritos offensive coordinator at the time, and showed him Stevenson's highlight reel.

"I literally watched two or three plays and was like, oh lord, this dude is special," Grosfeld said.

Grosfeld then called Stevenson, whose message was as eager as it was concise: Say the word, and he'll enroll.

"It was probably the simplest recruit I ever had," Grosfeld laughed.

Grosfeld was comfortable with Stevenson's background and the explanation for his poor grades. When he spoke to Stevenson, Grosfeld recognized a kid who understood his mistakes and had a sincere appreciation for the opportunity to get a second chance.

Stevenson just wanted to play football again, and he was prepared to back it up with more effort in the classroom.

"He dealt with some depression through it, definitely breaking his foot," Grosfeld said. "He felt in his own mind that he could play at a high level, and he didn't think he was going to get the opportunity. This spurred him to get that opportunity.

"When you get football taken away from you and you hit depression, the thing that is going to suffer is school. Injuring his foot and missing his senior year, he went in a little bit of a downward spiral as far as academics go. Then when you don't think you're going to make it, I think you kind of lose that drive."

Frank Mazzotta, the Cerritos head coach from 1977-2017, had a similar reaction as Evans upon his initial look at Stevenson.

"From the day he walked on there, it was like, wow, how did anybody miss on this guy?" Mazzotta said. "There was no question he was special."

No one missed Stevenson. More to the point, he had removed himself from their radar.

Now motivated to realign himself with the one thing that's always kept him going, Stevenson had to make use of his time at Cerritos. His parents helped, working multiple jobs to pay his tuition so he could focus on classwork and football. And at one point, a teammate's parents allowed him and a couple friends to stay in their in-law apartment, where he slept on a couch, to make the journey away from home more affordable.

On the field, Stevenson made an early impact as a freshman with 68 carries for 501 yards and three touchdowns. Mazzotta wanted his best player on the field more often, but Grosfeld and running backs coach Frank Montero deferred to the sophomores who needed the added spotlight to help with their recruitment.

Stevenson was onboard with Grosfeld's vision.

"He can go over you, through you, under you, around you," Grosfeld said. "I said, 'You realize you're going to be the best back in the United States next year.' He goes, 'Coach, I got you. I believe in you.'"

That plan came together in 2018, when Grosfeld was promoted to head coach and Stevenson rushed for 2,111 yards – 817 more yards than anyone else in the Southern California Football Association – and 16 touchdowns.

On a particularly memorable showing, Stevenson battled through a nasty stomach bug while racking up 18 carries, 339 yards and touchdown runs of 60, 70 and 90 yards.

"He will battle through anything," Grosfeld said. "He'd go out there and run for 40 then go to the sideline, and he's throwing up, shivering, shaking. I look over, and he's like, 'All right,' then get up and bust for 50."

Finally with the grades to match the on-field production, Stevenson became a coveted recruit. Oklahoma head coach Lincoln Riley wanted to reel in an older back, and his staff – along with Stevenson's lead recruiter, Jay Boulware – tabbed Stevenson as their top-ranked player in junior college.

"We were convinced right away that he was the best," Riley said.

Two years after being out of football and almost hopeless that he'd ever get back onto the field, Stevenson earned the attention of nearly every big-time program in the country, and he chose the perennial national championship contenders over USC and Texas.

"He is a great junior college football story," Grosfeld said. "He has proven that it works. "He's done a lot for us. He's done a lot for Cerritos. Most importantly, he's done a lot for himself."

'He's going to do whatever it takes to make it'

For financial reasons, Stevenson had to stay at Cerritos for an extra semester to earn his associates degree, so he got to Oklahoma in the summer of 2019. It took him a while to get back into playing shape, learn pass protections to become a three-down player and improve his ball security after four fumbles as a sophomore.

All the while, Stevenson thrived on special teams, particularly kickoff coverage where as a junior he led the Sooners with seven tackles, including a thunderous hit against Kansas that still echoes in Norman, Okla. After running for a 61-yard touchdown in the fourth quarter, Stevenson returned to the sideline and excitedly proclaimed to Riley that he was about to destroy Kansas kick returner Jamahl Horne.

And that's how it played out.

"He knocks the hell out of this guy," Riley beamed. "We were kind of up (42-7 on the road), so there wasn't a lot of noise in the stadium. It sounded like a shotgun went off."

Boulware added, "That Kansas (hit) was deafening. He knocked the piss out of him."

Stevenson had 64 carries for 515 yards and six touchdowns in a backup role as a junior, but his season ended when an NCAA drug test revealed marijuana in his system before the national semifinals against LSU. He got a six-game suspension that ate into his 2020 campaign.

Once again, Stevenson realized how quickly it could all get taken away.

"At first, he was really down about it," Riley said. "Just a sense that he had let himself and family and everybody around here down. We had to pick him up a little bit. Then I think as he started getting through it, his teammates started uplifting him, and he got in a better place mentally."

Stevenson got another boost in 2020 when Oklahoma hired school legend DeMarco Murray as the running backs coach. Murray, a three-time NFL Pro Bowler, coached Stevenson hard, encouraged him to tighten up his diet and showed him how to work to become a professional through time management, film study and practice habits. Murray also created a film reel of LeGarrette Blount highlights to show Stevenson what he could become if he kept at it.

The appreciation for Stevenson's willingness to take coaching actually seemed to grow during his suspension.

"Everything I asked him to do, he did it with a smile on his face and with a great attitude," Murray said. "He's a competitive kid. He's extremely coachable. He never had bad body language or a bad attitude whether I jumped his ass or I applauded him."

"He's a guy who wants to be great. He wants to learn. He wants to learn things that he's never learned before."

Sooners defensive ends and outside linebackers coach Jamar Cain refers to Stevenson as "Ram-Bam," and his group got an extended taste in practice of the bruising back's hunger to return to the field. Stevenson was on the scout team for the first five weeks of the 2020 season and gave the starting defense an intense, game-speed look.

The trash talk livened up those workouts, too.

"We had to tell him to stop running so hard," Cain laughed. "We can't get my starting linebackers hurt because you're trying to run everybody over. Rhamondre was causing havoc. It was like, 'Dude, all right, get out.' He was standing next to me like, 'Can I go run the ball? I'm going to run your guys over now.' I'm like, 'OK, no, we're not doing that.'"

Stevenson's appreciation for special teams – or really, just his desire to be on the field in any capacity – carried into that senior season, as he begged to cover the opening kickoff in his first game back against Texas Tech. Murray

obliged, but Stevenson had three rushing touchdowns that day and Murray knew he couldn't risk an injury to his top back. Against Stevenson's wishes, he had to sacrifice his special teams snaps.

He became the three-down back that Riley wanted, too. If the Sooners needed a good route from a running back, Murray wanted Stevenson in the game because of his footwork, balance, hands and ability to win one-on-one battles against coverage.

As a blocker, that's where Stevenson improved the most over his two seasons.

"Year one, I was scared to death to have him in there if somebody was going to blitz us," Riley said. "Honestly, year two, he was one of the best pass-(protection) guys that we've had here. It improved that quickly."

Stevenson had 665 rushing yards and seven touchdowns along with 18 receptions for 211 yards in six games last season. He averaged 7.2 yards per carry over two seasons at Oklahoma after averaging 9 yards per carry at Cerritos and 7.5 yards per clip in high school.

"Those are insane numbers," Grosfeld said.

It's unrealistic to expect those averages to carry over to the NFL, but there's a reason the 5-foot-11, 231-pounder has been such a headache for defenders at each level. When Stevenson was running with purpose, he had physics on his side.

"The gift of being able to run through or over people, it just makes him tough to tackle," Riley said. "He can break tackles in so many ways. You got used to it in games, honestly, that one guy was rarely going to bring this cat down, which obviously is a great skill to have."

When the Patriots zeroed in on Stevenson last month in the fourth round, they identified the 23-year-old as a willing special teamer who should be able to spell Damien Harris and Sony Michel on early downs and James White in passing situations.

They also knew Stevenson was raw, especially for someone who never got a true offseason at Oklahoma due to his summer arrival as a junior and the pandemic-shortened spring in 2020. And he doesn't have a lot of mileage due to a relative lack of carries over the years.

The path for improvement certainly exists. So does the drive to keep himself on the field after some costly mistakes.

Once lost from the game, Stevenson has gotten it back, and he truly had to earn his way to New England.

"I saw a kid who had gone through the struggle," Boulware said. "He's going to do whatever it takes to make it. He's got a good head on his shoulders. I believe in the guy."

QB Jarrett Stidham



Talent. Intelligence. Confidence. Jarrett Stidham's ceiling with Patriots could be sky-high

By Jeff Howe

August 9, 2019

Quarterback Jarrett Stidham was in the midst of the marquee game of his career, playing the star role in one of the most heated rivalries in college football, and an unlikely fan couldn't get enough.

Every time Stidham took over the Auburn offense during the 2017 Iron Bowl, Alabama running back Damien Harris made sure to secure a good view. Harris even admitted he was privately rooting for Stidham's success, clutching to a close connection the two formed as 8-year-olds on a Kentucky Little League football team that went undefeated.

Their childhood bond stayed intact even after Stidham moved to Texas and ultimately wound up playing for rival Auburn — just one testament to the way people remain drawn to Stidham, a charismatic leader who has won over teammates and coaches at every step and earned levels of loyalty that couldn't even be dented in a football atmosphere that paralyzes an entire state and temporarily divides families.

"For me to want an Auburn guy to do well, it says a lot about our friendship," Harris said with a laugh.

Stidham completed 21-of-28 passes for 237 yards that day and added a career-high 51 rushing yards, including the game-sealing 16-yard touchdown through four defenders, as sixth-ranked Auburn gave No. 1 Alabama its lone loss of the season.

Harris' Crimson Tide eventually won the national championship, which softened the blow of the Iron Bowl. Harris still beamed about his memory of Stidham that afternoon.

"I paid very close attention to him," said Harris, who was reunited with Stidham in April when the Patriots drafted both. "He's one of my best friends. Even though we were playing against each other, having that relationship, every time he went out there, I watched him. Secretly, I wanted him to do well and wanted him to perform. I just wanted us to win. He played a great game and obviously has had success since then."

Talk to anyone about Stidham, and the 2017 Iron Bowl will come up. Former teammates at Baylor, where he played before Auburn, tuned in to watch on TV. Ditto for former coaches. It was the defining moment of a breakout season in which he was named SEC Newcomer of the Year and that led prognosticators to label Stidham a potential first-round draft pick.

See, Stidham has always had star-level ability, and he's a dream for teammates and coaches — a fact verified by those at each stop of his career. He has overcome various degrees of adversity, including a less-than-ideal 2018 season when Auburn had to replace four starting offensive linemen and SEC Player of the Year Kerryon Johnson. The result was a fall to the fourth round of the draft. He was the seventh quarterback off the board.

The Patriots might have stuck gold, as Stidham has blown away all expectations over the past three months by showcasing incredible accuracy through 19 practices over the spring and summer and in the preseason opener against the Lions on Thursday. He already looks ahead of where Jimmy Garoppolo was at this point of his 2014 rookie season, as Stidham makes a few highlight-reel throws during most of his workouts and performs with enough consistency to suggest this isn't a fluke.

Bill Belichick and the coaching staff have also given Stidham a handful of opportunities to work with the first-team offense and defense, something that never happened during the summer for recent draft picks Jacoby Brissett and Danny Etling. And it took quite a while for Garoppolo to earn that type of trust at practice.

Stidham was 14-of-24 for 179 yards and a touchdown Thursday in a solid preseason debut against the Lions, and he could have had a couple of other scoring strikes if they didn't clang off his targets' hands. He has also completed 71.1 percent of his passes in team drills during training camp.

Stidham's poise, consistency and ability to lead his teammates have been evident since he reported to Gillette Stadium in the spring. They're all traits he's shown throughout his career, conveying the tantalizing, ever-growing possibility the Patriots have a franchise quarterback in the making.

The potential exists for Jarrett Stidham to be the heir to Tom Brady's throne.

Humble roots

The first time Joe Gillespie heard Stidham's name, he was described as something of a mythical figure.

And Stidham was only in middle school.

Stidham, fresh off that championship run with Harris and the mini-49ers in Kentucky, moved to Stephenville, Texas, when he was 9, enrolling in school in the same class as Josh Gillespie. Josh went home one day and told his football coach father about this new giant who could block out the sun.

"I remember driving up to the intermediate school to pick up my son one day," Joe Gillespie said. "There was Jarrett Stidham out there horseplaying just like every other fifth-grader, but he's a foot taller than everybody else. My son gets in the truck and I said, 'Is that the kid you were talking about?' From that point forward, Stephenville is, shucks, 20,000 people in the community. Everybody knows everybody. It's a one-horse town."

The football-crazed town that shuts down on Friday nights was instantly drawn to Stidham, whose spotlight brightened throughout his youth. Stephenville High became a Texas powerhouse under coach Art Briles in the 1990s, and Joe Gillespie helped keep the winning ways intact during 20 years on the staff, including his final seven (2008-14) as head coach. Their quarterbacks drew a crowd, too, with Kevin Kolb and Jevan Snead causing college recruiters to flock to town before Stidham.

When Stidham got to Stephenville High, Gillespie said he had the “best backup quarterback in the nation,” but he wouldn’t sit upperclassman Tyler Jones in favor of the younger signal-caller. So they moved Stidham to wide receiver, cornerback and safety, a combination of positions that Gillespie believed helped Stidham gain a better overall understanding of the game as a way to see it through other vantage points. They won the state title that season, so clearly it worked.

The country knew Stidham as a signal-caller, though, and he already had scholarship offers to play quarterback before his junior season without playing a snap. He shined at elite all-star camps during his first couple years of high school, and Gillespie shared film of his practice work with recruiters to help his stock.

“Then he goes out and performs on Friday nights for us, and the floodgates opened,” said Gillespie, who is now Tulsa’s defensive coordinator. “The recruiters were flocking in by the droves almost daily.”

As a teenager, Stidham was one of the most wanted quarterbacks in America for the better part of two years, sometimes speaking to college coaches on the phone for three hours a night. All the while, he dealt with some private struggles as his family underwent financial issues.

Stidham, who ultimately moved in with a guardian family when he was 18, kept a heady presence about himself. He worked out before school in the morning, handled himself well enough in the classroom to finish in the top 10 percent of his class and graduate early, and somehow balanced his life as a big-time recruit.

“A phenomenal young man who, honestly, did not have everything handed to him,” Gillespie said. “He had a good home, but had some difficulties – finances, where am I sleeping tonight, am I going to get a decent meal?”

“At an early age, this young man came into high school talking about, ‘I want to make it all the way.’ He also knew what he had to do to get there and was hungry for as much knowledge as he could gain. You couldn’t outwork him. You couldn’t beat him to the weight room or to school in the morning, showing up at 5:30, 6 in the morning.”

It surely translated. Like nearly all NFL quarterbacks, Stidham had absurd high school stats – 6,516 passing yards and 80 touchdowns, 1,790 rushing yards and 29 scores over two years – but Gillespie thought one story stood out the most.

As a senior, Stidham broke a finger on his throwing hand toward the end of the regular season and had to sit out a month while recovering from surgery. Stidham was close to returning during a second-round playoff game against Lubbock Estacado, but Gillespie wanted to use him only in case of emergency. It ultimately took four minutes to break the glass.

“So he hasn’t played in a month and went out there and threw six touchdown passes,” Gillespie said of his performance in the 69-60 victory. “This is a guy who wasn’t expecting to play.”

Next phase

The recruitment was another story. Stidham verbally committed to Texas Tech as a junior, but that didn’t do much to deter his pursuers.

After all, it was evident Stidham was the real deal.

“It was without question the best guy I saw throw that year and really one of the best high school guys I’ve ever seen throw,” said Rhett Lashlee, who was Auburn’s offensive coordinator from 2013-16.

Lashlee also recognized he didn’t have a great chance to get Stidham out of high school. A few days after Auburn fell in the national championship game to Florida State in January 2014, Lashlee went to Stephenville to watch Stidham throw in a basketball gym that was lined with auxiliary turf. The word on Stidham was that he was already the best quarterback to ever come out of the area, which was something Lashlee needed to see to believe.

But Lashlee wasn't alone. He was joined by Philip Montgomery, who previously worked as an assistant at Stephenville and was Art Briles' offensive coordinator at Baylor at the time. And Chad Morris, another former Stephenville coach who had been Clemson's offensive coordinator for that tour. The ties to the town ran deep.

Stidham blew them all away.

"He was just ripping the ball all over that thing," Lashlee said.

Stidham ultimately chose Baylor, which was an hour-and-a-half from Stephenville and surging to national prominence with a dynamic offense that was understandably attractive to an athletic quarterback with a live arm.

The community celebrated Stidham even more for staying local. But as his status soared, his humility remained intact. That's a trait that hasn't been lost on anyone throughout his journey.

"He had to live with a lot of pressure and stuff like that," Gillespie said. "I'm going to tell you, he was so publicized at such a young age – I know I can speak for me – if I would have been that way, my arrogance level would have gone out the roof. I would have been extremely immature and unable to handle that with a great deal of grace. Never once did you concern yourself with other players on the team not being the same (level) as he was. He made them all feel as great. They were extremely important to his success, and he made that well known."

Stidham enrolled early at Baylor in December 2014 to prepare for the 2015 season. His talent was apparent enough to get him into seven games behind starter Seth Russell, who then sustained a season-ending neck injury that thrust the freshman into the pole position.

It was a high-pressure situation that Stidham handled with relative ease, taking an undefeated, second-ranked Baylor to a win at Kansas State before the Bears welcomed both No. 12 Oklahoma and the "College Gameday" circus to campus a week later. Stidham excelled, though Baylor fell, 44-34.

"When he first came in, he was spinning the ball like no other," Baylor wide receiver Chris Platt said. "Coming in as a freshman and starting against Oklahoma, all the publicity and all that stuff, he wasn't worried about it at all. Everybody saw it like, 'This dude is the real deal. He's going to be something one day.' It was just amazing."

The next week, playing through a nasty bruise that extended from his hip to his armpit in a road victory over No. 4 Oklahoma State, Stidham went down for the season with a chipped bone in his ankle. It wasn't just the coolness in the huddle that impressed Platt, but the willingness to try to play through a variety of injuries. Stidham was their leader.

Until the storm hit.

Briles was fired in May 2016 as part of the fallout from a major sexual assault scandal at Baylor, and Stidham transferred to remove himself from the program. He enrolled at McClennan Community College in Waco, Texas, and worked out with the Midway High School team to keep himself in shape while recruiters again tripped over themselves to get him to their program.

Lashlee had a second chance, and his prior relationship with Stidham paid off as Auburn competed with Florida and Texas A&M for the commitment. Lashlee saw an even more mature Stidham this time around, a quietly confident and easygoing kid who wanted to play on a big stage and pursue his NFL dreams.

And Lashlee recalled when Stidham, who can seemingly relate to anyone in any situation, visited his home and got hounded by his twin boys. Rather than sticking to the Auburn recruitment pitch or discussing any future plans on campus, Stidham joined the 5-year-olds to play football in the front yard for 45 minutes. Lashlee actually had to be the one to stop the impromptu game of catch.

He knew he had his guy. There aren't many me-first quarterbacks with long-term staying power.

New environment

Jarrett Stidham still owes Kerryon Johnson \$20.

Johnson made that point very clear this week after the Patriots and Lions practiced in Allen Park, Mich. Stidham just rolled his eyes.

Stidham joined a talented Auburn team that had championship aspirations in 2017. It could have theoretically gone awry with a high-profile quarterback walking into an established locker room, especially with coach Gus Malzahn's staff tabbing him as the likely starter – after a year in community college and throwing to high schoolers, no less.

But Stidham has that endearing personality and genuine work ethic. So one day, as Stidham bragged about the running ability he showed off in high school and at Baylor, he told Johnson he'd have a 40-yard score before the end of his career.

"I told him when he first transferred to Auburn that you're not running for a 40-yard touchdown," Johnson said, growing more animated. "It's too fast out here (in the SEC)."

Stidham insisted to Johnson that he was going to run for that 40-yard touchdown.

He never did.

"So he owes me \$20 for that," Johnson said. "Make sure he gets that message because he's acting like he forgot. I have not forgotten.

"I want my \$20."

Sometimes, it's the little things. Stidham was described as a guy who can joke around or lighten the mood in a high-stress locker room. Maybe it'll come at his own expense.

Rewind to Baylor for a moment, and Platt still thinks about the time he was putting air in his tires at a random gas station in Waco. Out of nowhere, Stidham snuck up behind him. He spotted Platt while driving by and stopped to make sure he was OK. Players gravitate toward guys who offer gestures like that.

At Auburn, it was easy to see throughout offseason workouts that Stidham would win the job, and it was also natural for his teammates to root for him. He cheered for his fellow quarterbacks at practice and got to know them as people as well as teammates.

"He's a natural-born leader," Johnson said. "He came in, acted as himself and people respect that. Then obviously, his play on the field spoke for itself."

Stidham rewarded Lashlee for his persistence by dominating the competition at practice.

"Ultimately, his play proved he was the guy. It wasn't even close," Lashlee said. "Jarrett is as accurate of a quarterback as I've ever seen. ... He is a fierce competitor. He's tough as nails."

Sharpening Iron

Chip Lindsey, Auburn's offensive coordinator the past two seasons and now Troy's head coach, really appreciated that Stidham had a good head on his shoulders. Stidham, who is now married, was engaged to a Baylor soccer player for most of his time at Auburn. Lindsey said Stidham focused all his attention on football and rarely went out at night, a combination of characteristics that showed a quality moral fiber and a drive to succeed on the field.

So Lindsey gave Stidham a ton of responsibility at the line of scrimmage, crediting his quarterback with changing protections and routes based on his pre-snap read. Lindsey stressed his praise for that element as something Stidham earned through all the extra hours at the facility.

Stidham was lighting up the SEC in 2017 when Auburn and Alabama met Thanksgiving weekend for their annual Iron Bowl clash. Both teams were still in the hunt for the national championship.

Stidham's numbers didn't necessarily pop off the page, but he controlled the pace of the game by himself with his command and accuracy. In the two years since that game, 13 defensive players from Alabama have been drafted, including four first-rounders. It was as close to an NFL defense as any college team has boasted in the past two decades.

Stidham's supporters ranged from the opposing sideline to homes around the country.

- Damien Harris (Alabama running back in 2017): "We always kept in touch."

- Chris Platt (Baylor wide receiver in 2017): "If he wasn't playing in that game, I probably wasn't going to watch it. He was just on point throwing dimes. I was like, 'Oh my god, I knew this was coming, but dang, he's tearing it up right now.'"
- Rhett Lashlee (UConn offensive coordinator in 2017): "That's why he came to Auburn. I remember him coming here saying, 'I want to come here and help Auburn beat Alabama,' and he did that. You just know when a guy is clicking. They have a certain look in their eye when they're on. I think great competitors rise to the occasion in big moments. For a guy like him, that moment wasn't too big. And at a place like Auburn, there's nothing bigger than the Iron Bowl. He acted like he was made for it."
- Kerryon Johnson (Auburn running back in 2017): "He loves the pressure. He loves the big-time moments. He gets excited for things like that, and that's what helps him play well. He came out there and led us. That whole season, he did his thing – under scrutiny, under pressure, all the talk, it doesn't faze him. He just goes out there and plays the game, and he succeeds."

Future of the franchise?

Stidham earned the label of a potential first-round pick after the 2017 Iron Bowl validated what was evident all season. But after Stidham couldn't convince Johnson to stay another season and Auburn lost 80 percent of its starting offensive line, the Tigers dipped in 2018.

Stidham was criticized for holding the ball too long or succumbing to pressure. While this is a hyperbolic comparison, look what happened to Tom Brady in 2015 when the Patriots didn't have an offensive line or a running game. But hey, that's the nature of the quarterback position – corral the glory when it's going well, seize the blame when it's not.

It's not like it was a disaster, though. Stidham completed 66.5 percent of his passes in 2017 but 60.7 percent in 2018; averaged 225.6 passing yards in 2017 but 214.9 in 2018; had 18 touchdowns and six interceptions in 2017 and 18 touchdowns to five picks in 2018. He did nearly as much with a whole lot less.

"He made a lot of (great) throws in practices and games, especially in 2017 when we protected him much better," Lindsey noted.

The Patriots might have stolen Stidham in the fourth round, but it'd be a stretch to say they were sold on him. They were on the clock for the 10th time, including three trades down the board, before calling Stidham's name in April.

It's also true that Stidham has impressed the Patriots far quicker than anyone anticipated. It started in organized team activities and minicamp, and it's bled into progress in training camp and the preseason. This isn't just a summer fling.

His accuracy rarely waivers, a fact on display in front of a large audience against the Lions. But throughout training camp, he has made the easy throws with a high degree of frequency while also showing eye-popping touch with the intermediate and deep attempts, whether it's been an arcing fade to Jakobi Meyers, or an extended dart to N'Keal Harry, or a drop in the bucket to James White on a wheel route or several instances when he rolled both left and right out of the pocket. Each example featured a well-covered receiver, too.

Does he occasionally hold the ball a little long? Sure, but it takes a lot longer than a few months for the game to slow down for a rookie quarterback. Even with that, Stidham uncorked 14 of his passes against the Lions in 2.4 seconds or less, with 10 completions. The timely reads are more prevalent.

"The talent is unmistakable. The intelligence level is there. The confidence is there," Lashlee said. "I think it's a credit to the Patriots for recognizing the talent."

Stidham is off to one heck of a start. He doesn't have the keys to the kingdom yet, but they're within reach.

The roots of a potential franchise quarterback have been planted for years, and now it might be time for them to sprout in Foxboro.

Stidham might be the Patriots' next big thing.

RB JJ Taylor

The Providence Journal

FOR A FRIEND: Late teammate 'Tank' never far from Pats RB J.J. Taylor's mind

By Mark Daniels

Oct 3, 2020

J.J. Taylor sat in front of his locker just moments before the biggest game of his life. Quiet, he was staring at the silver helmet in his hands. Taylor wasn't looking at the Patriots decal or the red face mask, or thinking about making his NFL debut.

Instead, his focus was the name on the back of the helmet. In all caps, it reads, "TANK GOODMAN."

The name means everything. It elicits every emotion. It reminds him of the best times. And the pain, loss and heartbreak.

"Before the game, I'd probably spend about five to 10 minutes just looking at the back of my helmet," Taylor said. "Just reminiscing."

This season, several players have names on the backs of their helmets as part of the NFL's Say Their Stories initiative. They're doing it to honor victims of systemic racism and police brutality, as well as social justice heroes.

But Taylor took it in a different direction to honor his longtime friend.

Goodman was killed this summer in an act of gun violence. He was 23 and one of Taylor's closest friends. That's whom Taylor's thinking about before each NFL game. It's the name on his mind when he first runs on the field and the person he prays for before each kickoff.

"Right now, with everything going on and just knowing how much he meant to me as a friend, it means a lot," Taylor said. "It means the world."

A 5-foot-6 undrafted rookie free agent, Taylor is already an inspiration for making the team's roster. What people don't see is the pain he's dealing with or the motivation behind it all.

Taylor entered his first NFL training camp in mourning. He now carries his friend's name with him every Sunday.

"It was hard," the young running back said. "Now, I'm not just doing it for me anymore. I wasn't doing it for me in the first place. It was for my family, those who believed in me or those who looked up to me, but now I'm doing it for him — to keep his legacy going."

An early bond

Jamal "Tank" Goodman was always stocky for his age. He always loved football. That's why the nickname "Tank" was fitting.

The first time Jea Reese heard it was when she dropped her son off at his first football practice at Centennial High School in Corona, California. Players were running the 40-yard dash, and when he took off, a coach yelled, "Where did this tank come from?"

The name stuck.

A quiet kid, Goodman stood 5-8 and weighed upwards of 230 pounds as a teenager. On the field, he developed into a competitive, hard-hitting linebacker.

"Oh, he loved football. He played from the time he was 9," said Reese. "He just really, really took to it. It even provided him a scholarship at Dixie State. He really enjoyed it. He actually went into Centennial as a running back, but they needed a linebacker. He had really not played defense, but he was athletic and ended up thriving."

Goodman wasn't the next star running back. Instead, it was his friend, Taylor — a 160-pound dynamo. Taylor entered Centennial as a sophomore and was a year behind Goodman.

"It was a bond instantly," said Centennial coach Matt Logan. "They all played for similar previous coaches and played against each other. They're all really the type of comical type kids who would bag on each other, have fun. It was a close-knit group."

In 2015, Goodman made first-team All-State as a linebacker and Taylor did the same as a running back. The pair bonded in part because of football, but they were also alike. Off the field, they were quiet but on the field, their actions spoke volumes.

"[Jamal] would always talk about how good J.J. was and said he's just really quiet. As they got older, I told J.J., I could see the reason why he and my son developed the friendship, because my son was very quiet," Reese said. "They were very similar in that kids that have talent, just remarkable talent, but just we're not the showboaters."

"They enjoyed the sport and enjoyed playing it. ... They were very competitive on the field, but came off the field as gentle, caring people."

Tragedy strikes

Goodman ended up at Dixie State University in Utah because of football, but his goal was to make an impact off the field. He was in the process of completing a bachelor of science degree in criminal justice when his life came to a tragic end on June 23.

That night, his roommate, Tommy Bradshaw Jr., admitted to police that he shot Goodman in the chest. This allegedly happened because Goodman knocked loudly on Bradshaw's bedroom door, according to court documents. Bradshaw, 32, was arrested and charged with one count of first-degree felony murder.

At the time, Goodman was working with youths at a juvenile detention center and he wanted to make a difference after earning his degree. His mother said he was living with Bradshaw to help him.

The nickname "Tank" was appropriate, due to his stature, but not an indication of who he was.

"He was funny, he was goofy. Some will call him a big ole teddy bear," Taylor said. "He got the name Tank because he's a big dude, but he was a real good dude at heart and just a real genuine person."

The news crushed Taylor. The friends talked almost daily. Their core group from Centennial got together constantly to play PlayStation. They called themselves the 'PS Squad.' No matter what was happening in life, they took the time to play, trash talk and catch up. Taylor always looked forward to those moments.

"I got a few good friends that we all keep in contact to this day. And he was one of the few that I talked to almost every day," Taylor said. "Even though it was maybe through PlayStation or whenever I came home from college, we all hung out and went to play basketball. He was one person that was just a constant person in my life."

Goodman's death happened a month before Taylor's first NFL training camp. He struggled with motivation and leaned on past coaches for guidance.

“At first, it was very difficult losing a friend, especially a friend that was as close to me as he was,” Taylor said. “It was kind of hard to be in the right mental state about anything, really.”

The advice he took to heart was that he should honor and play for Goodman.

Honoring ‘Tank’

The email sat in Reese’s inbox and she wasn’t sure what to do. Initially apprehensive, she spoke with Candy Cray of the NFL on Aug. 31. Cray explained how players were honoring people in the name of social justice. Although her son’s situation was different, his name was among those requested.

Reese was shocked.

“For my son to be honored in that way, I was just completely floored,” Reese said. “As a parent, I know the type of child that my son was. Even the person that took his life he was helping. For him to be honored at that level was actually breathtaking. For his name to be recognized at a national level is something big, because I’m in the process of starting a foundation. Now people across the world will want to know — “who is this Tank Goodman?””

Initially, Reese didn’t know Taylor requested the name. People back in Corona didn’t even know it was happening until after Taylor made his NFL debut against Miami. When word got around, he took a picture and sent it to friends and coaches. The gesture resonated with everyone who knew Goodman.

“It brought tears to my eyes to see,” said Logan. “Everybody down here thought it was a truly, truly remarkable tribute to our fallen teammate and friend. It was amazing.”

Following the game, Taylor had an emotional phone call with Reese. The pain is still fresh. It won’t go away anytime soon, but that helmet made for a nice moment for people who truly needed it.

“His mom ended up calling me after my first game, and she told me how much it meant to her for me to put his name on the back of his helmet and how much it meant for her family,” Taylor said. “I guess you could say it was a little bittersweet.”

“It was emotional. I cried,” Reese said. “It’s bittersweet. For me, it was exciting, but then it was like, ‘Wow, why does he have to be honored in such a way when he could have been [here]?’ People saw the light that he shared on so many when he was alive. So it was very, very emotional, but a happy emotional, because he used his platform to recognize my son.”

Jamal “Tank” Goodman is gone, but not forgotten. J.J. Taylor has made sure of that

LB Kyle Van Noy



Half of Me: The Kyle Van Noy story

Erik Scalavino
June 28, 2021

Of all the countless children born March 26, 1991, one particular bundle of joy proved to be everything this young couple from the West Coast could have wanted.

Healthy, happy, head full of curly hair. His unbridled laugh and sparkling eyes must have melted their hearts. Thing is – he wasn’t theirs. Not just yet, anyway.

The infant boy's biological mother almost immediately put him up for closed adoption, for reasons known but to her, to God, and perhaps a handful of administrators at the private, nonprofit LDS Social Services (later renamed LDS Family Services), which reportedly handled his case.

Some 28 years on, that same child can laugh playfully about the people who welcomed him into their home and raised him as their own.

"I always make fun of them," he confesses. "Out of all the babies, you had to pick someone who's going to be in the NFL. You guys got lucky!" They went into the hospital and picked out of the litter, basically."

During a more serious turn in the discussion, the young man adds, "I'm just blessed that they're my parents. They're really, really good people. I'm happy to call them Mom and Dad. They're good ones."

Layne and Kelly Van Noy felt the same about their new baby boy, whom they officially adopted soon after his birth. They named him Kyle.

ANSWERS... AND QUESTIONS

There isn't any specific moment or singular incident that he can pinpoint. The realization instead came to him gradually.

For approximately the first decade of his life, young Kyle lived with his family in California. Throughout those years, he began to notice stark physical and personality differences between himself and his older brother, Travis. So, he approached the man and woman he always considered his mother and father – neither of whom looks anything like him, either – and began asking questions.

Yes, he was adopted, their response both truthful and matter-of-fact.

"It wasn't that big of a deal. No one acted weird or different about it," Van Noy recalls with a shrug. "You just kind of rolled with it. So, I never really cared that much. I've got a bunch of cousins that treat me like they're my cousins. It doesn't really faze me."

Around age 11, Van Noy and his family moved to next-door Nevada, back to Reno, where he was born. By this time, he was asserting himself on the football field and getting noticed, both for his play and his appearance.

"As you get older, other people find out, and they're like, 'Oh, you're adopted,' you know, like it's a bad thing," Van Noy continues. "Really, it's a blessing. My mom's my mom, my dad's my dad. They never treated me any different. I don't know what it would be like without them. I just know they're not my birth parents."

As a teen, Van Noy began to grow, attracting the attention of college scouts and recruiting services, who ranked him among the nation's most coveted high school players. He eventually chose to play somewhat close to home at Brigham Young University in Utah.

There, Van Noy started 36 of 52 games during his productive four-year career. As a senior, he was a semifinalist for the Bednarik and Butkus Awards (best defensive player and best linebacker, respectively) and appeared on several All-America lists. The Detroit Lions later made him their second-round pick (40th overall) in the 2014 NFL draft. "Baby Kyle," as he is still affectionately known sometimes, had grown into quite a young man. Yet, his family remained protective of him, not just because of his status as youngest on the Van Noy family tree, but also perhaps due to the way outsiders perceived him and his adopted background.

"Yeah, I can see that," Van Noy admits. "They're all very protective. I take pride in it. I'm sure they do, too. They're very proud people. I'm happy they are. That's the way it should be with family."

Shield him though they tried from the judgments of others, Van Noy's family couldn't protect him from his own curiosity.

Who are my biological parents? Why did they give me up? Do I have any blood relatives?

Closed adoptions are defined as those in which the adoptive family knows little to nothing about the biological parents and has no direct contact with them. The law, therefore, ensures that Van Noy remains, to this day, in the dark about such details.

He explains why he's just fine with that.

"I just tell everybody how big of a blessing it is and just try to shine more light to it. A lot of people focus on cancer and different diseases. My focus and my wife's focus and our foundation is to share our stories and promote foster care and adoption and how beautiful it is."

CULTIVATING RELATIONSHIPS

While in Utah, Van Noy met a beauty queen.

Marissa Powell represented the Beehive State in 2013's Miss USA pageant, finishing as the third runner-up. On one of their first dates, she asked him to share an obscure fact about himself. When he revealed that he was adopted as a baby, "She was like, 'Oh, my dad and brother are, too.' So, it was cool," Van Noy remembers. "It's a great thing. Their family's great. Her little brother is just like her real brother."

That shared life experience only strengthened their bond. In 2014, the couple started a joint charitable venture, dubbed the Van Noy Valor Foundation. The organization's goal, he explains, is "a little bit of everything," including removing the stigma that many adopted children feel and encouraging them that it's not something of which they should ever be ashamed. The foundation also helps facilitate foster care and adoptions.

"Not everyone has a perfect relationship [with their parents], and that's OK, but make the most of that situation," Van Noy suggests. "We're just trying to set them up for success in whatever it is they're trying to do. Hopefully, we'll be able to give kids college grants to go to school. That's our end goal."

Among the events they host is a backpack giveaway for school-aged kids and a Christmas tree giveaway around the holidays, which makes Van Noy nostalgic for his own childhood.

"We want to give kids that may not have had a Christmas a chance to enjoy the holidays, open up presents, and enjoy holiday cheer. At the end of the day, if it gives them a smile, and they get to build a relationship with me and my wife, I think that's a win, because they're able to see people that have gone through [adoption] and know how it is." Van Noy became a Patriot after New England traded with Detroit for him nearly three years ago. He's rewarded them by becoming an integral member of a defense that has won two Super Bowls since then. In late August, the Patriots recognized Van Noy's commitment to his off-field work by naming him the 2019 recipient of the team's Ron Burton Community Service Award.

If cultivating relationships represents the core of Van Noy's foundation, it also serves as a somewhat sad irony, for one relationship he will likely never have is with his biological parents. Although he maintains that this is not important to him today, there is a truth he would very much like to discover.

"It would be if I had a sibling," Van Noy reveals, "just to see what someone looks like if they're half of me. I think as I get older, you kind of want to know more medical [family history], just in case."

These days, such considerations are at the forefront of his mind more than ever before.

FULL CIRCLE

Early September inside the Patriots locker room, Van Noy is understandably a bit preoccupied. The Pittsburgh Steelers aren't the only highly anticipated arrival of the upcoming weekend. Every now and then, he glances at his phone, expecting a call from Marissa at any moment telling him to get to the hospital – NOW! The happy couple is expecting their first child.

In deference to the old-fashioned, Van Noy and his wife resist the temptation to learn the baby's gender until it is born, which happens the day the Patriots dismantle the Steelers in the 2019 regular season opener. Van Noy is with Marissa when she brings their son into the world and joins his teammates via cell phone during their post-game locker room celebration.

"I'm just excited, finally," he admits, "to meet someone that's half of me, you know? I know I can see myself in them. That's something I've always wanted."

Now that he has it, would he and his wife ever consider adopting a child?

"You know, we've talked about that," he replies with enthusiasm, "That's definitely an option in our future. I wouldn't ever close the door on that. Right now, we're just kind of focused on starting our little family."

Van Noy gets to thinking about his own childhood circumstances, where they've led him, and where they might one day take him. Back to California eventually, it would appear. During football season, he makes his home here in New England, but maintains a residence in Santa Monica — "I love the warm weather," he admits with an apologetic grin — where he and Marissa will likely settle post-NFL.

He has difficulty describing his emotions on becoming a father. Traces of remorse are even more difficult to conjure when he contemplates how his life has unfolded, given how it started. Van Noy remains resolutely philosophical about searching for and perhaps finding the other half of himself.

"Maybe one day I'll figure it out," he concedes. "I feel like I was brought into this world a different way with the family I was supposed to be with. At this point, I'm comfortable with who I am."

The Boston Globe

Patriots' Kyle Van Noy is teaming up with Boston's XSET to change the esports landscape

By Khari Thompson June 22, 2021

The game never ends for Patriots outside linebacker Kyle Van Noy.

When the eight-year NFL veteran isn't focused on his day job — or chasing his toddler around the house — you might find him on Twitch streaming his latest run on Call of Duty: Warzone.

Van Noy isn't just one of the best athletes at his position in one of the most grueling contact sports in the world. He's also a competitive gamer.

Van Noy has been into video games since the days of Sega Genesis and PC consoles, with his all-time favorites including Nintendo's Super Smash Bros and Xbox franchises like Call of Duty and Halo.

But make no mistake about it: this isn't just fun and games for Van Noy. He's using his passion for games to build something even bigger.

And he's teaming up with the high-powered Boston-based gaming club XSET to change the way you think about gaming.

Building an esports 'powerhouse'

Around the time Van Noy was contemplating his future as a free agent after the 2019 season, entrepreneurs Marco Mereu and Greg Selkoe were in Los Angeles talking shop.

Mereu wanted to found an esports company, while Selkoe, along with companions Clinton Sparks and Wil Eddins, had just left the gaming organization FaZe Clan in search of a new venture.

They're all from Boston, and they knew they wanted their newest enterprise to be tied to the city.

"With both of us being East Coast guys, we thought we could tap into more of the urban cultures of Boston, New York," Mereu said. "The kids who play games these days are a much more diverse and inclusive audience, and just really reflect what we felt a lot of gamers want to see in an organization."

Those early conversations gave birth to gaming club XSET, where co-founders Selkoe and Mereu serve as CEO and COO, respectively. The club has about 50 competitive gamers across 10 different games, including VALORANT, Fortnite, Apex Legends, and Call of Duty: Warzone, and a team of nine content creators.

XSET prides itself on its diversity and inclusion from top to bottom. Three of its six co-owners are Black, and more than half of its membership identifies as women or non-white.

Its commitment to those goals proved instrumental in getting Van Noy on board as an initial investor and adviser.

Van Noy in turn brought Patriots safety Adrian Colbert into the fold while the two were playing together in Miami last season, joining XSET's aptly named "Special Teams" unit. The Patriots linebacker revealed recently that NFL players like Cowboys running back Ezekiel Elliott and Buccaneers defensive end Ndamukong Suh will soon be part of the team as well.

Mereu calls Van Noy and his peers "modern" two-way athletes — think Michael Jordan, Bo Jackson, and Deion Sanders, except with competitive gaming as their second pursuit.

Van Noy sees himself the same way.

"We have a unique situation where we can be two-sport athletes and be part of something so special," he said. "I think guys are really seeing the future of esports as a whole, but also what we bring to the table. And they see us being a powerhouse."

XSET also boasts contributions from well-known music artists and producers like Swae Lee, Ozuna, and the aforementioned Clinton Sparks to pro skateboarder Minna Stess and pro BMX rider Nigel Sylvester.

The club, Mereu says, is "more of a culture" than simply a gaming team.

"Gaming is really the fabric that reaches across every different culture: sports, music, entertainment, fashion," he said. "Everybody plays games these days. Everybody's a gamer."

That vision is a big part of what makes XSET special, explains Van Noy.

"We're trying to bring a little bit of flash, a little bit of elegance, a little bit of grace," the Patriots linebacker said. "We're young, we're talented, we're hungry, and we want to be the best organization. But we also want to be very well-respected. We want to do things the right way. We're very inclusive, and we're trying to create a family-based organization."

That inclusion goes beyond how the team recruits its gamers. It can also be found in how its gamers act.

Providence native and XSET gamer Jason Galluccio — known as "Loochy" — has seen and heard a lot during his time in gaming chat rooms, and he knows firsthand how unfriendly those places can be.

"Now, in 2021, it's starting to push away from that. I think we've all seen what gaming toxicity can be and the negative effects it can have on people's mental states," he explained. "And I feel like in general the trend is pushing more positive."

Part of XSET's mission to foster an atmosphere is aimed at keeping that trend moving in the right direction.

"We want to eliminate some of the toxicity in gaming," Van Noy said.

In March, former Miami Heat center Meyers Leonard — who invests in FaZe Clan — made headlines for using an anti-Semitic slur on a Twitch stream while playing Call of Duty.

The epithet sparked outrage both in the athletic and gaming communities and prompted the Heat and FaZe Clan to suspend Leonard. He's currently out of the league after being traded by the Heat to the Oklahoma City Thunder, who subsequently released him.

The incident also served as a reminder of how much goes on under the radar in the gaming community, where "Loochy" says he still encounters things on his streaming feeds that go too far.

"We all trash talk," he said. "But there's a fine line between banter and friendly competitive-natured trash talk and straight-up being disrespectful to people, and that's the one that has to be drawn."

XSET, he adds, has already drawn that line in the sand simply by bringing in people who make its vision a reality.

"I feel like what XSET has been doing and what they need to continue doing to push that narrative forward of positivity in the gaming scene is just continue the path we're already going down: continuing to bring on creators and faces that have that level of respect for everyone around them."

The Providence Journal

Adopted as an infant, Kyle Van Noy's journey an inspiration to others

By Mark Daniels

November 3, 2018

FOXBORO — As he grew older, it started to click. His skin color was different — a little darker than the complexion of his parents and older brother. The same for his hair. That, too, was different.

"You just kind of realize you don't look like your parents or your brother," Kyle Van Noy said. "People make comments, but it's all you know so you don't know much better at a young age. When you start to understand more and ask more questions, you get more answers."

Van Noy was born on March 26, 1991, in Reno, Nev., and placed with LDS (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) Family Services, an adoption agency. When he was four months old, he was adopted by Kelly and Layne Van Noy, who also had a 3-year-old biological son, Travis.

Kyle was raised in a loving home with strong values. He and his brother bonded over athletics. They were so close that neither remembers exactly when they learned that Kyle was adopted. It wasn't that big of a deal.

"He's my brother and he's my only sibling. I don't know anything different," Travis Van Noy said. "If we were older, there would've been a little bit of a difference. There really wasn't a time, especially with us being so young. He was my new play buddy. We just hung out together and did stuff together. He was my brother. It wasn't like there was any kind of big change type of thing."

Being adopted places you in an exclusive club that not many can comprehend. Van Noy admits he can't remember meeting another child of adoption while growing up. That's one reason why, when Van Noy entered the NFL, he aimed to help those kids who were once in his shoes.

Four years ago, Van Noy and his wife, Marissa, started the Van Noy Valor Foundation. Its goal is to provide opportunities and encourage "valor" in the lives of adopted children, those in foster care and disadvantaged youth.

The charity has taken off while highlighting the person Van Noy has developed into off the field.

Better to give

The Van Noy family is a part of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For them, that means serving, loving and helping those who are less fortunate. It was a lesson that started early.

During Christmas time, the Van Noy family taught their sons about giving. They showed them it could feel just as good to help others as it was to unwrap presents. The family volunteered at the Salvation Army, where they found families in need during the holidays.

"A couple of years, we would try to find a family that was in need and we would try to find their specific needs, their ages and try to figure out how we could help make their Christmas better," Travis Van Noy said. "I still do that with my personal family, my kids and have continued that tradition."

"Growing up we tried, with the religion that I am and the faith that I am, always give back," Kyle Van Noy added. "It didn't matter how much we had; it was always to give first. We would maybe have a couple of presents, but give most of the presents to someone else because they needed it more. That's how I was raised and that's who I was around."

The Van Noy brothers always loved sports. Travis, who's 6-foot-8, played basketball at Southern Virginia and maintains he can still beat Kyle in basketball. Kyle often tagged along with his older brother and played sports with his friends. Kyle turned into such a good athlete, he had the chance to be drafted in baseball before settling on football.

Van Noy, however, always wondered what it would have been like had he met an athlete like him who had a similar background. It's part of the reason he started his foundation.

"I feel like it would have been a big positive for me if someone that was a celebrity or whatever you want to call it, to be able to help out, give back their time," Van Noy said. "Like going back to Reno, I started doing that. I felt like I didn't have that there so I wanted to go back and help out."

Foundation grows

Van Noy grew by leaps and bounds while playing at BYU.

Paul Tidwell, who was BYU's linebacker coach and recruited Van Noy, saw his maturation process firsthand.

"One thing about Kyle was, he was very giving with his time. He loved people, loved kids. He would go out of his way to sign autographs," Tidwell said. "He would go out of his way to talk to people. I saw him grow in that area. I'm just really proud of him. I know that he's doing a lot of good and he's got a good heart."

When he entered the NFL in 2014, he started the foundation. His wife made the perfect partner as her father and brother were also adopted. What started out on a small scale has expanded to multiple events each year. This year, he's bowled with 10 kids in foster care at Patriot Place's Splitsville. In July, Van Noy returned to Reno and took kids from a local foster care agency to a Reno Aces Triple-A baseball game. The special guests also received tickets to see the Arizona Diamondbacks play.

This month, his Patriots teammates teamed up for Van Noy's celebrity waiter night. The foundation raised money for their Christmas tree giveaway on Dec. 1. The charity will give away 253 Christmas trees, 600 coats, lights, ornaments and Christmas gifts to foster kids. Van Noy says he also hopes to have some kids try to kick field goals in Gillette Stadium. The foundation is also taking foster kids to see the movie, "Instant Family," which is about adoption and stars Mark Wahlberg.

"It's great to see and be a part of it," Travis Van Noy said. "It's been really cool to see the growth of the foundation from their kind of conceptualizing it and talking about it. The first event, there were only a few people who showed up in Detroit, but now, Boston has embraced it. It's been pretty awesome."

Respect of teammates

Van Noy was traded to the Patriots in the middle of the 2016 season. Over the course of the last three seasons, the linebacker has developed into one of the team's key defensive pieces. His teammates remained impressed with him on the field, but they are truly blown away off it.

During Van Noy's countless charity events, he has received an endless amount of support from the Patriots organization. Every player on the team has his own story of personal struggle, but they admire Van Noy for putting his own story out there.

"All of us have gone through our own journeys to get here. I think his is a journey that's a little more unique than some other people," Jason McCourty said. "The fact that he recognizes that and wants to do for others that are going through the same journey, makes that special."

"You see a guy like him and he's in the NFL. He raises money for a cause. It shows you, if you do care and you do give a helping hand like that, it's what it produces," McCourty added. "Anytime he has an event, I always want to help out. I think that's very important. I think we all know people who through tragic things or whatever, persons grow up without a mom or a dad or grandparents, like something happens and I think that the work he is doing is incredible."

For Van Noy, it's about proving to these kids that second chances can make a difference. He's able to relate to them unlike a lot of adults can.

"A lot of them sometimes get put in situations where it's just not cool or family situations are messed up," Van Noy said. "That it's OK, that it's your parents choices — it doesn't mean that it's your choices. You can choose to do something. I try to encourage them as best as possible."

RB James White



There's Always This Year

By James White
September 29, 2017

As I stood there, I remember not being able to feel a single thing. Well, nerves. I felt the nerves. That's kind of unavoidable when you have that many people focusing on you.

That's never been what I'm about — getting attention. I'm someone who prides himself on just keeping his head down and putting in the work. But on a stage like this, with that many people watching, you can't just blend in.

I remember that it was really loud, but that the crowd's cheers were kind of muffled — all I could hear were my own racing thoughts, the biggest one being, Don't screw this up, man.

I looked to my right, searching for the only person whose strength could get me through the next few minutes. A guy who has been at the top of this business for years — decades even. A guy who's been on this stage so many times before and always handled it with ease.

Conan O'Brien.

So, the first thing you need to know about Conan is that he's absolutely huge. Like not just a huge celebrity or huge personality — like the guy is a really big human. And that's coming from me, an NFL player.

The other thing you should know about him is that he's just as funny — maybe even funnier — off camera as he is on it. After winning the Super Bowl in Houston last February, I was flown out to L.A. to appear on his show. I was kind of nervous — like I said, I'm not someone who really seeks out attention. But Conan loosened me up by cracking jokes backstage, and once we actually got started, it all felt pretty natural.

It was a pretty unbelievable way to cap off what was probably the best week of my life. Not just because I won a Super Bowl and appeared on a talk show and all that, but also because, for the first time since I started playing football, I had the spotlight solely on me.

That's something that had never happened before.

If you're reading this, you've probably heard the term running back by committee before.

I've been a member of crowded backfields for as long as I've been playing football. It began in eighth grade, when I was on the same team with this kid named Gareef Glashen. He must have run like a 4.2 or 4.3 forty-yard-dash. Well, probably not, but at that age it felt like it. Just the fastest kid alive. I thought I was pretty good, but I couldn't say I was better than him.

I started at St. Thomas Aquinas in Fort Lauderdale at the same time as another kid on the football team who ended up becoming one of my best friends. He also happened to play running back and his name was Gio.

Yeah, the one who plays for the Bengals, that Gio. Giovani Bernard.

He's still one of my best friends to this day, and in high school I think we were almost like brothers who pushed each other constantly to not be outdone by the other. We would line up in the backfield at the same time and both got a lot of experience catching passes back then. I don't think at the time we ever dreamed we'd both end up in the NFL doing the same thing. I mean, you don't really think that far ahead when you aren't even the clear-cut starter on your own team. But I think playing with someone as talented as Gio helped me learn how to put my ego aside. If I got down because Gio had a better game or got more carries, I probably would never have become the player I am today. I learned right away that you can't be envious of a teammate's success, because that's unproductive. I let Gio's success inspire me to do better, and, eventually, we both ended up getting where we needed to be.

That mentality of putting the team ahead of myself became very useful for me at Wisconsin, where there was no shortage of great running backs to share the backfield with. I don't know if I attract talent or what, but while I was in Madison I played with Montee Ball, John Clay and Melvin Gordon. It's not often that that many guys at the same position at the same school all end up in the NFL. But that's where the bar was set for us. I was surrounded by a lot of talent. Even though I was named the Big Ten freshman of the year, I ended up getting fewer carries my sophomore year because Montee was so electric that season. I'll admit it was a little discouraging, but, instead of quitting, I pushed myself to get on the field in other ways, even trying to block punts on special teams. I just wanted to help us win.

What I never fully realized back then was how great all of those experiences would be for me later on in my career. College players who don't get playing time early on can sometimes get discouraged and either quit or transfer. But I'm glad I had the experience I had at Wisconsin because I ended being drafted by an organization that not only discourages selfishness, it absolutely will not tolerate it. When you play for the Patriots, there's never any second-guessing what the goal is. There's no questioning your role or how you're used. You take direction, you practice and you execute.

That's how you win Super Bowls.

My first training camp as a rookie with New England, we were doing practice drills with the full team and I broke through for a long run.

The crowd watching started cheering, and I was feeling pretty good because it was one of the best plays I'd made all camp. I was a little winded, but I didn't want to miss any reps so I lined up for the next play. When the ball snapped, I started going right, then cut the ball back to my left and boom. I ran directly into a brick wall named Brandon Browner.

I could tell it was a big hit not just because of how it felt, but because immediately the crowd went from cheering to saying, Ooooooooooooooh.

Yeah, that sound usually means the defense won the play.

When I finally got back to my feet, I saw Coach Belichick walking towards me. I kind of figured he was going to tell me whatever I'd messed up. But when he got to me, he said kind of casually, in his voice that never really changes tone, "So one thing you'll learn: The bigger they are, the harder they hit." And then he walked away.

I still laugh about that.

What I learned pretty quickly after joining the Patriots was that the games are almost like a reward. During the actual games we're all just flying around and having fun. We go into every game knowing that the team we're playing against is going to try to give us their best shot. And there's no doubt that they practiced extra hard the week before to make sure they do. But as a team we never go into a game believing that the other team had a tougher week of practice than we did. That's because Coach Belichick demands the best out of you, and challenges you to give your best. It's honestly not for everyone. But if you want to be great, that's pretty much all you can ask for from a coach.

Both from a mental and physical standpoint, the way we prepare is so challenging that there's really nothing that can happen during the itself game that will make us panic. Even a 25-point deficit in the Super Bowl.

Like I said, in the past few months I've been asked about that game a lot. People want to know whether there was some sort of dramatic moment or speech that inspired our comeback. The truth is, during the course of the game itself, there weren't a lot of moments when I was really thinking about the fact that I was playing in the Super Bowl. Nobody on the team really had wide eyes. There was just focus.

There was no magic behind why we ended up coming back. Definitely some great plays from great players, but nothing we hadn't practiced or prepared for. Even when we were down, we all knew we had the opportunity to win the football game. Not because of luck, but because we felt like we were in control of the game based on our time of possession, even though we were behind on points. We knew the turnovers were killing us, but we aren't a team that usually turns the ball over, so that would be easy to fix. Also, we knew we had Tom Brady and having Tom Brady on your team means that you're always in the game.

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When we went into overtime and won the coin flip, I think that's when we all knew we had this thing. All the tough practices, the intense meetings, the crushing hits — all of those little moments added up to this big one. I don't think a single person who'd been through it all doubted we were ready for it.

Going into that game, based on our preparations, I had the sense I might have a big role, but obviously I didn't think that meant 14 catches or anything. I didn't get to play in the game when we went to the Super Bowl my rookie year, so this time around all I really hoped for was to make a meaningful contribution to the game.

That entire final drive, there was no pep talk or anything from Tom in the huddle. We didn't need that. The entire offense knew we just needed to follow his lead and we were going to take it down the field. From a player perspective, everything we do comes from Tom. When I first began with the Patriots, it was honestly almost weird being in the same locker room as him. You're accustomed to looking at him as an icon rather than a teammate. But he has a way of moving past that with everyone really quickly. He takes the time to really get to know all of us, especially the guys on the offense. That disarms you in a way, and when you see how selfless he is and how much he's focused on winning, of course you're inspired to operate the same way.

That entire drive in overtime, even though it was this humongous moment, there was never a time when it didn't seem like we were in control. And when our offense is in the zone like that, it's so fun being on the field with him because everything just clicks so seamlessly. The ball is there when it needs to get there, not before or after. If you're in the right spot and stick out your hands, that's a catch. I know there are a number of ways we could have won that game, but I'm always going to feel very humbled that I got the honor of putting us across the goal line for the last time to make us champions.

I think the most interesting thing is that when we finally did win, even though it was the sole focus of all of our preparation that year, for me it felt kind of.... fake. Like I was in another dimension or something. I had all of these reporters circling around wanting to interview me. That's not something that's ever really happened before. That's not how it works when you're part of a committee. But on that day, after that game, the attention was on me and it felt weird as much as anything else.

In the days immediately following the Super Bowl, I got more attention than I'd ever received in my entire career combined up until that moment. It wasn't just going on Conan, but also talking to reporters, going on radio shows, even just walking on the street in Boston and having people recognize me and freak out. It was all very different. Not in a bad way. I guess it just really hit me that my performance in that one game — one of hundreds of football games I've played in my life — is going to be something some people will remember me by.

I can see how those who aren't prepared for the spotlight can get overwhelmed by it. I guess that's why I'm glad my entire life had prepared me for my moment.

No matter who you are, it's tough to win games in this league. But that's especially true when you're the defending champs and everybody is trying to take you down.

Coach Belichick tends to have a short memory when it comes to victories, but he always remembers the stuff we can improve. That's really the goal that pushes the organization forward, even more than playoff victories and Super Bowls. We want to try to achieve perfection every time we take the field, no matter who we're playing — even if it's against our own team in practice. And when that's your goal, the work never ends.

Still, it's pretty sweet to win a Super Bowl.

You know it's kind of funny, after we won last year, I had so many people mobbing me to get interviews that by the time I actually made it back to the locker room all my teammates had left the stadium to go celebrate somewhere else. It was honestly kind of a bummer to walk in there expecting a party and not see anyone. I think that's the only thing about the whole experience I might have changed. I really wish I could have celebrated right there with my teammates in the locker room after we won that game we worked so hard together to get to.

Well, I guess there's always this year.

DB Joejuan Williams

The Boston Globe

Patriots rookie Joejuan Williams has come a long way to make it to the NFL

By Nora Princiotti

July 23, 2019

NASHVILLE — It was the second night of the NFL Draft. Joejuan Williams, just selected as the No. 45 overall pick by the New England Patriots, hopped in a black sedan and snuck out of the downtown crowds flooding the streets of his hometown.

They drove west and pulled up in front of a dorm on the Vanderbilt campus. Williams unfolded his 6-foot-4-inch frame from the back seat, thanked the driver, and walked in.

He went to his friend Kalija Lipscomb's room, where a group was watching the draft. Without knocking, he opened the door and stuck his head, Patriots cap affixed to it, inside.

"Guess who?"

The guys in the room went crazy, jumping and hugging.

Back downtown, Williams's friend, coach, and mentor, Corey Phillips, saw the scene in the dorm room posted on Instagram. He showed Williams's agent, relieved, because Williams hadn't told everyone he was taking off when he left the green room. There was supposed to be a party in his honor starting soon.

That Williams wanted to go jump up and down in a dorm room with his best friends instead of going to a party surprised no one. But when you've had to jump over so many hurdles to get to this point, people worry.

Difficult start

Williams grew up with his mom, Stephanie Robertson, in Nashville public housing. His father wasn't in the picture, and Williams doesn't talk about him publicly except to say in a video produced by Vanderbilt that he knew his father was a very good football player in Tennessee and that he did give him one thing, a goal: "To be better than him in everything that I did in life."

Williams moved around so much he refers to places he "stayed" instead of places he lived. They were evicted multiple times. Violence and police presence were constants. One Christmas Eve, Williams went to sleep convinced he'd finally see a tree and presents the next morning because he'd seen red lights flashing outside his window.

But life hit its nadir in April 2010, when Robertson was arrested by an undercover police officer for selling crack cocaine. She was convicted and sentenced to 4½ years in prison. Williams and his older brother, Deontre, went to live with their grandmother.

"My kids saw a lot, they saw a whole lot of stuff that they weren't supposed to see at that age," Robertson said in the video. "That hurts me every day, I still think about it."

No one wants to get too deep into what that period of time was like for Williams. The basic facts are known, but the specifics — of where he was for the days after his mom's arrest when no one could find him, of what it really felt like to grow up without his dad, of how he and his brother made it work — he's only shared with a select few. Phillips, the high school coach turned Vanderbilt recruiting coordinator, has known Williams since he was a middle schooler and is like family. He knows the story. Vanderbilt head coach Derek Mason knows, too, from the nights when Williams was in college when he needed to talk and they'd just get in the car and drive. It's a small inner circle.

Williams can mask it with charisma, but he's an introvert. This is the guy who goes to the dorm room, not the draft party. He hates the idea that in telling his story his mom — his hero, the person who taught him to tackle in the streets outside their apartment and the first person he hugged after the call came from the Patriots — might come across as a villain instead of someone who struggled but fought.

"We've had a lot of low points, but through that she always tried to show her love for her kids," Williams said in the Vanderbilt video.

The story of his childhood is dramatic enough that it can eclipse everything else, that Williams loves Call of Duty, has worn the same pair of Vans sneakers basically every day for the past year and always keeps Skittles, Starbursts, Rips or gummy worms in his backpack. So he keeps it private. And yet, everybody wants to know. Phillips remembers once ahead of the draft, when the interview requests and feature stories were piling up, when Williams got frustrated.

"How many times am I going to tell how [crappy] my life was growing up," he asked.

Help from others

When Robertson went to prison, Williams was a middle schooler at Smithson Craighead Academy, a public charter school on the outskirts of the city. Many students were there because they'd had problems at other schools, so it wasn't the easiest place to stay on track, but Williams had some of the right people in his corner.

One was Maurice Fitzgerald, dean of students and head football coach. At this point, Williams was a round little tailback with average athleticism, but his coaches liked that he was smart and competitive. Fitzgerald kept him on the right path, got him working out with his son, Buck, who runs a training program, and connected him with Phillips who was then coaching at Father Ryan High School, a private school on a manicured campus just south of downtown that counts Tim McGraw and Faith Hill among its neighbors.

Father Ryan also has a very strong athletic program, and its head football coach, Bruce Lussier, was interested in a few students at Smithson Craighead. With some urging from Phillips and Maurice Fitzgerald, Williams was included in that group and was able to get a financial aid package. He matriculated as a freshman in 2012.

Williams was a gangly 5-10 as a high school freshman. He didn't play much, but he made friends quickly and soaked up new opportunities. Sometimes that masked the jealousy and the sense of unfairness he often felt meeting his new friends' families or visiting their homes, and the difficulty of the transition to Father Ryan.

There was one moment that sticks out to Phillips for two reasons. To understand its significance you need to understand one of the young coach's biggest rules: Never wear your pants below your waistline.

"If you're in my presence and you're sagging, we're going to have a bad misunderstanding and you know it," Phillips said.

So, when Phillips spotted Williams sagging one day just after Christmas break Williams's sophomore year, he immediately pointed it out to him. What he didn't realize until Williams yanked his trousers up was that they were several inches too short. He was growing fast, and he didn't have any others that fit.

Phillips was immediately mortified he'd singled out Williams. He went into "full-fledged panic mode."

"As an African-American kid at a private school that's predominantly white, I didn't want him to get made fun of," Phillips said.

Phillips went to Walmart and bought the biggest pair of pants he could find, size 34 x 36. When he saw them on Williams was when he realized Williams had grown at least two inches since he started at Father Ryan.

As Williams grew he became more coordinated, and word of the big cornerback from Nashville started to spread among college coaches. The summer after sophomore year was when the offers started rolling in. Williams was going to camps and standing out. Tennessee. Kentucky. Ole Miss. Auburn. Alabama. He had about a dozen offers before he was a junior.

That same summer, Phillips would bring Williams along when he worked out with an old friend, former NFL cornerback Cortland Finnegan. Williams was shy at first, barely spoke to Finnegan, and only watched the drills, but one day Finnegan got fed up with watching Williams stand there and yelled for him to jump in.

The workout was done 45 minutes later. Williams thanked Finnegan, gave him a hug, grabbed his things, and left. Finnegan walked right over to Phillips, stared him in the eye, and said "Whatever you do, don't [screw] that kid up. He's going to be a pro."

Williams made 48 tackles, 2 interceptions, and 11 pass breakups as a junior in 2014. All he had to do was choose a college. The phone was ringing off the hook. A few weeks before he had to decide, Williams posted a note on social media telling all the schools he needed some space and to give him a week to himself. Mason, from Vanderbilt, was one of the few who listened.

Mason and Williams, both raised by single mothers, had connected from the jump. Williams also loved Vanderbilt for the value of the education he knew he'd get there and for the chance to stay and play for his home city. He also knew that Mason had coached another big cornerback, Richard Sherman, at Stanford.

It was important to Williams that his college coach have a plan for him because his size was unusual for his position. He believes he's a cornerback at heart, at his best one-on-one against a No. 1 receiver, but some coaches felt he would outgrow the position.

"The word safety was almost like a cuss word, a four-letter word," said Buck Fitzgerald, Williams's trainer and the son of his middle school coach. "You don't go with the safeties, you do everything that the small guys do."

Williams knew Mason saw him as a corner. In high school, after Williams went through another growth spurt, Phillips consulted Mason on how to handle it.

"How did you get Richard to play with good pad level," Phillips texted.

"I stopped trying to make him look like the other kids," was Mason's response.

Williams chose Vanderbilt. Before he could get there, there was another hurdle. Robertson's sentence ended in October 2014. She was working to put things back together and moved her family for a job. Williams transferred to Hendersonville, a nearby public school that had a good football team. Then, the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association brought the hammer down because of a rule that states any student who transfers from a private to a public school has to live at least 20 miles from the school they're transferring from. Williams's new home missed the cutoff by two-tenths of a mile. He was ineligible. He appealed, but it was denied. The second-ranked college football prospect in the state missed his senior football season because of the distance of three football fields.

"The whole thing was stupid," Buck Fitzgerald said. "It was just dumb."

It was a lonely time. Williams traded camaraderie and competition for solo hours in the weight room. He was still growing — Buck Fitzgerald eventually realized that the weeks when Williams seemed to trip over himself were the expression of growing pains, not poor focus — and never complained about missing football, even though he did.

"I'm sure it was tough and really dark, but again, if you didn't know you thought he was just fine, you know?" Buck Fitzgerald said. "I think he focused. When you've had to deal with as much as he did, I think you lock into what you want to lock into."

College years

At Vanderbilt, Williams played in every game as a true freshman and, by the end of the season, had worked himself into the team's primary cornerback rotation. His sophomore year, he started. That year against Georgia was when he gave up his first touchdown. Vanderbilt had beaten the Bulldogs the year before, but on their way to a national championship game appearance, Georgia got revenge, 45-14.

Williams was hardly the only player to lose a matchup in that game, but that didn't matter. He'd bit on a double move and had to watch the ball sail over his head. In the locker room he sobbed uncontrollably.

Phillips, who was hired to help with recruiting at Vanderbilt not long after Williams started there, was within earshot to hear Williams tell Mason he felt like he'd let him down.

"I knew in hearing him say that, this kid is chasing perfection," Phillips said. "He's not trying to be a good player, he's trying to be the best, most dominant player on the field."

Williams made the All-Southeastern Conference second team as a junior with four interceptions and 13 passes defended. He played mostly on the outside, but he'd travel to follow the best receivers in the SEC. Williams relished those matchups, walking into cornerbacks coach Terrence Brown's office first thing every Monday asking, "Who's next," before watching as much film as he could.

"I watch film like I watch 'Game of Thrones,'" Williams said after the draft.

Williams got serious about his body, too. There's still an indent on the right-side panel of his old Vanderbilt locker from where he stapled an index card with his weekly recovery routine. Normatec compression recovery device on Monday, cold tub Tuesday, extra lifts, massages, band work, and the rest.

The next step

Williams's draft process hit a snag when he ran a disappointing 4.64 40-yard dash at the combine, though he improved to 4.55 at his Pro Day. He weighed in at 211 pounds in Indianapolis, something Buck Fitzgerald thinks might have slowed him, but is back down around 205 now.

It didn't bother the Patriots. They showed so much interest in Williams before the draft — interest that included two private workouts and a five-hour meeting in Nashville with coach Bill Belichick — that some around him began to think it might be a smoke screen until they traded up from pick No. 56 to get him at No. 45.

Williams joins a loaded secondary in New England. Stephon Gilmore, J.C. Jackson, and Jason McCourty all figure in ahead of him on the depth chart, at least for now.

"He's a tremendously impressive kid," said Patriots director of player personnel Nick Caserio. "I would say he's very mature. He's a great person, which is important. It says a lot about him and the things he's endured throughout his life. But as a player, he's got some unique attributes that not a lot of players in that position have."

Phillips often says that Williams's life has been a sequence of "almost there" moments. He perseveres and progresses, only for life to throw another hurdle in his way. It's why the people around him worry easily. Old habits die hard, but Phillips said that when Williams walked across the stage and put on his Patriots cap, what he felt more than anything was relief. Finally, he could take the "almost" out of the equation.

It was apt that Williams's draft was held in Nashville. In the only place he's ever called home, Williams got where he was going.

DL Deatrich Wise, Jr.



Patriots rookie Deatrich Wise Jr. proving early to rise in NFL

Adam Kurkjian

Sunday, September 24, 2017

FOXBORO — With the evidence in hand, Brian Brazil made his case to the referees.

The coach of Hebron High in Carrollton, Texas, Brazil had just watched his team lose to Allen, 28-21, in 2011. What had Brazil up in arms was how his defensive end, Deatrich Wise Jr., fell victim to one hold after another without a single yellow flag thrown.

The explanation he received made it even worse.

"The game was over and I took (Wise's) jersey over to the official, and the jersey was completely ripped. It was torn to shreds. I took it to the officials after the game and said, 'Not one holding call. Did not call holding once, and I told you before the game (he would be held),' " Brazil recalled. "And they said, 'Coach, he's on the backside of the play.' And I said, 'Exactly. He runs everything down from the backside.' "

That didn't matter. The officials, despite acknowledging the fouls, believed Wise wasn't in position to make the plays and, thus, didn't see it as a violation.

"I guess (the holding) worked," Brazil said. "I had to get his jersey replaced because I couldn't use it after that game. It was totally shredded."

Wise said Thursday that game taught him a valuable lesson.

"High school is when I learned that refs never call a holding call," Wise said, "and I've kind of got to get used to it."

As Wise enters his third career NFL game this afternoon with the Houston Texans coming to Gillette Stadium, opposing offensive linemen have yet to keep him out of the backfield. Already with two sacks in two games, Wise has drawn an illegal hands to the face call, but no holding penalties yet.

He can see it, do it

All one must do to get a sense of how Wise can dominate at the point of attack is shake his hand. Not only does Wise have fingers that stretch out seemingly to the size of a catcher's mitt, but his grip can have a crushing effect. Those big, strong hands, combined with 35-plus-inch arm length, make for a daunting physical specimen. Brazil even theorized that the 6-foot-5, 270-pound Wise could have grown into an offensive tackle.

Wise's coach at the University of Arkansas, Bret Bielema, knows a thing or two about developing defensive linemen, having also coached fellow Pats defensive end Trey Flowers. Bielema said that while Wise's arm length is a strength, it's his skill that sets him apart.

"He's got tremendous eye-hand coordination, which allows him to make really quick decisions with his hands and it follows through on the field," Bielema said. "Some people can think all the right things, but they really can't do them. Deatrich has a unique ability to be able to see it and be able to do it."

Wise said he did not develop those techniques until his redshirt sophomore and junior years at Arkansas. However, at the beginning of his senior season, he broke his hand and had to deal with an AC joint injury in his shoulder. His production dropped significantly, as he made eight sacks and 10.5 tackles for loss in 2015 and just 3.5 and 5.5 his final year.

Bielema said that was "100 percent" due to injury.

It did not scare off the Patriots, as they drafted Wise in the fourth round with the 131st overall pick. But Wise's injury woes were not over.

Focus firmly on field

While success in training camp practices can be taken with a grain of salt, Wise had plenty of it in early individual and team drills. But against the Jacksonville Jaguars in the first preseason game, Wise suffered a concussion. He went through the protocol and did not again play until the season opener against the Kansas City Chiefs.

Another injury might bring a "here we go again" feeling to some, but Wise said that was not the case.

"I actually didn't have that thought," Wise said. "I'd been through so much in college, I just remained positive saying that this too shall pass. I was going to keep studying film every week. I was studying O-line tape with the guys . . . and keeping my mind in the game even though my body wasn't in the game. I've been down before, but I wasn't out. So I knew I was going to come back."

When he did, he made an immediate impact. Wise had a sack and five quarterback hits in the team's 36-20 win over the New Orleans Saints last week. He looked basically like the player observers raved about in camp.

And Bielema thinks better days lie ahead.

"The thing about (Wise) is he's just really long," said Bielema, who deems Wise as strong a pass rusher as he's ever coached. "He's got a long torso. . . . Those guys take some time to develop. . . . I don't think he's even scratching the surface of what he can be."

Wise, too, knows he can get better.

"Everybody's giving me praise right now," Wise said, "but I'm staying focused because I have a long way to go."

But, as Brazil noted, the present isn't too shabby, either.

"I mean, two games, two sacks, I think that's a pretty good start to his career."

Maybe when opponents are forced to hold Wise so much they rip his jersey off, people — and officials — will know he's hit that next level.
