

# **2022 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."

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## 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."

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## **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 Parcells' Patriots staff as the secondary coach in 1996. Parcells, 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 Parcells 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 Parcells bolted for the Jets in 1997, but Kraft decided to ultimately wash his hands from the Parcells 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," Parcells said. "The people in New England are lucky to have him."

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## 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.

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## 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 Boutselis earned him the opportunity, but it was up to the young coach to make the most of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **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."

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## **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."

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## **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.

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## **DL Christian Barmore**



### **Bedard: Heading into 2nd season, Christian Barmore ready to 'wreck some teams' for draft snub**

By Greg A. Bedard  
September 10, 2022

If you were impressed with Christian Barmore's rookie season for the Patriots, the former Alabama defensive tackle doesn't share your opinion.

"To me, everybody says I had a real great year but I think there's a lot I could have done better," Barmore said in an exclusive conversation with BostonSportsJournal.com on Friday. "I missed a lot of sacks and stuff like that. I should have made more things happen. My focus is no mistakes that I did last year because I knew what my mistakes were. So really my goal is to just squeeze anything, when they double or anything like that, get into the backfield and make that play, don't miss any plays - plays you miss could hurt the team.

"Even if they say it's not your fault, but it is your fault, you know what I'm saying? Because you could have made that one happen. My mission this whole year ... I've learned from all that, the offseason too, like literally the plays I knew should have made, I'm going to make them this season. So this whole season is about that."

That is bad news for the rest of the NFL.

Barmore, after a draft day slide that is still very much on his mind (he was very honest about that in our conversation), had an outstanding rookie campaign. As a role player (55 percent of snaps) playing mostly as a designated pass rusher (67 percent of his snaps were rushing the passer), Barmore was still the second-best pass rusher on the team by every measure to Matthew Judon, who played nearly 400 more snaps than the rookie.

The next step for Barmore is to earn the respect of the coaches against the run to get more snaps. Bill Belichick said Barmore has made gains in those areas, and it has shown in camp and the preseason.

"I think he's improved ... better fundamentals, better techniques, better understanding of the blocking schemes," Belichick said this week. "He's played a lot of different positions from three (technique) to two to one to zero, little bit of five-technique. Just the volume of that, it's not the easiest thing, especially from a young player. I think he's gotten more comfortable with that. Guys he has, he's playing with them, DG [Davon Godchaux], [Lawrence] Guy, Carl [Davis Jr.], Dan [Ekuale] when he was here. Those guys are pretty good. I think they've all worked well with him. He's worked well with them. So I think it's good to have that same continuity to have those same guys back."

Barmore has a goal in mind.

"I want to be a guy who doesn't come off the field," he said.

Barmore could well get his wish. According to sources around the team, the Patriots are planning for Barmore to be a big part of their defense this season — and it could start in Week 1 against a Dolphins team that features a center in Connor Williams who could be a weak spot. Taking advantage of Barmore's strength and quickness against a center would involve him playing 1 or Zero technique. With the heat playing a big factor, and it being the first game of the season, don't expect any Patriots defensive lineman to play a ton of snaps — but expect Barmore's role to increase as the season progresses.

Some players who experience success as rookies can rest on their laurels and enjoy the fruits of their labor. But Barmore hasn't done that — Judon noted Barmore returned in better shape and he's expecting big things from his potential inside/outside pass rushing partner.

"It's just growth from year one to year two," Judon said. "Changing his body, changing his mentality, just you know, kind of growth that you would like to see out of a player, such as his caliber, from year one to year two. But he got to put it all out there on the field, right? Training Camp and OTAs we've seen that but we got to see what he does this year. And I think he's gonna do great things for us."

#### Draft Day Drop

There are several teams in the NFL who did not expect Barmore to be in this position. As we reported at the time of the 2021 draft, when Barmore unexpectedly slid out of the first round, some teams had concerns about what kind of professional Barmore would be. Even Belichick, who traded two fourth-round picks to move up eight spots from 46 to 38 and pick Barmore, noted at the time how rare it was for a player like that to be available at that stage.

"It's pretty unusual to get the first defensive tackle to be drafted at that point and the first interior defensive lineman to be drafted at that point in the draft, so we traded up," Belichick said. "Felt good about acquiring that and look forward to working with Christian."

Barmore continues to use that as motivation.

"Yeah, I can say that, yeah," he said. "But I thank God I'm here because I know that I could ... people thought I was off the field (problems) kind of guy, misunderstood kind of guy but they didn't know who I was. I was just like a real competitor on the field and just I just love playing the game of football. ... They called me a troublemaker, but I was never a troublemaker. I never got locked up in college. I never failed a drug test. I made all my classes. I ain't never had academic misconduct and I was just someone they didn't know about because it was all rumors, it was not true. I'm doing the best I can to be here and be the best player I can be for this team and be a good teammate to everybody and be coached."

Barmore is well aware of what teams were saying about him, and how teams passed on him. What were the issues? From our reporting after the first round (before the Patriots picked him) when Barmore was still on the board and would make sense for New England:

But there's a flip side with Barmore that will need to be dealt with for the Belichick bet to pay off. I know of at least one team that took Barmore off their draft board. Another had a late second-round grade on him. Both were teams that play similar schemes to the Patriots, and had an interest in interior defensive players.

...

First of all, Barmore did drop. If he was a clean prospect, he was clearly a first-round talent, especially this year. This was not about the quarterbacks pushing people down the board or anything like that.

Friday morning, after taking a look at the first-round results and seeing which players were available that might interest the Patriots, I made some calls, and most of them centered on Barmore due to his position and college. I wanted to know why some key teams passed on him, hours before the Patriots would trade up for him. That led to this thumbnail:

Christian Barmore, NT, Alabama (6-3, 310): Tremendous first-round talent with ability against the run and the rush, but big-time red flags off the field that caused him to drop out of the first round. Nick Saban has spoken well publicly of him. If he's there, this is an old-school Belichick pick.

What I heard was interesting. And I am just passing on the information I received before he landed on the Patriots — there was no anti-New England bias.

"Yeah, we looked hard at him, could use a player like him ... Barmore was not for us," said one team.

What was the issue? I'm not going to divulge specific information to protect my sources and their relationships, but it boils down to this: there are a lot of questions about Barmore's intelligence and how it might manifest itself once he's out of the more controlling collegiate environment and has more freedom.

The team that had the late second-round grade on Barmore said that was the earliest they would have been comfortable with the risk.

"Alabama barely held him together," said an NFC scout. "As a pro, he's a real wild-card."

I asked another scout if he had any specifics, and he said that just general accountability — getting to practice and class — was a struggle for him and Barmore has to be in a very tightly controlled environment, like Alabama has, to succeed. Barmore also was in a very heavy rotation — most players with his talent play upwards of 70 percent of snaps. His playing time just kept dropping to about a 50-50 split. That's very unusual and sent scouts digging for answers.

"I think he's going to be a big-time bust," said one scout, again, before the Patriots picked him.

The Patriots have to know all this. Obviously, Nick Saban didn't completely wave Belichick off Barmore, so there should be some comfort there with the risk.

And here's the other thing: Barmore's tape is really good. There is no indication on the film that he has any issues, outside of his playing time split and also that he brings it in big games — he was terrific in the playoff games this year — but completely disappears in others. That can happen; it's not totally unusual for college-age players.

"They said teams were concerned about my off-the-field issues the whole time, about me fighting my teammates, fighting the coaches, and they said I was not doing what I was supposed to do," Barmore said. "But I never — literally never — missed a game in college, I never missed a game. I know people that missed games that did some stupid stuff that still went in the first (round). I'm gonna bring it up because that's in the past but it's alright because God made me come here and I thank God for it.

"I just know that those people that said things about me, they were not true. And I know I am not the type of person — you can ask all my teammates at college, even here — like I'm a humble person, I'm not a selfish kind of guy. I feel like I do make the team better. It seemed like the hard work you put in in college and especially like, you know, I mean, like all the stuff you did, especially going to class and they say these things ... it hurts, it really hurts me, because I know that I did what I had to do in class. I literally got like 20 credits so I could graduate in two semesters. So I know I did my part. So it was just a misunderstanding. I guess people were just saying stuff about me to get ahead, I guess."

Teams got it flat-out wrong, and he knows which teams

Here's the thing about the teams that passed on Barmore: they were completely wrong with their concerns. There were serious questions about Barmore's football IQ, but on film, Barmore has constantly been a smart player. Knowing that other teams thought about Barmore, I looked for that all during his rookie campaign and I couldn't find one instance where I thought, 'He's having issues doing what he's supposed to be doing.' And you can clearly see that on film. It was never there. And he's been great in the locker room too. Barmore's puzzled by those scouting reports as well.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out because like literally there's a lot you have to do on the d-line," Barmore said.

"Like get in your gap, play your run and play the technique. So that's what I'm trying to figure out because I know my IQ is really good and I know I can get even better so it's just like they always say stuff like that, guess to make you go down whatever but I know those teams missed wrong about my IQ. But it's all right. I thought it was because of the off-the-field issues and stuff like that. It was never about football, I guess because I know that I could be a smart football player. All I've got to do is just follow the scheme, follow the defense and just follow everybody with what I have to do."

Some of those teams that passed on Barmore are on the team's schedule this season. Let's just say he's aware of that.

"Yeah, definitely looking to wreck some teams, teams that took me off the radar," he said. "They would call me so many times. I'm like, okay, then they pass on me again, you know what I'm saying? It was just crazy. I know them teams, yeah."

Barmore didn't slack off after his rookie season, he's gotten better. The Patriots are looking to increase his role. And Barmore has all the motivation he needs for another year with the teams that passed on him.

Sounds like someone's ready for this season.

"Definitely expect to have a big year," Barmore said. "Just keeping my head down and ball out. Just literally just focus on what I got to do. You know, move on. It really is about being the best player you can be for this team."

## **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."

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## **WR Kendrick Bourne**

### **The Providence Journal**

#### **Patriots' Kendrick Bourne was on the wrong path. Here's why his life changed**

By Mark Daniels

FOXBORO — On the first day of his new life, Kendrick Bourne resorted to old habits.

That's when the 17-year-old walked into the cafeteria at Milwaukie Academy of the Arts, opened up his Louis Vuitton bag and stole a fistful of snacks. When the woman serving lunch saw it happen, she was irate. Stealing was commonplace for Bourne at this point in his life, but not on this Milwaukie, Oregon, campus.

When the school's football coach, Don Johnson, heard about the incident, he lost it.

"I went up and grabbed his bag in front of the whole school. I dumped it out," Johnson said. "I grabbed his backpack, his football helmet and shoulder pads. I grabbed everything and went to the front of the school and threw it in the street and said, 'get your ass out of here.' I told him, 'take your ass back to the hood because you don't want this, you don't really want this at all.'"

'Last chance'

Had Bourne got back on that bus you probably wouldn't know him today. Instead, the senior went to football practice and sat in the bleachers. When it was over, he begged Johnson to let him stay. The coach's message was simple:

"This is your last chance."

Waiting for Bourne back home in Portland was a life on the street full of drugs, booze and crime. It was an avenue to gang activity and a path he was already on. Instead, he chose to break the cycle.

It took Bourne one year to change his life.

"I literally changed everything about me," Bourne told The Providence Journal. "No more stealing. No more trying to get over on people. No more smoking. No more drinking. No more skipping class. I literally bought into everything to get to college."

"He was a late bloomer and when we say late bloomer, I mean the deadline," added Bourne's brother, Andrew. "It was his senior year, he made the change and it's been amazing ever since."

Bourne's dangerous cycle

The Lloyd Center shopping mall sits downtown in Portland. It was one bus stop away from where Bourne lived in the northeast part of the city. Instead of attending class at Benson Polytechnic High School, he spent his time here. This is where he went to work, stocking his Louis Vuitton bag with stolen goods. When he went to school, Bourne sold the items to students to make money. Sometimes he'd use the cash to play dice at the park.

"I was that thief that would resell stuff. Just really into the wrong things," Bourne said. "I had that Louie bag. I would fill it up with candy, anything. I was worried about the wrong things at that age. Just a bad kid and not knowing what I was doing. Not really understanding the consequences of what I was doing."

Bourne's actions created a dangerous cycle. Due to his failing grades, he wasn't eligible to play sports during his sophomore year. Without sports, he spent more time on the streets. It was frustrating for the coaches who saw his otherworld athletic ability.

At the time, Johnson was an assistant coach at Benson and saw Bourne sell his illegal goods or hustling other students for money. If an argument broke out with the jocks, Bourne would step up on the football field or basketball court and put on a show.

"If the athletic kids ran their mouth, he really put his cleats on and just dominate," said Johnson. "So the first time I saw Kendrick was when he just put his cleats on and went into a 7-on-7 (drill) and he jumped up and caught a ball one handed so damn high everybody looked at each other like 'what just happened?'"

"He's a different type of athlete and then he literally would go in the gym and argue with those guys on the basketball team. And just windmill (dunk) from the box."

When he was a junior, Bourne's actions caught up to him. He played five games on the football team before he was caught with marijuana at school. Then he was arrested for stealing at the mall.

"I ended up just getting kicked out of school by getting caught with marijuana, smoking stuff like that and stealing," Bourne said. "At that time, at a young age, I was just lost. Vision was blurry, not really knowing what I wanted to do."

Bourne found the right path

Andrew Bourne is seven years older than his younger brother and warned him. He grew up on the same streets and had similar problems. That's why he ended up at Long Beach City College instead of a Division-I program to play football. Those problems were why he got in trouble at school and had to go back home. When he returned, he was worried about his brother.

The tide changed when Johnson went to Milwaukie Academy of the Arts to coach football. He saw the potential and invited Bourne to get away and enroll for his last year of high school. That meant he had to take a 35-minute bus ride every morning and be on his best behavior.

"I think once he went to jail his junior year for stealing it kind of just switched his life around," Andrew Bourne said. "He was like, 'man, if I keep on doing these negative things, my brother's been telling me that nothing positive is going to come out of it and I can see that.'"

"So he decided to make that change his senior year. The school wasn't close. It was going to be tougher to get to school in Milwaukee than it was right down the street from where we lived. We didn't know how it was going to go. We weren't expecting much."

Following the incident in the cafeteria, everything changed.

Bourne became a leader on the football team. He went to class. His grade point average hit 3.8. His favorite class was 'Poets and Playwrights.' On the field, he finished with 54 receptions, 1,292 yards and 18 touchdowns. He earned dozens of scholarship offers, did well on his SATs and accepted a full ride to Eastern Washington.

"At my last school I just wasn't doing good at all. The school didn't trust me. The principal didn't trust me. He knew I was a bad kid," Bourne said. "Just changed everything when I got over there so that my name could be good around the school rather than 'he's a sneak. He doesn't go to class.' Just changed everything about myself just so my future could be brighter."



"I could've easily been a bad kid and doing what I've been usually doing. Ignoring people, not listening to people but I just felt the timing was running out."

How Bourne makes a difference

When Bourne returns home, he sees familiar faces. Memories of his past serve as reminders of where he was going and how far he's come. He has friends who still hustle and are involved in gang activity. Some had more athletic talent than he did.

"It's just it's just sad to see, man. I was literally one year, one decision from being like that," Bourne said. "And that's the difference between people making and people not. Kids literally thinking the streets are gonna be there forever."

That's why Bourne and his brothers Andrew and Evans created the Bourne Blessed Foundation in 2020. Originally, they wanted to create autism awareness since it runs in their family. Now, the foundation supports a wide range of initiatives, including teenagers who were once in Bourne's situation.

Last year they donated hundreds of laptops to students that were high school seniors in Oakland. In Massachusetts, Bourne partnered with the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program. When he returns home, he'll strap on his cleats and play with kids in the park. He'll invite teenagers to workout with him or ask questions. Bourne saw firsthand what having a good mentor does for your life.

"I was careless. I just don't want all the kids back home doing like that. I've seen guys that I'm close to gang banging now - stuff like that," Bourne said. "I'm trying to help those high school athletes or high school students just get through that tough time. Try to make them change that decision or change that path because there's a lot of kids that are talented, but don't have the resources, don't have the mentor like I had with Don Johnson."

Added Andrew Bourne: "Kendrick says all the time, 'it's great for me to be here, the spotlight is great, but how can we use it to help the world?'"

A lot has changed for Bourne. Johnson laughs about it now – a once undisciplined teenager playing for Bill Belichick, one of the greatest disciplinarians in the NFL. It's not a surprise that Bourne's fitting in with the Patriots, on pace for a career-year. Nor should it be surprising that he made it as an undrafted free agent in San Francisco before signing with New England this offseason.

Good references:Kendrick Bourne learned about the Patriots through Wes Welker and Jimmy Garoppolo

After turning his life around, Bourne approached the NFL like he did at Milwaukie Academy. He took advantage of every moment.

"After everything I've been through I'm grateful to be here," said Bourne. "Going through all that stuff earlier in my life just showed me what I need to do and what I don't need to do. What doesn't help me, I don't want to do. What does help me, I love to do and I want to do because I know it's going to help tomorrow."

Once Kendrick Bourne found his path, there was no turning back.



## **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.

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### **DB Myles Bryant**



#### **Overlooked his whole life, it's no coincidence Myles Bryant thrives with Patriots**

By Mark Daniels  
December 9, 2022

FOXBOROUGH – It was around 7 p.m. when Marvin Sanders headed home for the night. The Loyola High School football coach exited the building and walked into the Harvard Heights neighborhood of downtown Los Angeles.

As he headed down Venice Boulevard, he was shocked to see his two best players at the bus stop.

Sanders first saw Myles Bryant and David Long at 6 a.m. for the team's weighting lifting session. They stayed after school for track and field practice. Sanders knew their schedule, but was surprised to see them on the street.

"What are you guys doing?" Sanders asked. They explained to get to their homes in Pasadena, they needed to take a bus and a train. At that moment, it hit the coach what it took every morning for them to arrive at school for their morning workouts.

"They were never ever late in the three years and that's their mode of transportation," Sanders said.

Bryant was always willing to go the extra mile. This was one example.

Those mornings started around 5. When track practice ended around 7 p.m., he and Long, his best friend, caught a 20-minute bus ride downtown to Union Station. They'd hop on the train for another 20 minutes back to Pasadena.

From there, they either walked to Long's house on the east side of town or to Bryant's mother's job near the train station. They'd go home, eat dinner, finish homework, get to sleep and do it again.

"We did that for a while," said Bryant. "We had to work for it."

Bryant's atypical commute from high school was fitting. He always took the road less traveled. When it came to football, things rarely came easy. When times got tough, Bryant was always willing to do whatever it took to come out on top. It's the same now with the Patriots.

That hectic commute was only the start.

Here's why Myles Bryant plays with a chip on his shoulder

The phone rang and rang. Then it went to voicemail. Bryant was confused, so he called the number again. The ringing must've felt like it went on forever. No one picked up.

That's how he learned UCLA dropped his scholarship offer. Bryant was at his lowest.

After a standout junior season, he was confident he'd earn a Division I football scholarship. After all, he had two major offers. Washington offered him that June and he made an unofficial visit in July. In August, UCLA offered. By September, Bryant called Washington coach Jimmy Lake to commit.

"He told me that another guy just committed, and they were only taking three corners in," said Bryant.

He immediately called Jim Mora at UCLA.

"It was just a bad situation," said Bryant. "I called right after I found out about Washington. I was like 'alright, let me go ahead and secure a spot at UCLA.' And then I was calling the coach and he never answered. I was like 'alright, I'm gonna try again' and he never answered."

UCLA had a 'silent commit' that wasn't made public. They pulled the offer from Bryant – before he even realized it. Bryant thought about quitting football. It was a moment where doubt crept into his mind. He questioned everything. The people around him were livid.

Despite being all-state first-team as a sophomore and junior, he entered his senior season without a scholarship offer. Teams looked at his size (5-foot-8) and passed for taller cornerbacks. His coach, Sanders, played defensive back for the Nebraska Cornhuskers. He then coached defensive backs in college at Nebraska, North Carolina, Florida Atlantic and USC before coming to Loyola High School.

He knew Bryant was a Division I football player.

"It was frustrating as his high school coach," Sanders said. "I had been in college for a long time and being able to see how good of a natural football player he was - he may not have the measurables that everybody looks for, but

after being around Myles I thought 'wow, this young man is going to be pretty special.' And I tried to sell him to anybody that I knew."

Long and Bryant met when they were 5 years old. They grew up together on and off the football field. They played the same position and Long says Bryant was always the better player growing up. Long developed into a four-star recruit and watched his friend dominate with him. He held offers from all over the nation before committing to Michigan.

He knew Bryant was a Division I football player.

"I think I was more frustrated than him," said Long, who now plays for the Los Angeles Rams. "I was more frustrated from afar because I knew the kind of player he was. I kind of knew the reasons why people weren't recruiting him, it was more so his size than what he was able to do."

Bryant had another great season to finish his high school career. No one came calling that spring. At signing day, he had one partial offer from Cal Poly. It paid \$7,500 a year toward tuition.

"I was pissed just because there would be guys we'd be playing against and I'd go out there and dominate," Bryant added. "These guys are already committed to USC, UCLA, Oregon like all the big schools - Oklahoma. I'm out here dominating and I still can't get it a look. It was frustrating for me and then it just kept building - the chip on my shoulder."

Bryant opted to walk on at Washington.

Hawaii v Washington

Myles Bryant during his time at Washington. (Photo by Alik Jenner/Getty Images)Getty Images

How Myles Bryant proved every college coach wrong

Everywhere Bryant looked there was a future NFL player around him – at least that's what it felt like.

That fall he joined a loaded Washington defensive back room. Bryant worked out with five future second-round picks in Budda Baker, Sidney Jones, Kevin King, Byron Murphy and Taylor Rapp. There was also future fifth-round pick Jordan Miller and Zeke Turner, who's in his fifth year with the Cardinals, who the Patriots face on Monday night.

Expectations were high for the group. That didn't include the 5-foot-8 walk-on cornerback. Little did anyone know, Bryant was a man possessed that summer. He grinded. He worked out harder. The summer before he enrolled at Washington, he set out to prove everyone, including his coaches, wrong.

"I really started to work out with a chip on my shoulder," Bryant said. "That's when I really developed a 'you can't miss a day' attitude."

The star-studded defensive back room brought out the best in everyone. Practice was competitive. Weightlifting was a battle. Players competed in sprint sessions in the offseason. Bryant immediately stuck out.

"If we were doing runs or sprints without a coach, he would be in the front or somewhere near the front," Turner said. "Myles is a small guy, but he'd be lifting the same weight as everybody else – if not more. Just outworking everybody. He'd be doing weight sometime and I'd be like, 'golly.'"

Then there were the practices. Reps were limited. If Bryant was going to earn playing time as a walk-on amongst seven future NFL defensive backs, he had to make the most of every day. That's what he did.

"Everyone was like, 'who's this guy?'" Turner said. "It was like they couldn't keep him off the field because he was making so many plays so they needed to put him on the field." Bryant appeared in 11 games as a true freshman and earned his scholarship the next spring.

"Myles was a walk-on, but he worked his way through spring ball and fall camp. He was just like making plays everywhere," Turner said. "His freshman year, he played a little bit here or there, special teams, but he was always making plays in practice. Next year, he worked his way into the starting lineup and we were deep. We had DBs everywhere. For him to even crack the starting lineup was crazy."

Bryant earned honorable mention All-Pac 12 honors as a sophomore. He was second-team all-conference as a junior. After being named to the preseason All-Pac-12 first team and on preseason watch lists for the Thorpe, Nagurski and Bednarik awards, Bryant had hype. He knew he was going to the NFL.

At one point, he knew was going to be drafted.

Until he wasn't.

Bryant is proving NFL scouts wrong  
By this point, Bryant was used to disappointment.

At Washington, he was surrounded by NFL talent. In his final year, he shared the secondary with first-round pick Trent McDuffie and third-round pick Elijah Molden. After playing with so many future NFL defensive backs, he had no doubt that was in his future.

He even debated declaring for the NFL Draft after his junior year. Following a standout senior season, Bryant expected to hear his name called. Instead, it was like he was back in high school.

NFL teams saw his size and 40 time (4.6). That spring, 26 cornerbacks were drafted. Bryant wasn't among them. He didn't think about quitting this time. Now, he knew exactly what he needed to do.

"I expected to be drafted," Bryant said. "There was high school and now comes the NFL. It was a very similar process, but it was more surprising going from high school to college. So, once I got here, I was kind of like I know how it's going to be and how I've got to focus."

Bryant followed a similar script in New England. As an undrafted free agent, he was cut during his first training camp and signed to the practice squad. He finished his rookie year on the active roster, playing nine games. The same thing happened last year. Bryant was cut and signed to the practice squad before finishing the season on the active roster, playing in 12 games.

This year, it's been different. Bryant is the Patriots starting slot cornerback and has played over 55% of the team's defensive snaps. He's appeared in all 12 games this fall. He has a career-high 42 tackles and five passes defended to go with an interception.

He's played outside cornerback, inside cornerback, safety and returned punts in New England. Only seven of the 26 cornerbacks drafted ahead of Bryant in 2020 have played in more games. Only 10 have played more defensive snaps.

"When I saw he was undrafted, like me, and went to New England, I thought that was the perfect place for him because of how hard he works," Turner said. "Then seeing him getting snaps, in the starting lineup, getting interceptions, making plays, it didn't surprise me at all. His work ethic is just crazy."

"Anybody that knows Myles figured that he would land on his feet," Long added. "We all have our fair share of adversity. I feel like his was just the game of football and it's kind of tough (with) something that you love and... it's the same narrative. You're battling being small or undersized and you have to constantly go out and prove yourself year in and year out."

Bryant's living his dream, but has little time to sit back and enjoy the success. He knows as soon as he stops working it could be over. That's why he pushes himself. He'll forever be that kid who was under-recruited and undrafted.

He's better for it.

"That's just how life is. You just can't sit back and rest on your laurels," said Bryant. "You can't sit back and look at your accomplishments and be like 'man, I'm at the top of the mountain.' There's always going to be stuff that's going to pull you down. For me, it's just taking those moments, appreciating them for what they are and learning from them."

"It's always just keep moving forward and always working on what needs to get better."

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## **S Kyle Dugger**



**After missing son's birth, Kyle Dugger is making up for lost time this offseason**

By Alexandra Francisco  
June 19, 2022

Emerging as a versatile NFL safety out of a Division II college doesn't come without its challenges, but no adversity can quite prepare you for what Kyle Dugger and his girlfriend Kaiann experienced last season.

He managed to stand out for the New England Patriots during his rookie year, despite a pesky ankle injury and the COVID-19 pandemic making it anything but normal. That growth continued to year two, on and off the field, as he simultaneously got ready to become a father.

Then, Kyle tested positive for the virus after a Week 12 win over the Tennessee Titans. One day into his quarantine, Kaiann went into labor six weeks early.

"It's not how I saw my first child coming into the world," Kyle said. "I wouldn't call it traumatic, but it's definitely something I'll never forget. I was like, there's no way this is happening right now. She's going into labor when I'm at my peak with COVID (symptoms). It didn't seem real that the timing matched up the way it did."

Missing New England's next game against the Buffalo Bills was one thing, but not being there for the birth of your first child is another. Especially, given the complications Kaiann faced.

She arrived at the first hospital already seven centimeters dilated, but frustrated with the care she received there, Kaiann had to advocate for herself and ultimately get transferred to a different hospital.

She had her mother, a close friend, and other support there with her, but watching his girlfriend go through this alone was excruciating for Kyle.

Admittedly, he'd never been in such a trying situation or felt so helpless.

"I've never been in a position where I literally felt like I was almost handcuffed and forced to watch someone struggle," Kyle said. "It's almost as if I was restrained just to see someone I love go through something so difficult. I wasn't there to help her as well as not being there to see such an important moment. It was very weird. I felt like I was being held back and couldn't do anything."

Zairo Christian Dugger was born in early December, weighing six pounds, eight ounces. FaceTime calls with Kaiann would have to suffice as the family navigated the baby's time in the newborn intensive care unit with Kyle isolated for eight full days.

Finally, he was able to meet his son, but it came with mixed emotions.

"I was emotionally drained, honestly. I was still feeling the effects of COVID and it really took a minute to kind of hit me," Kyle said. "Once I got to the hospital I was feeling very drained of any energy I had. It was a mixed feeling with sadness and a dark cloud hanging over me as I was meeting him for the first time. I hate it because I wasn't able to be really present."

As things calmed down, he got a new perspective -- especially as the offseason allowed them to head down to Charleston, S.C. to be near family and help Kaiann. Kyle is happy to get up at 4 a.m. to change or feed Zairo.

"Once I realized the opportunity I have been given, and the position I've been put in to take care of my child, it's been amazing," Kyle said. "I want to do as much as possible. Everything he does is just so adorable."

Their first offseason as a family of three has been more than what he hoped for, as he intently watches his son grow. He looks forward to playing with him and teaching him lessons about life as the years go on, and his priorities have changed entirely.

As hard as Kyle had to work to get where he is, he now has new motivation.

"The priorities have definitely switched around a lot," Kyle said. "He's the most important thing. He trumps every other reason for me to work so hard and try to be the best version of myself -- on and off the field."

# 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," Cronic 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

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## **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."

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## **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."

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## **LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL**

### **Graney: Patriots' Lawrence Guy of Western High has spirit of giving**

By Ed Graney  
December 16, 2022

There is nothing like the faces. The little ones that light up with happiness and thanks.

That's why Lawrence Guy discovered this path of giving.

That's what motivates him the most.

Guy is a defensive end for the Patriots and Western High alumnus who will return home Sunday when the Raiders host New England at Allegiant Stadium.

He is the Patriots' nominee for the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award, which annually honors a player's commitment to philanthropy and community impact, as well as his excellence on the field.

Raiders punter AJ Cole is his team's nominee.

"Lawrence's unselfishness is the thing that stands out most," said Raiders safety Duron Harmon, who played with Guy in New England. "He just continues to give back to the community — he makes himself available over and over and over. It was super humbling and a pleasure to watch him give such service."

"It's also an inspiration, without a doubt. I don't know if he knows it because he's just doing his work, but I know it inspires me to give back more. That's what our profession is about — to inspire people and help people around us so they can achieve great things as well."

Guy has made a habit of such.

Above and beyond.

Hasn't stopped giving

It's a giving spirit that was imparted by his father, Michael, a firefighter who would hand out Christmas dinners with his young boys to needy families. Such things stuck with Lawrence. He hasn't stopped giving back since.

He and his wife's foundation has a stated mission to provide resources and opportunities for financially disadvantaged families. Has it ever.

There is the annual donation of backpacks filled with school supplies for hundreds of children. There are the baby showers for young single mothers who are expecting or recently had a baby. The bottles, blankets, car seats and baby monitors given to them. There are all the Thanksgiving meals gifted to those most in need.

“Just the look on the kids’ faces makes it all worth it,” Guy said. “We’re planting seeds in the community and watching them grow over the years. And as they grow, they, too, give back to the community.

“That’s the real pleasure in doing all of this. You see the kids, all full of joy and grace. That’s why we do it — the joy of everyone and knowing it all might change their lives for the better.”

He grew up with his own struggles, having by age 20 been diagnosed with dyslexia, dyscalculia (a math learning disability), ADD and ADHD. But none of it stopped him from forging ahead and reaching the pinnacle of his profession — “Sports helped, but my family always pushed me to be the best man I could be,” he said — all of which he shares tales of when speaking to those young minds he’s constantly helping.

He is a Super Bowl champion in his 12th season and sixth with the Patriots, a lineman with 16.5 career sacks and 459 tackles.

Wasn’t sure he would get here out of Western High.

Wasn’t sure it was possible.

Death Star fan

“We only had so many options,” Guy said. “I remember having conversations with teachers and saying that I wanted more. I wanted to prove people wrong. I wanted to achieve my goals. Now, I’m still chasing them. We do a lot on the field, but it’s just as rewarding with what we do off it.”

And now he comes home, like many, still surprised that the Las Vegas he grew up in houses an NFL team. Guy is a big “Star Wars” fan and was asked once what stadium he most wanted to play a game in.

“The Death Star,” he said of Allegiant. “It’s still surreal, thinking of Las Vegas and the NFL. It’s amazing. I never thought as a kid it was possible.”

But he knew giving back was.

So he never stopped.

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### **RB Damien Harris**



#### **Carrying On: Through good times or bad, family keeps Harris on track**

By Erik Scalavino

November 25, 2021



FOXBOROUGH, Mass. – If, as centuries of empirical evidence would suggest, Hell indeed hath no fury like a woman scorned, then a woman watching her 6-year-old get clobbered in tackle football can't be too far behind. In a 2017 media interview, Mike Goggins, a youth coach from Kentucky, vividly recalled a day when one of his longtime female friends came storming toward him, "her nose ... flared out," because Goggins' son had delivered a punishing blow to her son in practice. The boys would remain teammates and their respective parents friends, once the tension-thick air between the adults had cleared.

Yet, this woman proved she could also direct her ire toward that same son when she felt he wasn't living up to his end of the gridiron bargain. The boy, you must understand, didn't particularly like football at the time, despite insisting he wanted to be on the team. He just preferred watching the proceedings from the bench, where he contented himself with seemingly unlimited supplies of water made available to him. Besides, his ill-fitting helmet hurt his head considerably.

Knowing that this boy had no father at home, Goggins eventually took it upon himself to purchase a new helmet for his player. While the equipment upgrade helped with the headaches, the child still seemed disinterested in actually playing.

Lynn Harris would not tolerate this behavior. Around the sixth overtime of a scoreless, snowy game, she confronted her son on the bench, demanding that he either get in the game or face the unspecified consequences when they got home. Fear of the unknown overtaking him, Lynn's son mustered the courage to ask into the game, where he immediately tore off a 98-yard touchdown run.

Lynn's play worked better than she could have imagined. Later that season, Goggins' team, called the 49ers, advanced to their age group's Super Bowl, held at Eastern Kentucky University's stadium. The young ball carrier, who that morning was running a 104-degree fever, beseeched his mother to let him continue running the football with his teammates. She did, he scored again, and the 49ers won the title, completing an undefeated season.

Now 24, that boy currently leads the Patriots in carries (143), rushing yards (603), and rushing touchdowns (seven) 11 games into the 2021 season – feats he'd never have accomplished without his mother's tough love, steadfast determination, and inspiring example.

"My mom's like my best friend ... She's really been the rock of our family since I was born," Damien Harris remarks. "As a football player, a lot of the things I've learned from my mother – resiliency, selflessness – have been paramount to my growing up and development as a person. I appreciate and love her more than anything in this world. Without her, I wouldn't be the man I am today or be where I am today."

Though far from being a man at all at the time, a 7-year-old Damien – Lynn's only son and oldest of her three children – would quickly discover that he would nevertheless need to be the man in his house full of women.

Damien Harris  
#37 RB

Height: 5-11  
Weight: 213 lbs  
College: Alabama  
SELFLESS SERVICE

As an emergency medical technician (EMT), first responder Lynn Harris could often be found driving her ambulance around Richmond, Kentucky, a suburban community in Bluegrass territory some 30 minutes south of Lexington. "Always sticking her face in the fire to help those in need," Damien remembers of his mother's primary occupation.

Since Damien's father was not involved in their lives, the burden of supporting herself, her ailing mother, and her three kids fell squarely on Lynn's shoulders. Consequently, she frequently had to moonlight to make ends meet.

"My grandmother just needed a lot of medical attention. She's been battling a lot of things. My mother's always had to be a personal caretaker for her," Damien explains. "She's done that, working multiple jobs at a time, taking care of myself and my younger sisters. At an early age, I had to start taking care of myself sometimes, whether my mom was at work or wherever she was. I had to take care of my grandmother as well. Once my younger sisters came about, I had to start taking care of them.

"I had to take care of my mom at times," he points out, "because with her overextending herself so much out of the goodness of her heart, sometimes it left her a little down. I had to play my part in picking her up, too. I still do that to this day."

Despite her manifold commitments, Lynn remained dedicated to Damien's football career, which had become too prolific for anyone to ignore. In his junior season at Madison Southern High School, Damien ran for 2,621 yards and 42 touchdowns, marks that earned him Gatorade Kentucky Player of the Year for 2013. Even though a knee injury curtailed his 2014 senior campaign, Damien still piled nearly 1,500 yards on the ground, along with 23 TDs.

"In the midst of all that, my mom never missed a game – home, away, it didn't matter," he recalls. "Even now, she's here for almost every game. She's always down to travel with the girls. She would just pack some suitcases, some coolers with food and drinks for the long drives. She's done everything to support me. My mom would do anything, go above and beyond, for her family."

Damien asserts that his upbringing caused him to mature earlier than most children, to gain an understanding of the importance of taking on a purpose bigger than oneself.

"My grandmother's a trooper ... The strength, the spirit that she has is something that's also been instilled in me. My mother's really taught me a lot, seeing her take care of my grandmother and my two younger sisters, as well as myself. It taught me how to take care of people."

Even so, Damien recognized that he still had much more he wanted to learn.

#### RESTORING COMMUNICATION

Finishing with the second-most touchdowns in Kentucky high school history (122) and the 11th-highest yardage total (6,748), Damien had his pick of powerhouse college programs. He also had an invitation to The Opening, a Nike-sponsored recruiting event in Oregon. There, he'd reconnect with his youth football 49ers quarterback, Jarrett Stidham, who, after their unbeaten 2003 season, moved to Texas and became a coveted recruit himself.

Ultimately, Damien chose the University of Alabama – to play football, of course, but also to study communications. Damien took pride in applying himself as much in the classroom as on the football field. After four years in Tuscaloosa, he left with a bachelor's degree and two national championship wins to show for his hard work.

"Getting my degree is my greatest accomplishment to date. Being the first person in my family to graduate from college, that comes first and foremost," he proclaims. "I know that gives me a chance not only to take care of myself in the future, but also my family, all the people that have helped me get where I am. As great as this game of football



is, as beautiful of a game as it is, it comes to an end at some point. But something that doesn't end is the knowledge, the information that you gain. Nobody can ever take that away from you."

Damien Harris embraces his mother, Lynn, at a game during his University of Alabama days.

A post-football media career would have to be tucked away for the time being, however. As a freshman backup to future NFL star Derrick Henry, Damien would eventually run for 23 touchdowns and more than 3,000 yards over 54 games in his four Crimson Tide years. Jarrett, meantime, transferred from Baylor to become Auburn's starting quarterback in 2017 and '18, meaning he and Damien would square off in two Alabama-Auburn "Iron Bowl" rivalry games, with each player's school winning once (Auburn in '17, 'Bama in '18).

But for nearly three full seasons now, Harris and Stidham have reunited as teammates after the Patriots selected the pair during the 2019 NFL Draft. Their already strong friendship has only grown ever since. "Absolutely," Damien confirms. "I remember when we first got here, anytime Stid and I wanted to go get something to eat, we'd always go together so we could get a lay of the land, figure it out. It was important having somebody I already knew and had a close relationship with, if I needed somebody to lean on when things get tough, I definitely had somebody."

Since arriving in Foxborough, Harris has faced his share of professional and personal challenges, but like any properly trained running back, he continues to keep his legs moving whenever he meets with resistance. A lesson he first learned not from any coach, but the several strong women in his life.

## RIGHT AT HOME

Where is home?

"Good question," Damien begins with a chuckle. This week, as we in the United States prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving, such a simple question can elicit varying, often complex answers. For some, it's just the house where we grew up or currently live. Others, like Harris, require a more layered response.

"I feel like I almost have a few homes now," the Patriots ball carrier adds. "Obviously, Kentucky's where I'm from, where I was born and raised. I'll always have Bluegrass in my blood, but then I went to Alabama, and it became a second home for me.

"Now, I love where I'm at, being a part of this team, this culture. Never thought that I'd be a New Englander, and it definitely took some getting used to at first, but I've grown to love it here. I love not just the team, but the environment as well. Everything," he quips, "except the cold weather. I'm still not used to that. But I like to think I have a few homes."

Harris exults with safety Adrian Phillips after New England defeated the Chargers in Los Angeles earlier this 2021 season.

Harris certainly seems to have found a home in New England's backfield, where he's established himself as a regular starter and productive contributor in the running back rotation. After losing a fumble late in this season's Week 1 Patriots loss to Miami, Harris saw his touches and his output briefly decrease, while New England's record as a team fell to 2-4. Since then, however, the club has rattled off five straight wins and Harris has reclaimed his spot as the team's top rusher, overcoming a concussion along the way.

"Everyone has their own struggles, their own story. When things got hard for us as a family," he observes, "I relied on the people of strength – my mother and grandmother – and their tenacity to do whatever it takes in order to get what you want, to accomplish whatever you want in life.

"I think that parallels football in the sense that every game isn't going to be a perfect game. Every play isn't going to be a perfect play. You're going to go through some adversity, you're going to have to battle through – whether that's personal or as a team, as an organization. Things aren't always going to be peachy and go your way. Always having a positive outlook on life, on football – all those things I learned as a child I apply to football and can apply to the rest of my life."

While some might consider a man growing up in a single-parent, all-woman household as a challenge to overcome, Harris prefers, especially this reflective time of year, to adopt an attitude of gratitude for the many blessings it has afforded him.

"I learned how to treat women with the utmost respect," he maintains. "My father wasn't around, but my family made the most of it to this point, and we're going to keep doing it. We're people of good faith. We know that God is good, that God is in the blessing business, and we're all very blessed, no matter what the circumstances are. Obviously, the circumstances are much better than they used to be. We're not where we want to be yet, but we're getting there, and we know it's because God is good all the time.

"That good faith that we keep – in one another, in the Good Lord – that's what carries us every single day. I'm just thankful for the great family I have, full of some beautiful women, the relationship we all have, the togetherness, the bond, and I wouldn't trade it for the world."

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## **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.

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## 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."

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## 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.

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## **TE Hunter Henry**



### **The faith, family and 'football genius' driving Patriots touchdown machine Hunter Henry**

By Patrick Djordjevic  
December 5, 2021

An excitable voice booms through the speakers, emanating from the Patriots' media room in Foxborough. The words spoken are familiar. So too the accent, well somewhat.

"G'day mate!" Amusingly, it isn't New England's Australian communications coordinator, rather star tight-end Hunter Henry.

The 26-year-old touchdown machine bounces into picture with a smile as wide as the nearby Charles River. It isn't long before Henry returns to his native tongue, though his exuberance remains. Henry has reason to be gleeful in this moment - his move from the beaches of California to the "brutal" cold of Massachusetts is paying off immeasurably. Even if it means wearing a beanie in December.

On the gridiron, Henry is almost peerless at his position. Heading into Week 13, the former Charger leads the league in touchdowns by a tight end - tied with Buffalo's Dawson Knox. Since Rob Gronkowski announced his initial retirement in March 2019, the Patriots have lacked a red zone threat capable of scaring defenses stiff. Now, the fear factor is back in New England and Henry is undoubtedly a key reason why.

As the question grows, so too does Henry's smirk. "Do you feel like anyone can guard you in the red zone?" His answer; as quick as it is emphatic: "I don't feel like anyone can guard me, ever! You've got to have that mindset, always."

Henry isn't the only Patriot with an unshakable confidence - it's easy to understand why. New England are a seemingly unstoppable force, currently on a six-game winning streak and sitting atop the AFC East with an 8-4 record. Once again, they look primed for a playoff assault.

Though it wasn't too long ago things were very different. At the end of last season, the Pats were mired in misery, mocked incessantly for Tom Brady's departure, their momentary downfall -- finishing last season 7-9 -- and of course, Tampa Bay's Brady-led Super Bowl victory.

Despite the outside noise, Bill Belichick's belief hasn't wavered in himself nor the team - not since Henry arrived anyway. Despite a matter-of-fact approach in front of the camera, there's a different Belichick behind closed doors.

"You don't become the greatest coach of all time really in this sport, without having a little bit of swag," Henry tells ESPN. "A little bit of you know, chip about him. He just kind of has that quiet confidence, that he knows who he is and he's very confident in that."

Henry undoubtedly believes in his head coach, evidenced in his big-money move from Los Angeles during free agency, in spite of the Pats' disappointing 2020 season. The pair have known each other for many years, with Belichick a friend of Henry's high school coach.



Despite their familiarity with one another, Henry has found himself surprised at the sheer greatness of the six-time Super Bowl-winning coach.

"He's a football genius, man," Henry beams. "It's cool to be around someone that loves football so much and has seen so much football, especially at the highest level and winning Super Bowls too, he knows how to get things done and knows how to put his players in the best position, knows how to motivate them in the best way.

"So it's been really cool to see the standard he holds everybody to and how he gets the best out of everybody."

It's often said there's a different expectation in New England. A unique way of operating, a higher set of standards to uphold. How true is it? According to Henry, it checks out. While the Chargers propelled him forward, there's a sense New England will lift him to greater heights.

"I think it's just the team atmosphere, the 'Do Your Job' atmosphere," he says. "Everybody has their role and you do your role. That's similar around the league but here it's very preached. It's preached every single day to do your job, trust the guys around you and believe in the team and everything that this team means. Everybody's basically one body and we need all of the parts of the body to come together to execute what we do on Sundays."

Henry himself is merely a body - flesh and blood like anyone else. It may seem absurd to define him so simply but that's how he views himself. Scoring at will for New England, pursuing a first Super Bowl ring and becoming the best he can are all of great importance. Yet it is Henry's faith which makes him feel complete, more than skin and bone, more than a vessel sailing through life.

"I'm here and I'm playing football but I'm more than a football player man, there's so much more to me than what I am," Henry shared. "The main thing that I am is God's son and I'm a believer and I hope that Jesus came and died for our sins. I have a lot of faith [in] who God is and who he is in my life."

New England Patriots tight end Hunter Henry celebrates his touchdown against the Cleveland Browns alongside Jakobi Meyers. Adam Glanzman/Getty Images

Many across America, and certainly Arkansas, dream of being Hunter Henry. Ironically, Henry tries to become less of himself. "He must become greater; I must become less," John 3:30 - eight words by which Henry lives his life.

"It's just a simple verse that means so much," he says. "It can mean so much in a football realm too, you know in a team realm. I think there's so many applications [for] a simple quote like that; to be humbled, to be humbled before God, to be humbled before your teammates, to be humbled before just everybody.

"That you're not bigger than anybody, that He needs to be the light before everything, and it applies to everything in my life. I think that's where faith kind of carries into your life, just applying those things on a daily basis."

Three F's -- faith, family and football -- have served Henry well for many years. They continue to be pillars for him and even more so once wife Parker gives birth to their first child this month. Make no mistake, Henry is more than committed to football. It's his life, but far from all of it.

"My 'why' here is to serve a bigger purpose," he says. "I like to worship God through my play. Hopefully I show a light in some aspect of my play and how I live my life. My family is big for me, my wife motivates me more than anybody in this world, just how hardworking and independent and just gracious and everything she is in my life. She's definitely one of my biggest 'why's. And then I have my little son coming next month, so I know once I lay eyes on him that'll be right there with her."

Once football season comes to a close, Henry likes to return to Arkansas, immersing himself in all nature has to offer. He loves the beautiful beaches of L.A. but they are few and far between in The Natural State, so hunting is what Henry does. Deer season often passes him by, so he settles for ducks.

For now, Henry has linebackers in his sights as he looks to help New England attain another Lombardi Trophy. Opposing fans may believe God is a Patriots fan, given their seemingly never-ending dynasty. Whether that is the case remains unsolved, though Henry is optimistic Jesus enjoys his work in the end zone.

"I hope so man," Henry says with a chuckle. "I'm doing my best out there for Him. I think he would be definitely proud, but hey the thing with Him is, he's going to be proud with whatever you do- scoring touchdowns [or] no touchdowns. Like what we talked about man, it's unwavering. It never changes."

While Henry will have to wait for eternal paradise, he has every opportunity to propel New England to seventh heaven come February 13.

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## The Athletic

### 'The definition of a Patriot': Why Hunter Henry has been a quick fit in New England

By Matthew Fairburn  
October 28, 2021

When Bret Bielema finished his introductory press conference after taking the head-coaching job at Arkansas, he walked off stage and called Hunter Henry. At the time, Henry was a few days shy of his 18th birthday, the No. 1 tight-end recruit in the country and at the top of Bielema's priority list. Bielema did everything he could to make sure Henry would follow in the footsteps of his father, mother and grandfather and become a Razorback.

On the first day of NFL free agency this year, Bill Belichick showed similar urgency, signing Henry to a three-year, \$37.5 million contract with \$25 million guaranteed. Those who know both Belichick and Henry considered this to be an inevitable match, a player and coach perfectly suited for one another. When Bielema was on Belichick's staff two years ago, Henry came up in conversation. Bielema told him, "Coach, this guy is the definition of a Patriot."

Early on, that assessment looks accurate. Henry has caught touchdowns in four consecutive games and has earned the trust of his neighbor, Patriots rookie quarterback Mac Jones. He has 24 receptions for 264 yards and has played 72 percent of the Patriots' offensive snaps.

"He's tough, smart, dependable times 1,000," Bielema said. "It's in his genes, in his DNA. Just everything about him is what you want."

When Belichick was discussing Henry's early impact on the team this week, he noted two plays that didn't show up on the stat sheet. One was the opening kickoff against the Jets. They kicked the ball in the opposite direction the Patriots were expecting and sent the ball into the sun. The Patriots flipped the direction of their return on the fly, and Henry flew across the field to make a key block. A few plays later, Henry's route drew coverage away from Jonnu Smith, who had open field to run with a screen pass.

"It's little things like that that Hunter does," Belichick said. "They're little things that become big things."

Henry has been doing those little things ever since he was growing up in Little Rock, Ark., the oldest of Mark and Jenny's four children. His father is a pastor, and Bielema described his mother as "having a stronghold on that house." They raised their children to be tough but gentle.

By the time Henry got to Pulaski Academy, he was ready for the rigors of playing for Kevin Kelley, who Belichick has described as the best high school football coach in the country. Henry started off as an offensive tackle, because Kelley noticed his size. Henry's father was a standout offensive lineman at Arkansas. Kelley wondered whether a ninth-grader would be able to handle playing in the trenches on varsity against kids two and three years older than him. It didn't take long for him to realize he had nothing to worry about.

"He wasn't scared," Kelley said.

What Kelley also realized after that season while watching Henry dominate on the basketball court was that Henry moved too well to play offensive tackle. The team wasn't using him right. So he called Henry's dad and said he thought he should move to wide receiver.

"Whatever you think will help the team," Mark told him.

It was apparent right away just how much Henry helped the team as a receiver. Transitioning there in Pulaski's passing offense, which was complex by high school standards, wasn't simple. But Henry absorbed the playbook faster than most and caught 45 passes for 748 yards and 10 touchdowns as a sophomore.

"I brought him along slower than I probably should have," Kelley admitted. "We had so many guys in the past that really struggled with it. I've had guys that have gone through their entire career and never picked it up ... He picked it up so easily for a guy that had never done it before. That really gave him a jumpstart."

Henry only got better from there. He had 64 catches for 1,093 yards and 16 touchdowns as a junior and finished his career by catching 107 passes for 1,449 yards and 15 touchdowns as a senior. He was ranked as the No. 1 tight end in the country by some recruiting services. That's why Bielema knew he had to call him the second he got done with his introductory press conference. Oklahoma and Alabama were among the schools after Henry, and Bielema didn't want to let him leave the state.

In the end, as enamored as Henry was by Oklahoma and Alabama, Arkansas wasn't a hard sell. It was in his blood. Plus, he saw what Bielema had done with tight ends in the past at Wisconsin. The family was sold by Bielema's honest approach, and Henry had a desire to continue his family's legacy.

"The Henrys are Razorback royalty," said Barry Lunney Jr., who played quarterback at Arkansas and was later Henry's tight ends coach before becoming the offensive coordinator at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Lunney was four years behind Henry's parents at Arkansas and met them through a campus ministry in which Mark was involved. Lunney became the tight ends coach at Arkansas right as Henry arrived. He was on the ground floor of Henry's development from high-school receiver to first-team All-American tight end.

"He just had that proverbial 'it factor,'" Lunney Jr. said. "He had an ability to relate to his teammates and garner respect as a freshman both through his words and his actions."

When he arrived at Arkansas, Henry hadn't been in a three-point stance since that freshman season as an offensive tackle. Bielema said the coaching staff "had to teach him everything about playing tight end." The growing pains were there, too.

During Henry's freshman season, Arkansas traveled to Florida. Henry ended up blocking a linebacker one-on-one in space and got rag-dolled. The next day, Bielema pulled him into his office and showed him the play.

"My friend," Bielema told him. "Before you leave here, you're going to be on the other end of this play."

Sure enough, two years later, the Razorbacks were back at The Swamp playing the Gators. Henry got another blocking opportunity against a linebacker and tossed him over a pile. He had developed into a complete tight end. Lunney said blocking for tight ends often comes down to desire, and Henry never lacked that.

Arkansas didn't just keep him on the line to block, though. Before Henry's junior season. Bielema told his coaching staff he thought Henry was the best tight end he'd ever coached. He didn't want to get to the end of the season and wish he had thrown him the ball more.

"We scripted out eight targets per game, if not more, that we wanted to make sure we got the ball in his hands," Bielema said. "I believe that year he didn't have a drop on the season. Not one."

Drops were so rare for Henry that when he dropped a pass in practice prior to Arkansas' bowl game his junior year, the whole practice field went quiet. Bielema had to crack a joke to lighten the mood.

"I had to get everybody laughing so that it wouldn't crush the team," Bielema said.

Lunney remembers every time Henry made a mistake, whether it was the rare drop or fumble, he focused so intently on correcting that error and making sure it didn't happen again. Listen to enough stories about Henry's work habits, and it's obvious why he'd gravitate to playing in New England under Belichick.

"His work ethic has always been there," Lunney said. "So it's not surprising at all that he would not even flinch about (going) somewhere where he's coached hard and where the standards are high and that gives him an opportunity to win because that's really who he is."

Added Bielema: "He feeds off success and he loves structure."

The connection between Henry and the Patriots was an easy one to make. Belichick knows his high-school coach and employed his college coach. Current Patriots tight ends coach Nick Caley was even a graduate assistant coaching defense at Arkansas when Henry was a freshman.

"He always had the right head on his shoulders, even back then," Caley said.

The Patriots travel to Los Angeles this week to play the Chargers, the team that drafted Henry and let him walk in free agency after five seasons. Henry said there were some "bittersweet" feelings leaving Los Angeles after all the relationships he and his wife had formed. But he's found himself right at home in New England. Henry's friendship with Jones is starting to translate into the production the Patriots envisioned when they signed him, too. As those who know him suspected, Henry is right where he belongs.

"I have a feeling that it was probably a perfectly made batch of cookies on many different levels, from the organization to the player to the personnel fit," Bielema said.

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## **QB Brian Hoyer**



### **Guregian: Meet Brian Hoyer, Mac Jones' Jedi Master**

FOXBORO — He's the calm in the storm, the Obi-Wan Kenobi for Patriots second-year quarterback Mac Jones.

Having Brian Hoyer perched at his side on game days and beyond has been a godsend for Jones, not to mention Matt Patricia, who is calling offensive plays for the first time in his career.

A look into the Patriots game-day operation, and it's Hoyer, along with quarterbacks coach Joe Judge, who is clamped down next to Jones on the bench, providing guidance after each offensive series. Patricia, meanwhile, is with the offensive line, but still communicating his thoughts to Judge via their headsets.

Zeroing in on Hoyer, he's the one armed with the blue Microsoft Surface tablet, showing Jones the plays and coverages and relaying if the defense is what they expected, or pointing out the places where the opponent did something different.

Speaking with the Patriots backup quarterback on Thursday, he further explained his role. He indicated he usually chimes in after Judge, the quarterbacks coach, initially goes over the plays with Mac that were just run.

When Judge is finished, Hoyer said he conveys to Jones what he saw from the defense, and if it matches what they anticipated during the week.

"We spend so much time together, so for me, it's about relaying messages. 'Hey, third down. They're doing what we thought they were going to do.' Or, 'Hey, watch out for this front' because it's something we weren't expecting. It's more reminders than anything else," Hoyer said.

Hoyer didn't want to make a big deal of how his role has evolved. He says he did the same for Tom Brady, although he acknowledged it was different dealing with Brady because there was no real need to mentor the GOAT.

But the way the offensive coaching staff is configured this season, with Patricia calling plays and also running the offense line, and Judge managing the quarterbacks, Hoyer's input is valuable. He boasts the most experience of the lot.

He's played on eight different teams. He knows offense. He's been there. Done that. Patricia and Judge haven't.

Hoyer not only knows the Patriots offense, and been coached by Josh McDaniels and Bill O'Brien, but he's also spent time with distinguished offensive minds like Kyle Shanahan, Norv Turner, Frank Reich and Nick Sirianni along his NFL journey.

That's why he's so important, not only as the backup – he led the team Thursday with Jones missing practice due to an illness – but as that calming voice for Jones on the sidelines. He's also someone who actually understands the offense, and what they're trying to accomplish with all the so-called "new" elements.

"When you're playing, you have a hard time thinking about all that stuff," said Hoyer. "And I'm just over there watching. So there's times where I feel like maybe I can remind him of something we went over during the week, or, 'Hey, did you see it this way?' Okay. Good."

So he's Obi-Wan, big brother and pseudo coach all wrapped into one.

Hoyer remembers when he was the one who just listened and didn't say a peep.

"My first three years, I just kind of shut up, because I didn't know what was going on," he said. "But when I came back in 2017, having gone and played a lot of football games, I felt totally comfortable (sharing my opinion) and Tom was always accepting of what I had to say.

"That just kind of grew and grew. Last year was my first year with Mac as a rookie, so I was just trying to help him with my experience and what I see, and I'm just continuing with that."

Jones has always spoken highly of Hoyer and the relationship he has with the 36-year-old quarterback.

"He's super supportive of me and trying to help me in any way he can," Jones said of the veteran last year. "He's hard on me sometimes, which is good, so he holds me to a high standard. He also has fun and enjoys the game.

"He's been around for a long time ... and Brian is just a great example of a great team leader and a great team player, and if he ever needs to get in there, I know he's going to do a great job. He's always ready, and I'm just happy to be able to learn from him and just be in the same room as him."

Even though Jones missed practice, the expectation is that he'll be good to go for Sunday's game with Pittsburgh. If not, Hoyer's the man. And he'll be ready to go.

"When you're not the starter ... you never know when you're going to go in there," said Hoyer. "You try to prepare the most you can during the week. Whatever happens, happens, and you go from there."

Like Jones, Hoyer enjoys their relationship, and smiles at the thought of how far he's come since entering the league in 2009 as an undrafted free agent with the Patriots.

"It's kind of a role reversal where you're backing up Tom, who's a veteran, who's seen it all, and then all of a sudden, you flip it, and now you're in this mentor role as the older guy," said Hoyer. "To me, I just try to give him the knowledge I've accumulated over the years, not necessarily from here, but other places, and things I've picked up along the way. I just try to help him out."

As for the offense, Hoyer described it as still being a work in progress, and like Jones, thinks they're getting closer to where they want to be. Right now, they're trying to build a foundation, and then draw from that.

"It's just about coming together, and for us, obviously as a unit, there's some newer things," he said, "so it's about finding those things that are the most comfortable, and just going from there."

Hoyer also indicated what they liked, and what might have worked against the Dolphins might not be what the Patriots show against the Steelers. Like always, they're trying to do what works best against a particular opponent.

So we'll see what they come up with against another team that blitzes like crazy.

"We're all super competitive. We never want to go out there and perform poorly," said Hoyer. "Mac's super competitive. He wants every play to be perfect, which we all know will never happen, but it's a good thing to strive for. He sets a high level not only for himself, but for the rest of the guys, which is great."

Hoyer is still pretty competitive himself. He admitted it was fun to lead practice Wednesday with Jones out.

"It is a level of fun to go out there and be in charge," Hoyer said with a smile, "but it's whatever they ask of me."

And right now, that's one part back-up, one part mentor, one part Jedi Master.

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## K Nick Folk

### **Boston Herald**

Three years ago, two brothers paced through Plymouth's most famous cemetery on a mid-morning pilgrimage.

Frozen earth crunched beneath their sneakers. Wind tickled the branches of leafless trees overhead. Gray clouds coated the winter sky, as daylight waned almost as quickly as it had arrived.

The brothers' journey ended at an 8-foot obelisk looming over its neighboring gravestones, but worn by weather and time just the same. It honored William Bradford, the first governor of Plymouth Colony in 1621. But to the brothers, Bradford represented something more.

He was an ancestor.

It was Dec. 9, 2019, and Nick Folk had kicked in his fourth game with the Patriots a day earlier. His youngest brother, Erik, a former college kicker, had traveled from California to witness the ongoing resurrection of Nick's NFL career. A rare off day gave the Folks a chance to connect with their heritage.

But the distance four centuries puts between a person and their ancestor is not bridged so easily. Standing above Bradford's buried ashes in the cemetery, Nick and Erik hardly felt closer to Bradford than they did reading about him in a textbook.

They felt like tourists.

"We took pictures and stuff," Folk remembered. "That was neat."

Erik dropped one picture in the family group chat. An uncle replied with a dry wisecrack.

"Then we just walked around for a little, got a coffee," Erik said.

The Folk brothers trace their lineage to Bradford through their mother's family tree, a genealogy dotted with New England greatness. Their maternal grandparents, Quentin and Claire Stiles, graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1955 and '56, respectively, moved their family west years later and became pioneers in their fields. Their mother, Kathy, played ice hockey at Dartmouth and still works as a pediatrician. One uncle, Geoff, attended Harvard, where he grew into a national champion pole vaulter and later a trauma surgeon.

Harvard was the next stop on the brothers' day trip. They visited the football stadium, searched for a track and field team photo from the late 1970s featuring their uncle, the pole vaulter.

No luck.

They grabbed lunch. Erik flew home, and Nick retreated to Foxboro, unsure how many more days he would kick for the Patriots, let alone professionally.

Fast forward, and Folk remains in Foxboro. After two and a half seasons, he is the most accurate kicker in Patriots' franchise history. Between training camp practices and preseason games this summer, Folk peels back the layers of his full-circle journey to New England.

But at the center is not Bradford. It's another forefather, one who made his name in medicine but dealt in time.

Meanwhile, on Folk's left wrist, an old watch ticks.

They call him 'Buddy'

Dr. Quentin R. Stiles literally wrote the book on bypass surgery, as the lead author of "Myocardial Revascularization: A Surgical Atlas." He contributed to the development of the cardiopulmonary bypass machine. He ran a flourishing

medical practice outside Los Angeles in the '60s and '70s and later served as the personal doctor of former Rams' owner Carroll Rosenbloom.

In college, he played basketball at Harvard. He hitchhiked one summer from Boston to California. During other summers, he mined in Montana, labored as a lumberjack and served as a California guide for the Sierra Club, a environmental organization dedicated to exploring and protecting "the wild places of the earth." Later, he spent two years in the Army.

In adulthood, he owned a deep-sea fishing boat and rebuilt a house on Mammoth Mountain in Northern California. He drank O'Doul's. He listened to classical music in his car at a volume barely above a whisper. He loved the Dodgers, skiing, camping, hiking and fishing.

With his grandsons, he fished for trout. All kinds. Rainbow, Brook, Brown and Golden, none of them safe from a well-placed cast. Together, they built computers, radios and a treehouse.

But for all his achievement and skill, he went by Buddy.

That's how Folk, Erik and their middle brother, Greg, knew their grandfather.

The story goes that Buddy once told his eldest grandson, then a toddler, they would be buddies one day. Sure enough, a young Folk repeated the name Buddy back to him. The day had arrived, and the moniker stuck.

It stuck like the lessons Buddy poured into his children and grandchildren over the decades to come, then a book he wrote and printed for each of them in his final years. Folk estimates the book runs somewhere between 50 to 80 pages. Each copy is complete white pages and black plastic binding.

The early chapters outline his childhood beginnings on an Indiana farm. Stories from Harvard and his operating room follow. Most are familiar.

"He tried to teach everything he wanted us to learn at a young age, then gave us refreshers as we got older," Folk said.

While most Buddy's teachings primarily cover family and fatherhood, two run central to Folk's staying power in New England: perspective and composure.

In Buddy's arena, failure meant death. An incision cut millimeters too deep or off-center during heart surgery would kill a patient. The precision and stakes of his first operations occasionally overwhelmed attending doctors and nurses. But Buddy emanated calm, even though with a human life in his hands, he wasn't entirely in control.

Buddy once estimated one in every 20 patients died in the initial days of heart surgery, some of them children.

"You can't let emotions get to you," he told ESPN in 2010. "You had to do it, and the only way that you live with yourself if they died was knowing you did your best and nobody else could have done it any better."

As an NFL kicker, Folk occasionally holds his team's fate at his right foot. He combats that pressure by drawing on Buddy.

"If I had a bad day kicking, he'd be like, 'Look, you don't have to deal with life and death. You're playing a game,'" Folk said.

Over two and a half years, he's made five fourth-quarter game-winners in New England

Buddy prepared him as a child by simulating pressure through harmless, yet intense, science projects like constructing radios and computers, and others involving drilling through PVC pipe or soldering fine wires. Buddy understood pressure gives the impression of time accelerating. The human body's clock — its heart, the ticker — races in response.

So, say a few words to yourself. Focus.

Life is a ladder climbed only one step at a time with countless ways back to the bottom.

Slow down. Breathe.

Harnessing time is how Buddy extended the lives of his patients. It's how he taught his grandchildren to maximize moments. Building radios and computers and treehouses, what they really forged were memories, and a foundation for life that would last longer than any bygone technology.

Buddy seemed to measure the past by how it could enhance the future. His most enduring lesson, which can even be found at the end of one in memoriam notice, spoke to this idea: always leave a campsite better than you found it.

To Buddy, a campsite meant anything and everything.

"It took me 27 years to realize that he wasn't just talking about a campsite," Erik Folk said. "But Nick tries to keep that mantra going with the teams he's played for and the relationships he's made, just trying to make other people better than they were before they knew him."

His teammates see it. They feel it.

"I've played with hundreds and hundreds of guys, and I've never been around a more professional football player than Nick," said Patriots captain Matthew Slater. "He's an example for everyone on this football team. It's the consistency day after day after day. His approach is unbelievable, so systematic. There's no wasted time."

Time stops

It's Aug. 2, and Folk is kicking field goals from a variety of distances during a steamy training camp practice.

While the Patriots offense and defense lock horns on an adjacent field, there are two constants on Folk's field: he doesn't miss, and his four children, all outfitted in kid-sized No. 6 jerseys, return every booted ball from beyond the goal posts back to him.

There go Folk's oldest boys, 9-year-old twins Gage and Davis. Annabelle sprints next with a football tucked under her arm and her ponytail swinging in the wind. Backup kicker Tristan Vizcaino greets her with a fist bump. Finally young Ben, days away from his fifth birthday, flies down, too.

"It's always good to have him come out. They ask about practice all the time. I think they enjoy it," Folk said. "And it'll be a good memory for them for hopefully a long time."

This is Buddy at work.

Two weeks later, under the southwestern sun Folk knew as a college kicker at Arizona, Folk is standing to the side during a joint practice at Las Vegas. Patriots punter Jake Bailey is front and center, and the Raiders' punt block team is charging hard on every rep. Bailey blasts every punt before the Raiders can reach him, but something's off.

Folk consults with the fourth-year punter after a good, but not great, period. Now alone on a side field, Bailey booms a few punts to test Folk's theory.

He was right.

"It's like having a caddy back there," Bailey said. "Whatever he says to me, it always keeps me in a good mental space. What he brings to my game is invaluable. I'm a way better punter with him in my corner."

What was wrong? His timing.

"That can happen when it's a punt period, joint practices and (the return team) knows there's no threat of a fake," Folk said. "You just tell yourself take a deep breath and slow down because sometimes you'll be in the right time, but your tempo can be off."

Buddy again.

Folk is almost as precise as his grandfather at work. In games, he employs an unorthodox approach that tasks Bailey, his holder, with leaning the ball left or right based on the wind. Under normal conditions, Bailey holds the ball perpendicular to the ground with his nose roughly two feet over the tip of the ball. If Folk wants a slight right lean, Bailey will tilt the ball toward himself so the tip is below his chin.



Patriots special teams coordinator Cam Achord allows Folk to call the shots during pregame warmups, when he'll declare whether he needs a normal, medium, large or extra large lean.

"Most kickers usually have one, maybe two, leans. Nick has four," Achord said. "He never wants to change his approach to the football (during a kick). Some kickers may change the finish, but he takes the lean based on the weather. The wind is the overriding factor.

"It's very slight. You wouldn't really notice it unless you watch the first one in warmups and then the farthest one."

Folk's leans have most obviously and critically benefitted the Patriots in Buffalo. He's 5-of-5 on road field goals against the Bills, including two makes during a windstorm last December that was so strong it scared the Pats into calling just three passing plays all game. Folk learned the technique from retired NFL punter Steve Weatherford, an ex-teammate of his in 2010 with the Jets.

"All it does is help the ball fly straighter, longer," he said. "In Buffalo last year, we were playing leans all night."

Though neither Folk's most famous Patriots kicks involved much of a lean. In 2020, he nailed a 51-yard straight-on field goal in New York as time expired to save the Patriots from the embarrassment of losing to a winless Jets team midseason. The drama that night, save for the scoreboard, was born from Folk's back injury.

Folk's availability was questioned all the way up until kickoff, when teammates weren't sure whether he would even take the field.

"On the sideline, there was a little pause like, 'All right, is he gonna be able to attempt this kick?' And we look up, he's already at the hash," Slater remembered. "There was no doubt in his mind. In the big spots, he doesn't flinch."

Three weeks after surviving the Jets, Folk dressed up an ugly 20-17 win over the Cardinals with a 50-yard field goal at the buzzer, a kick he claims to hardly remember. On to the next.

Last season, Folk hit just one game-winner in the final moments, a 21-yard chip shot at Houston. The week before, Bill Belichick called on Folk to attempt a 56-yarder amid driving rain against Tom Brady and the Buccaneers. Belichick's controversial call spoke to the game situation — asking Mac Jones to convert fourth down in primetime opposite the greatest of all time — but more to his confidence in Folk, even as the 36-year-old dealt with a left knee injury.

Folk's kick clanged off the left upright, but 11 months later, Belichick still sees him as one of his most consistent and productive players.

"The consistency from Nick is really remarkable. He's a very, very professional player and athlete. Not just the kicking part of it, but really everything," Belichick said last week. "His interactions with his teammates, specialists, other members of the team. ... But, at the same time, (he) knows that his job hinges on performance. It's not just relationships.

"Those are important, but he has all that, and his production and consistent performance is really impressive."

For Folk, none of this could have been imagined years ago. In the spring of 2018, when retirement felt imminent and he began weighing alternate careers, Folk was moving into a new house in Dallas.

He consulted with Buddy over the phone about a business venture. The next day, a close friend came to visit and help him uproot trees in the backyard. Change surrounded him.

Then Folk's phone rang. It was his brother calling with news, the kind that would uproot a small piece of them forever.

Buddy's time had run out.

Time starts again

Weeks after Buddy passed away at home on June 23, 2018, his belongings were all that remained. Buddy had assigned many of them already to his children and grandkids. Now, it was time to divvy up the rest.

Folk's mother, Kathy, asked if there were any unclaimed items that he wanted. Folk remembered a classic Rolex that Buddy wore with a metallic bracelet, black dial and small calendar window on the right side. He asked for it, and his wish was granted.

Then, a funny thing happened.

Time slowed down again. Folk trained, and within months, the Bears called him, a kicker in his mid-30s who made 54.5% of his field goals in his last NFL season.

The next day, Folk signed a contract with the Arizona Hotshots of the Alliance of American Football. He made a 55-yard field goal, the longest in the spring league's short history.

The 2019 NFL season started without him. Then the Patriots, the last remaining unbeaten team, had a problem in mid-October. Their all-time leading scorer, kicker Stephen Gostkowski, had been shelved by a hip injury, and his replacement, Mike Nugent, was struggling.

The Pats invited Folk to a tryout inside their practice bubble on a Tuesday, when several other kickers were present vying for the same job. He asked to see one snap from Joe Cardona to Bailey and attempted only one full-operation field goal before it was time to perform for the coaches.

No wasted time, not for future teammates. He left their campsites as best as he could.

The Patriots opted to stand pat after the tryout. But the following Sunday, Nugent missed two field goals and three extra points against the Browns and was sent packing. The Patriots called Folk back. The job was his.

The watch traveled with Folk every day, closer to him than his wife and children, who stayed home in Texas. All it took was a glance at his wrist or a high-pressure kick or low moment, and Buddy would return.

"It always somehow comes back to him," Folk said.

This has been the arrangement ever since.

Folk keeps kicking, and time keeps ticking, one last gift from the grave.

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## **DB Jack Jones**



### **Meet Patriots rookie Jack Jones, the most confident cornerback in the NFL**

By Mark Daniels | [mdaniels@masslive.com](mailto:mdaniels@masslive.com)

November 18, 2022

FOXBOROUGH – Confidence is announcing your college commitment on a stage next to Snoop Dogg.

Jack Jones always had that kind of swagger. It's the kind of self-belief you can't fake. It was seen when he was 18, seated next to a rap legend. Jones was the next big thing to come out of Long Beach, California. He knew it and Snoop knew it. That's why he made his college decision in a video with a local icon.

Wearing a long black shirt with a gold chain to go with a fresh haircut and studs in his ears, Jones sat comfortably on a white stool next to Snoop. For nearly three-and-half minutes, the rapper reminisced about watching Jones play football in his "Snoop U" youth program, a nonprofit league to help inner-city kids. Jones was talented enough at age 9 to play with 10-year-olds inside the LA Memorial Coliseum.

"That was good seeing you as a youngster," Snoop said at the time. "I watched you become a 10-year-old, 11, and 12. I watched you grow and get better and better. And the teaching, how you were able to be coached... Now you have coaches from all over the world wanting you to become a part of their university."

Jones wasn't here by accident. His father and uncle grew up with Snoop Dogg and played football together around the Long Beach area. Snoop achieved fame and fortune and Jack Jones dreamed of the same. He confidently told the rapper that he was excited to pick his college "because in a couple of years, I'm not gonna pick where I'm going, they're gonna pick me."

"You've got a strong team around you. We love you and we care for you," Snoop said. "Without further ado Mr. President, can you let everyone know where you're going to be playing at for the next four years."

After having Snoop Dogg call him 'Mr. President,' Jones announced his commitment to the University of Southern California. That was Feb 3, 2016.

Six and a half years later, as much as things have changed, they've stayed the same. The 24-year-old has been through a lot since sharing that stage with Snoop. However, his conviction never wavered. It's seen now in New England.

Here's how a fourth-round pick came to the Patriots as one of the most confident cornerbacks in the NFL.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL: OCT 02 Arizona State at UCLA  
PASADENA, CA - OCTOBER 02: Arizona State Sun Devils defensive back Jack Jones (0) and Arizona State Sun Devils defensive back DeAndre Pierce (2) former Long Beach Poly Jackrabbits during the college football game between the Arizona State Sun Devils and the UCLA Bruins on October 02, 2021, at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, CA. (Photo by Jevone Moore/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)Icon Sportswire via Getty Images

CONFIDENCE IS REFUSING to stop competing until you finally win.

Jones can't accept losing. The feeling festers inside him until it boils over. It traces back to when he was 13 at his first summer football camp for Long Beach Polytechnic High School.

Jones was matched up with fellow freshman DeAndre Pierce on a receiving drill and his teammate caught a pass with him in coverage. Jones was so mad, he forced Pierce to run the drill over until he won a rep.

"That was my first chance to get to know him and how he was. I didn't know how he was acting," said Pierce, who also played with Jones in college. "Then I got to know him through high school, college and even now. The best way I would describe him is that he's the ultimate competitor. He hates losing more than he loves winning."

This is where the legend of Jack Jones started.

Long Beach Poly is a school that's produced more NFL players than any high school in the nation. When Jones arrived, he was an undersized freshman. He quickly developed into a 5-star prospect and one of the most popular high school football players out west. In that first summer, his teammates saw a deep-rooted desire to be great. As his popularity rose, he pushed even harder.

When they'd travel for 7-on-7 tournaments, all eyes were on the next great thing from Long Beach. He was the star and loved being the main attraction.

"That's when that confidence started," said Kobe Williams, who played four years in high school and one at Arizona State with Jones. "That was as a freshman, man. Littlest dude out there, but his confidence was big. It was huge. It's one of things if you have it, you have it. If you don't, you don't. He definitely has it."

Jones' hatred for losing bled into his social life. In college, he competed in everything. When teammates got together to play Madden or NBA 2K, they saw it. When Jones played cards or dominos, that beast came out. It didn't matter what the game was.

"I'm pretty sure it's how he grew up," Pierce said. "If it's competition or something on the line, he wants to win regardless. He will play you a million times until he wins and then once he wins he's going to let you know about it. That's how he's always been."

Patriots

Arizona State defensive back Jack Jones (0) stomps the ground after missing an interception opportunity on a pass intended for Stanford wide receiver Silas Starr (19) during the second half of an NCAA college football game Friday, Oct. 8, 2021, in Tempe, Ariz. Arizona State defeated Stanford 28-10. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin)AP

CONFIDENCE IS BELIEVING no one is better than you – even when it drives your coach crazy.

When Jones arrived at Arizona State, he was different. After finding success at USC, he was dismissed from the team for academic struggles. He was then arrested and pleaded guilty to commercial burglary after breaking into a Panda Express. It took him improving his grades at Moorpark Community College before getting another chance.

He arrived in Tempe with more maturity, but with the same level of self-assurance. He'd crack his teammates up in meetings when their assistant coach put on the opponent's game film. It didn't matter what receiver was on that video screen, Jones didn't think he'd get open on him. It could be a future NFL wideout or someone 5 inches taller, Jones always thought he was better.

That's why he'd tell everyone in the room.

"Jack literally thinks in his head that it is impossible for anybody to be better than him or for anybody to beat him," Arizona State senior cornerback Jordan Clark said. "That's actually how his brain works. We'd be at practice or in the film room, there'd be a good guy who'd run a good route on film and everybody in the room would be like, 'That's a good play.' Jack's immediate response is 'He wouldn't catch that on me' or 'He wouldn't do that to me.' That is Jack-Jack."

This happened on a weekly basis. In practice, Jones trash-talked Arizona State's own receivers. It was impossible to get open on him – at least that's what he said. When that final whistle blew, however, this cornerback prevailed. Jones is the type of person who likes to talk and uses his own words as fuel. He speaks his own performance into existence and then does everything he can to prove himself right.

At Arizona State, he finished with 19 pass breakups and six interceptions in 25 games.

"He never thought anybody was ever better than him. He was always going to put the work in to prove that," Pierce said. "He knew he was better and he was going to show you why he was better in every way possible. In the meetings, our DB coach used to get mad, and be like, 'you have to respect this.' He'd be like, 'Nope, he's not better than me. I'm going to show him that.'"

"Sure enough, he'd go out and prove it. At that point, it's like what can you say? That's just the way he carries himself. You think like that, act like that, soon enough it turns into fruition."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL: OCT 14 Utah at USC

LOS ANGELES, CA - OCTOBER 14: cornerback Jack Jones (25) of the USC Trojans in a game between the Utah Utes vs USC Trojans on October 14, 2017 at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles, CA. (Photo by Jordon Kelly/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)Icon Sportswire via Getty Images

CONFIDENCE IS LEARNING from your mistakes.

There were people around Long Beach that thought Jones would fail. In that video with Snoop Dogg, Jones said his motivation to get to the NFL was to "take (his mom) out of the hood, put her in the hills." That dream was nearly derailed when he was kicked out of USC.

"Everybody counted him out. Everybody doubted him," said Williams. "They thought he was going to fail... just like every other dude from back home. It gets too much. But he just revamped his whole life. Got to where he wanted to be. He changed everything. It's crazy."

Part of the problem was Jones is a people pleaser. He wanted to be there for his friends in Southern California – even the ones who didn't have his best interest at heart. For USC cornerback coach Ronnie Bradford, it was hard to see.

Bradford played in the NFL for 10 seasons as a cornerback and recognized Jones' NFL potential immediately as a USC freshman. As a sophomore, Jones finished with four interceptions and was on track to be drafted high. Bradford saw that big-time confidence, but there were times he leaned on people to build himself up.

"Now, Jack had issues, but they weren't on the football field and that's what I appreciate about him," Bradford said. "When he was on the football field, it was about all business and that's the one thing that I said he needed to do in all aspects of his life."

"I don't know if he surrounded himself with the right people that had his best interest in mind in the beginning and while he was at USC being a young kid. Probably one of the best things was for him to get away from that situation and go somewhere where he could focus on him."

That's why Jones needed to leave California. His friends noticed a difference when he arrived at Arizona State. He was still that uber-confident kid, but no longer needed others to enhance his confidence. That came from within.

Part of this self-assurance is why he's a good cornerback. Confidence is paramount at the position. Players must also move on quickly when a mistake is made. Jones showed that on the football field. After USC, he showed it off the field. Jones knew he had to limit his mistakes if he was going to achieve his dream of getting to the NFL.

Step one was improving his grades. Step two was getting out of his home state. After that, his on-field abilities took over.

"He definitely had to get out of California, and he told me that, too," said Pierce. "You could tell he really learned from his experiences. With him being a competitor, he never wanted to make the same mistake twice."

"Whether it's competing in football or what he had to go through for a year and compete in the classroom to get his grades up. That was a big thing for him being academically ineligible when he was at USC. The dude's a fighter. He's always been like that. I think that's what's going to always make him successful."

Added Bradford: "It's good for him. It's good for his mindset. It's good to know that he doesn't have to have people or hangers-on to prove to build up his confidence... Jack's a good player. Jack knows he's a very good player. And now it's good to see that kid grow up."

Patriots

New England Patriots' Jack Jones (13) celebrates after recovering a fumble during the first half of an NFL football game against the Green Bay Packers, Sunday, Oct. 2, 2022, in Green Bay, Wis. (AP Photo/Morry Gash)AP

CONFIDENCE IS TRASH TALKING Aaron Rodgers in your fourth NFL game.

Jones revealed his true self following the first interception of his career. On Oct. 2, the rookie picked off the future Hall-of-Famer inside Lambeau Field and ran it back for a touchdown. Then the post-game press conference happened. Jones couldn't hold back.

Standing at a podium, he stated, "Personally, I feel like it's disrespectful to throw an out route on me. If you can throw the ball past me to get to the receiver, I'm no good."

The quote went viral. Patriots players found it hilarious. Jones' friends back home weren't surprised. That was the same level of bravado he showed back home when he was 13.

"That's nothing. Even my dad, when he heard it, he was like, 'That's Jack,'" Williams said. "If you knew him or have known him forever, that's nothing... He's going to keep saying it. That doesn't scare him at all. It doesn't matter who it is."

"That was Jack every minute of every day whether we were practicing or somewhere else," added Clarke. "He believes in and will bet on Jack-Jack any day of the week and a lot of the time, he's right."

Pierce agreed. He'd seen Jones like that before.

"I can tell you, he was dead serious. He wasn't trying to say that to be funny," Pierce said. "He actually means it. This is how it was, he could be having a great practice, like two or three picks, and then he gives up a catch and he'll act like the whole practice is terrible."

Following his interception on Rodgers, Devin McCourty approached Jones and told him it was fine if he wanted to talk. The key was to make sure he was willing to put in the work and be there when the team needed him. That's how he'd earn respect.

"Jack's a true corner," McCourty said. "He was a five-star coming out of high school. He's been one of the best and he kind of lives that. The cool thing about him is he's willing to learn and work. It's not a confident arrogant thing. He's always asking questions."

That moment was the Patriots introduction to the real Jack Jones. Inside the locker room, players embraced it. They found the quote funny but saw the work the rookie was putting in each week. Since then, Jones has two interceptions and five passes defended in 13 games. Opposing quarterbacks are completing just 39% of their passes with the rookie in coverage.

"That's him. Some guys, you've got to accept who they are and their true personality," said Patriots cornerback Jonathan Jones. "It's not a show or pretending. That's genuinely who he is as a person. He believes in himself."

Added rookie cornerback Marcus Jones: "That's who he is as a person. We love his personality. That just comes with Jack."

"You have to have that elite level of confidence," noted Patriots safety Adrian Phillips. "With him, it's even higher."

Jones dropped in the 2023 NFL Draft due to his past. He came to a Patriots team trying to replace All-Pro cornerback J.C. Jackson. Now in the middle of his rookie season, Jones has all the makings of the Patriots next great shutdown cornerback. For him, that's not a surprise. In many ways, he's still that teenager on a stage alone with Snoop Dogg, sitting tall with a level of confidence not many have.

"He was with Snoop?" asked McCourty, who didn't know the story. "Wouldn't you be confident?"

Jack Jones certainly is. He's always been that way.

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## **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.

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## 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 airtailed 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, whodied 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.

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## 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

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## **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 defensed 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."

## **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."

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## 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.

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## The McCourtys and McCorkles: Devin and Jason's friendship with TD Garden security twins

By Steve Buckley  
June 7, 2022

The Celtics' journey to the NBA Finals this spring has attracted the customary Who's Who of Boston Sports to TD Garden, from Red Sox legends David Ortiz and Pedro Martinez to Patriots owner Robert Kraft and his second-year quarterback, Mac Jones.

And then there are the McCourtys twins, Devin and Jason. The two longtime NFL defensive backs — Devin is entering his 13th season with the Patriots, and Jason played in New England from 2018 through 2020 — have made several appearances at the Garden during the Celtics' playoff run. And, yes, absolutely, the record will show that these guys are board-certified, card-carrying, first-class basketball fans.

But it's not all about the hoops when the McCourtys twins attend Celtics games.

It's also about this: The McCourtys twins, who are identical, look forward to hanging out with the McCorkle twins (also identical).

Chances are you don't know the McCorkle twins by name, but you've probably seen them on television a zillion times, if not in person at the Garden. The McCorkle twins, Jack and Jim, are Dedham, Mass., natives and longtime event security managers at TD Garden.

When there's a big-name visitor at the Garden, there's invariably a McCorkle hovering in the background. Often both of them, in fact. What's that, a Grammy Award winner singing the national anthem? Look for a McCorkle or two. A Bruins legend throwing on his old sweater to serve as honorary fan banner captain? There's probably a McCorkle, or two, in that little corner of the Garden with them. Look! There's Donnie Wahlberg heading for his floor seats! Look! McCorkles!

Understand this: The relationship between the McCorkles, 53, and the McCourtys, who turn 35 in August, is quite real, and to a degree that the McCourtys have been known to take note of it on social media. The two share an Instagram account — it's called "mccourtytwins," naturally, and it has 430,000 followers — and last month they shared a photo that had been posted of them talking with McCorkles on the Garden floor.

They added their own two cents to the photo: "Twins chopping it up with twins," Jim McCorkle shared it on Facebook.

Even better, the McCourtys jumped to action during the Bruins' 2019 Stanley Cup playoff run after the B's posted a video on Twitter showing Patriots center David Andrews and Massachusetts Special Olympics athlete Justin Oates serving as fan banner captains prior to Game 5 of the Eastern Conference semifinals against the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Though the McCourtys were no doubt delighted to see Andrews speed-chug a can of beer while Justin happily waved the banner, it was the McCorkle twins hovering in the background who caught their eye.

"@dandrews61 is cool but S/O the twins in the back," they tweeted on their shared @McCourtyTwins feed. They closed with a pair of raised fist emojis and the hashtag #TWINLIFE.

And yet in his early days with the Patriots, Devin McCourtys only knew one of the McCorkles. Leastways, he thought he did.

"I met them early in my career when I went to my first Celtics game," Devin said by phone last week. "But honestly, in the beginning I never knew they were twins. I thought I was always talking to the same person."

Ditto with the ditto McCorkles.

"I knew there were two McCourtys playing in the NFL," said Jim McCorkle, known as "Buzzy" to friends and family, "but I myself did not know they were twins until they both came to a game."

Fast forward to 2018. Devin McCourty, in his ninth season with the Patriots, was now teammates with his brother Jason, who joined the team after eight seasons with the Tennessee Titans and one season with the Cleveland Browns. (Jason McCourty was selected in the sixth round of the 2009 draft by the Titans, Devin McCourty in the first round by the Patriots in 2010.)

"We went to a (Celtics) game," Devin said, "and they both came up to us and started talking, and we took a picture."

"And we all just started laughing, because it's not all the time when we're out that we run into twins. A lot of times when we're out, we'll see somebody and they'll tell us they're twins and maybe show us a picture. This time they both came over to our seats, and they came over at the same time."

Now, said Devin, "Every time we see each other, it's always jokes and talking twin life."

Twin life?

"Oh, just the normal stuff," Devin said. "Like who's older, who was the meaner one, who was the more athletic one, who was the one who got more girls growing up."

"Twin life," it turns out, is a thing.

"Yes, Devin's right," Jack McCorkle said. "Once we found out about each other, it was all twin life after that. We talk about things like, did you ever know if one was hurt and all those things you hear about twins. That happened to me once."

Jack proceeded to relay an event from years ago when he felt a sudden need to call their mother and inquire about Jim's well-being. This happened when Jack was a student at Nichols College in Dudley, Mass. Jim was a student at Stonehill College in Easton, Mass., nearly 60 miles away.

"I said, 'Hey, have you heard from Jimmy, and is everything alright?'" he said. "And my mother said, 'No, he has a problem with his throat. How did you know?' I told her I didn't know, but something just struck me weird."

The McCorkles did not play football growing up in Dedham, but they did play hockey and were teammates at Xaverian Brothers High School in Westwood. Jim, a goaltender, later played hockey at Nichols. Jack, a forward, played hockey at Stonehill.

"We played against each other eight times in college," Jim said. "Jack never scored on me."

For his day job, Jack is executive director of alumni relations at Northeastern University. Jim is president/CEO of Common Trust Federal Credit Union of Woburn. Their side gig is keeping an eye on the Big Papis, Robert Krafts and Donnie Wahlbergs of the world.

"I love the twins," Wahlberg said via text. "When New Kids and I performed at the Boston Strong concert in 2013, they almost tackled me to make sure I didn't do a Justin Bieber and step on the Bruins logo in their locker room (so I wouldn't jinx the team in their Stanley Cup run versus the Blackhawks). They are such great guys."

"They have the spirit of the old Garden, even though they work in the new Garden. Meaning they always have a welcoming smile, but they are always ready for anything. I still have the bruises from the locker room logo incident to prove it."

The McCourtys and McCorkles seem to be blessed with solid gold senses of humor. As such, here's hoping there comes a day when they all get together and, oh, I don't know ... Devin McCourty and Jack McCorkle walk into Tresca in the North End and ask for a table for two, and then five minutes later Jason McCourty and Jim McCorkle walk in and ask for a table for two. Or they step into an elevator from different floors. Or ...

"We'd love to get a foursome and play a round of golf with them someday, just share more stories," Jack McCorkle said. "Whenever we see them at the Garden, we're all running around, so it's a quick thing, a two- or three-minute conversation. There's no real time to sit and have a long conversation."

Think about it. Two McCourtys, two McCorkles, one foursome at Granite Links. That's a charity event just waiting to happen.

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**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 Torry 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."

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## **Jakobi Meyers, Patriots' Next Slot Receiver, Was Hidden In Plain Sight**

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.

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## **DB Jalen Mills**



### **Two-for-One Special: Meaning behind Mills' jersey number**

By Eric Scalavino  
December 3, 2021

OXBOROUGH, Mass. — As the final moments of Thanksgiving Weekend 2021 ticked away, the Patriots were only a few hours removed from having defeated the Tennessee Titans 36-13 at Gillette Stadium, when a surreal thought struck New England cornerback Jalen Mills. Sitting at home on his couch, he turned to his girlfriend and said, "You know what's crazy? I'm in the NFL." With a quizzical look, she responded, "Six years later, you're just realizing that?"

Recounting the conversation to a reporter, Mills divulges that, even with a Super Bowl ring from his former club and a four-year, \$24-million contract with his new one, he finds it difficult to reconcile that he's living this life.

"I just don't see myself as that," he explains, "how little kids look up to me, run up to me and scream for autographs. I was once a kid that didn't have all those things — the best past, the best living conditions. I didn't have NFL aspirations."

Yet, here he is in New England, with a colorful coif and corresponding sobriquet, plus all the accoutrements to which a professional athlete could aspire. He also has something meaningful for which to play this coming Monday night in Buffalo, apart from his team's playoff positioning. Something deeply personal and poignant that, if all goes according to plan, will transport Mills back to his humble upbringing in the Lone Star State.

#### IDOLS AND INFLUENCES

Those who knew him best would tell you that sports never much interested Uhkoto Chatman. Instead, they would describe the Texas man as a hardcore news junky. Before liver cancer claimed his life on November 16, 2017, Uhkoto loved little more than to relax in his Dallas-area home watching 24-hour cable TV news networks.

If anything brought Uhkoto as much joy, perhaps it was the close relationship he enjoyed with his nephew, a boy who dreamt of becoming an aviator or a brain surgeon, loved the color green, and did enjoy sports, but also genuinely held his Uncle Uhkoto in high esteem. Eventually, though, another man would vie for the child's admiration.

"From the start," Jalen Mills confesses, "my first love was basketball. My mom loved basketball and used to take me to Dallas Mavericks games – Dirk Nowitzki, Jason Terry, Jerry Stackhouse, all those guys." Great though these hometown players were, none could hold a candle in Jalen's eyes to Allen Iverson of the Philadelphia 76ers.

The 6-foot guard – known for his braided hairstyles and by his two nicknames, A.I. and The Answer – thrilled and inspired a prepubescent Jalen with his on-court killer instinct and fearlessness when taking on players much bigger and taller than him. When Jalen played youth basketball, he tried to emulate Iverson, down to his trademark uniform style.

"I tried to grow my hair out. I had a little bitty 'fro and tried to get braids, but my mom wouldn't let me," Jalen recalls. "I used to wear the headband, the finger wrap where he had his number, a sleeve on my arm. I had all his shoes, the Reebok Questions and Answers. I had his throwback 76er jersey when they were red, black, and a little bit of gold."

By the time Jalen reached high school, however, he'd fallen out of love with basketball because, as he admits with a self-effacing laugh, "Dudes got too tall, too fast!" He switched to football, starting off as a quarterback and wide receiver. During a workout with fellow wide receivers entering his sophomore year at Lancaster High, just south of Dallas, the defensive backs coach approached Jalen. He remembers the man saying, "Hey, I know you think you're a receiver, but you're really a DB. Why don't you come train with me? I think you have a chance to get a scholarship playing cornerback or in the secondary."

Now the secondary coach at the University of Missouri, Aaron Fletcher had made an offer and a prediction that would have positive repercussions in Jalen's life to this day.

"I loved competing and making plays and having fun with the guys playing football. It's a kid's sport to me," adds Jalen. "If I could get to college and get a full ride, that would be a dream. My mom didn't have the funds to send me to any college. I had this opportunity to use what God blessed me with, so, why not."

Jalen agreed to switch to defense, and it paid almost immediate dividends. By his junior year, major college programs were showing keen interest. However, in the classroom, Jalen's grade point average couldn't keep up. Coach Fletcher knew Jalen needed to make another move – to a better school and a better environment that would help his player focus on his academics. His senior year, Jalen transferred to next-door DeSoto High, and Fletcher went with him. Together, they helped guide their new school to a 10-2 record.

As Fletcher predicted, Jalen eventually made the necessary grades to earn a football scholarship to Louisiana State University. As a true freshman in 2012, Jalen started all 13 games for the Tigers and finished with Freshman First-Team All-America honors. Only during an injury-shortened senior season did he miss any games at LSU. However, Jalen had done enough to be selected by the Philadelphia Eagles in the seventh round of the 2016 NFL Draft.

"My coach changed my life," Jalen remarks about Fletcher's ongoing influence. "My first couple of years of high school, I was a problem child a little bit, just trying to be with the cool kids. He's all about helping the youth. He's a blessing. I still talk to him. He's still my mentor."

#### GOING GREEN

In Philadelphia, Mills played for a team whose primary color happened to be his favorite. Thus, he began dying his hair green, the genesis of his nickname, Green Goblin. Jalen also found himself living in the same city where his boyhood idol, Allen Iverson, began his long NBA career.

But as often as she'd taken her son to see the Mavericks play, Kisa Mills refused to take him on one particular occasion when Iverson's team came to town years ago. "I messed it up," Mills admits. "I ended up getting in trouble at school and my mom didn't let me go. I still think about that to this day."

Mills never got to watch Iverson play in person, but his mother would later stun Jalen when she arranged to introduce the two. "I still don't know how she did it," he adds with a chuckle.

During his second season with the Eagles, Mills helped Philly defeat the Patriots in Super Bowl LII. Two months later, on his 24th birthday, he'd returned to LSU's Baton Rouge campus to attend the football team's spring game. She informed Jalen that he was about to receive a FaceTime call from a number he didn't recognize, but that he should trust her and pick up the call.

"So, I answered and sure enough, it was Al. He said he heard I was a big, big fan, and he was a fan of me, because we had just won the Super Bowl against New England. He knew me by my style of play, and of course, I had green hair, and he was calling to wish me happy birthday. After that, I went to a couple of Sixers games here and there, got to meet him, talk to him, sit next to him. Surreal moments.

"I was turning 24 years old," observes Mills, who has grown to the same exact height as Iverson, "but if you were standing next to me on that call, you would have thought I was 12. Just smiling, telling him how much I respect him, how he inspired me to play sports the way I play it now. He was always hitting the floor, but always got up. It didn't matter who he was going against. That inspired me. He was one of the smallest guys on the court and he's playing like he was 7-feet tall. I want to be the biggest dude on the football field. I'm 6-foot, but try to play like I'm 6-5. That's the mindset I have."

Jalen Mills  
#2 CB

Height: 6-0  
Weight: 191 lbs  
College: LSU  
TWO FOR ONE

Late in the Eagles' eventual Super Bowl-winning season, Jalen's Uncle Uhkoto lost his battle with cancer. The once-close relatives had long since drifted apart and fallen out of touch. As a result, only in the wake of Uhkoto's death did Jalen learn that his uncle – a man who otherwise shunned sports – could quote his nephew's NFL statistics chapter and verse: every pass breakup, every interception, every tackle, every game, Uhkoto was keeping track of Jalen. The discovery left him feeling remorseful.

"It kind of broke me down," Jalen reveals, "because we had grown apart. We were close at one point in time. It took that moment for me to realize, this is a man I looked up to as a younger kid, and now he was looking up to me, keeping up with sports that he didn't even care about. So, I wanted to honor him in my own quiet way ... You're the first person I've told this to."

In 2021, Mills would get that opportunity. After signing his free-agent contract with New England this past spring, Jalen learned that the NFL would relax its jersey number restrictions, allowing certain positions beyond kicker, punter, and quarterback to wear single-digits on their uniforms.

Mills, who wore 31 and 21 at times as an Eagle, chose No. 2 here in New England. You see, almost no one ever called Uhkoto – pronounced a-COO-too – by his full name. They preferred his shortened nickname: Two.

This Monday night, when the Patriots travel to Buffalo to face the Bills in a critical AFC East matchup, Jalen Mills hopes to pay further tribute to his late uncle by wearing a new pair of customized cleats.

Each December, in a month-long observance known as My Cause, My Cleats, the NFL encourages its players to don bespoke footwear to highlight charitable causes that are personally meaningful to the individual players. The tradition has become so popular around the league that increasing orders for the unique designs are challenging manufacturers to meet their deadlines.

As of the Thursday prior to the Bills game, Mills was at Gillette Stadium still awaiting the completion and delivery of his new pair. "If he gets them to me and I have them on," Mills alerts his audience, "you should just be on the lookout for some green cleats."

More than Mills' lifelong favorite, green just happens to be the awareness color representing liver cancer – the same disease that robbed Ukhoto Chatman of his life four years ago. "That," adds Mills, "is what I'm representing."

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## **OL Michael Onwenu**



### **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."

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## **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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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## 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.

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## **WR DeVante Parker**



### **Parker Releases Cartoon Debut**

### **Miami Dolphins wide receiver DeVante Parker introduced his new cartoon series, "Uncle Vante," on social media**

By Alain Poupart  
July 21, 2020

DeVante Parker has been happy staying out of the media spotlight since he joined the Miami Dolphins as a first-round pick in the 2015 NFL draft, but he's been showing up on social media throughout the offseason.

Perhaps it's just a coincidence, but this has happened after he enjoyed a breakout 2019 season that landed him a contract extension from the Dolphins.

And now Parker has become the star of his own web series, "Uncle Vante," which features an animated character named "Pee Wee Parker."

The premiere episode was released Tuesday morning and featured a conversation where Pee Wee is asking DeVante about staying with him for a week during summer vacation.

"For those of you who don't know, I am a cartoon fanatic," Parker wrote on Twitter. "I'm very excited and proud to release my own, starring myself and @thepeeweeparker. Stay tuned over the next few months to see how our story unfolds! #UncleVante"

Along with Parker and four other producers (Jimmy Gould, Alexander Aigen, Cody Hock and Demetrius Franklin), the animation is produced by Smiley Guy Studios.

The "Uncle Vante" persona of Parker isn't new. It's been a running joke around the Dolphins, as a reference to him and fellow wide receiver Jakeem Grant (because of their height difference).

And, of course, there were numerous memes alluding that Parker being an authority figure over Stephon Gilmore after his monstrous performance in the 2019 season finale when he had eight catches for 137 yards (both the highest numbers for a New England opponent last year) despite being covered one-on-one most of the game by the 2019 NFL Defensive Player of the Year.

That performance led to some memorable Parker moments on social media this offseason, notably his "feud" with Saints wide receiver Michael Thomas and later a not-so-subtle jab at Gilmore.

Parker appeared on "Good Morning Football" to talk about "Uncle Vante" and said Pee Wee wasn't based on anybody specifically.

"It's just that little nephew that always aggravates you, just gets on your nerves, just like a little brother," Parker said. "And I'm just glad I can make this all happen right now. ... I just think it'll be a great platform for me to get it out there for everyone to see."

"I would say I was probably in high school when I wanted to do a cartoon. Growing up, my favorite cartoon was always SpongeBob (SquarePants). That's all I always watched when I was young. Wake up, SpongeBob was on. And now, they just show marathons of SpongeBob all the time. That's all I'll be watching."

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## The Providence Journal

### **Patriots WR DeVante Parker opens up about journey to NFL and those who helped him**

By Mark Daniels

FOXBORO — There was a winter chill in the air, but the 4-year-old wasn't going to be denied a game of catch with his grandfather. That's why the pair got creative and went inside their Louisville home.

These were rarely normal games of catch. The boy needed to dive for every reception, so Willie Parker took the action to the living room. That's where the grandfather tossed the football and watched as his grandson jumped and corralled the ball in his arms before landing on the soft cushions of the family's couch.

That was fine, but the boy wasn't happy.

"I said, 'What's wrong,' " Parker recalled. "He said, 'I don't want to dive on the couch. I want to dive on the floor.' Now, we have a tile floor. It's not concrete, it's tile, but it might as well be concrete."

So they tried again. This time, the grandfather threw the ball and, after the boy dove, he landed on the cold, tile floor with the ball in his hands. Parker let out an "Ooo" before remarking that they should stop, but his grandson was as fearless as he was tough. The game continued until the boy was tired enough to move on.

Twenty-five years later, DeVante Parker approaches the game of football with the same mentality. His love for the game and the bond with his grandfather were molded during moments like those. Long before he caught passes in the NFL, the Patriots receiver's first quarterback was the central father figure in his life and the man he calls "Dad."

Patriots wide receiver DeVante Parker catches a touchdown pass against the Raiders during a preseason game in August.

"He means a lot to me," DeVante Parker said. "Always there whenever I needed him, someone to talk to if anything happened and always [helped] keep my head straight."

Entering his eighth NFL season and his first with the Patriots, DeVante Parker's success has been aided by a close-knit family and a pair of mentors who stepped up when they were needed the most.

Parker found a father figure in his granddad  
As Parker grew older, the games of catch became more complex.

One afternoon, his grandfather was trying to teach him the importance of catching the football with his hands as opposed to his body. He also wanted to see Parker plant his feet on the ground before running. To show why it was important, they had a cousin throw Parker the ball. When he caught it with his body, Willie Parker lightly pushed him from behind and he dropped the pass.

"Once you catch it with your hands, you can fall, but you've made the catch," Willie Parker explained.

Those moments meant everything and it was more than just football.

Parker was 6 years old when he moved in with his grandparents, Willie and Yvonne. At the time, his mom, Raneca, was single and worked the third shift as a caregiver.

Willie Parker had lived in Louisville for most of his life and knew the city inside and out. The location of Raneca's apartment made him nervous.

"He moved in with us because where she was living at the time, it wasn't a safe area from my standpoint," said Parker, 74. "I know drug areas were kind of close."

DeVante Parker developed into a standout multisport athlete at Ballard High School in Louisville. He's pictured here with his family in 2019 when his high school basketball jersey was retired.

A proud father of two daughters, Raneca and Tracy, Willie Parker thought of DeVante as the son he never had. It also gave him someone with whom to share his passion. Willie Parker had played high school football in Louisville and then briefly in college at Eastern Kentucky. Later, when he was working as an accountant, he officiated high school games on Friday nights.

Those games of catch meant everything to the proud grandfather. Before long, he went from being called "Paw-Paw" to simply "Dad."

It was only fitting. DeVante Parker's father, former Louisville running back Anthony Shelman, was rarely in his son's life. The Parker family is fiercely loyal and Willie Parker never hesitated when he saw his grandson needed a male role model, so he stepped into that role.

"It was real big," the younger Parker said of his grandfather. "It's always good to have a father figure around, show you the right way to do things, what's right, what's wrong. I'm just blessed to have him in my life."

As Parker grew older, it was clear that his abilities were special — as was the bond with his family. When college coaches contacted him, the budding receiver didn't want to go on recruiting visits to the schools. The reason was simple — Parker was set on attending the University of Louisville to be near his family — so much so, that not even Alabama's Nick Saban could get Parker on the phone.

His family members didn't know that Alabama had been interested until Parker's high school coach told them he found stacks of personal letters and information buried at the bottom of his locker.

"We found out after he was gone to Louisville and the coach cleaned his locker out," Willie Parker said.

Parker received tough love at Louisville

When DeVante Parker arrived at Louisville, he was shy. When the team had an off day, he usually went home. There were even nights that he convinced his aunt Tracy to deliver food from White Castle to him on campus. His family would do anything for him.

The Parker family dynamic reminded Ron Dugans of his own. A standout receiver at Florida State who played four years with the NFL's Cincinnati Bengals, Dugans was Parker's receivers coach at Louisville. He immediately saw the talent and decided to push Parker harder than others.

"They kind of spoiled him a little bit. I was like, 'OK, I've got to get that out of him,' " Dugans said. "He was used to being kind of babied. Knowing the love that they had for him, I knew I had to get that same love to him as well, so I kind of took him up under my wings."

Louisville receiver DeVante Parker catches a touchdown pass during the 2013 Sugar Bowl. Parker had a father figure back home in his grandfather. At Louisville, he had another in Dugans.

Off the field, Parker wasn't the type to go out at night or get in trouble. His family had laid a great foundation upon which for the coach could build. To turn him into an NFL athlete, Dugans aimed to make him tough and to play with more urgency. It was about tough love and that first year was hard. Dugans routinely laid into him any time he didn't run full speed in practice. He was pushed to the limit on the field.

Dugans taught Parker how to position defenders at the top of his routes and the importance of quickly getting in and out of his breaks. Parker was big with great hands, but the coach wanted him to work harder to create separation. When the on-field teachings were over, they would go into a classroom where Dugans showed him recordings of bigger NFL receivers, such as Calvin Johnson and Julio Jones, to show him how they ran routes.

"When I first got there, my footwork wasn't always there, but he coached me up and transformed me, really," Parker said. "After him, I continued to grow and get better."

A year later, as a sophomore, Parker was on a different level, finishing with 744 receiving yards and 10 touchdowns. He finished his collegiate career with a school record for career touchdown receptions at 33. The Miami Dolphins picked him at No. 14 in the 2015 NFL Draft.

"He's a great kid," Dugans said. "He's humble, never forgot who he was or how he was raised. His family laid a really good foundation for him. He's someone you don't have to worry about. He's just a great young man. I challenged him to come out of that shell."

Parker's next chapter is in New England

The lessons from Willie Parker and Dugans can be observed over the course of Parker's football journey.

A 6-foot-3-inch receiver, Parker often uses his body positioning to get up and catch the football high above the man covering him. This offseason, the Patriots traded a third-round pick to Miami because Parker can provide the type of deep threat the offense has lacked. He made several highlight-worthy catches in training camp.

"DeVante is a great player," Patriots quarterback Mac Jones said last week. "Been around for a long time in the NFL and obviously we're really happy to have him. He does a great job competing every day in practice. He's a big physical receiver."

Patriots wide receiver DeVante Parker tries to elude the grasp of Dolphins linebacker Andrew Van Ginkel during the game on Sept. 11 in Miami Gardens, Fla.

Because of injuries and inconsistent quarterback play, Parker's time with the Dolphins was up and down. Some of his potential was seen while playing with quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick in 2019, when he finished with career-highs across the board — 72 receptions, 1,202 yards and nine touchdowns. Last weekend against the Dolphins, he made his Patriots debut, catching one pass for nine yards.

Willie Parker hopes to see the potential shown with Fitzpatrick emerge in New England this season. With every game played, his family is there either watching in person or on TV.

"He's really done more than I expected," Willie Parker said, "because, coming up, he's always talented, but what are the chances of making pro? He's just been blessed, man. God's really touched his life and allowed him to be successful at every level."



Willie Parker was there for his grandson when he needed a father figure. Ron Dugans was there to help turn a teenager into a man. DeVante Parker's the man he is today in part because of the foundation built beneath his cleats.

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## **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."

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### **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."

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## **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."

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## **WR Matthew Slater**

**The Athletic**

### **Why Patriots' special teams ace is compared to Tom Brady, Lawrence Taylor**

By Dan Pompei

May 23, 2022

BOSTON — "There's Brady! There's LT! And there's Slater!"

Jerod Mayo's deep, booming voice resonated through the Patriots' weight room.

"There's Brady! There's LT! And there's Slater!"

Matthew Slater had already heard what coach Bill Belichick said about him at the NFL owners' meetings.

"(He) will go up there, in the kicking game, with Tom Brady on offense and (Lawrence) Taylor on defense," Belichick told reporters in late March. "So I feel very, very fortunate to have the opportunity to coach all the players, but I'd say those three in particular."

It was the type of statement Slater would ignore if he could. He long has followed the rule that he doesn't read anything written about him. And if his wife, Shahrzad, reads something about him, she is not to tell him.

So Slater told Mayo, a teammate for eight years who now is the Patriots' defensive coordinator, to cut it out. Slater went to a corner of the room and resumed his lifting.

Belichick, who sometimes acts as if he would rather produce a kidney stone than a compliment, has praised Slater lavishly before but privately. During a team meeting in the 2020 season, Belichick stood before his team and said, "It's a shame if you younger guys don't take advantage of having Slater in the room and find time to talk to him. He's the greatest special teams player of all time."

For the next few weeks, Patriots safety Devin McCourty called Slater "The GOAT."

"He kept blushing and getting embarrassed," McCourty says.

Slater cannot be blamed for being uncomfortable with homage. This is a player who has started three games since high school, caught one pass in the NFL, fumbled away his job as a kick returner and has scored one career touchdown.

Slater is nothing but a special teams player. The only time he plays offense is in victory formation at the end of the game. His only opportunities on the other side of the ball are when the Patriots guard against multiple laterals on the last snap in their "Desperado" defense.

Tom Brady says of Matthew Slater: "He has every trait you're looking for in a teammate, a friend, a man." (Billie Weiss / Getty Images)

Slater has never had the acclaim Taylor and Brady have.

He does, however, have something else.

Patriots scouts identified it when they were evaluating him before the 2008 draft. Scott Pioli, then the Patriots' vice president of player personnel, says it was easy to see Slater's speed, intelligence and spirit.

And there was something else that stood out to them when he was covering kicks and punts, something almost everyone else missed.

"Rare vision," Pioli says.

That vision explains what logic cannot.

Slater's football life probably never should have begun.

His father, Jackie Slater, played offensive tackle for the Rams. Though Matthew begged his father to let him play football, Jackie pushed him to other sports.

Physically, Matthew didn't take after Jackie, who was 6-foot-4, 280 pounds. And he didn't give off athletic vibes. "You had glasses and asthma, and you were this little scrawny kid," Jackie tells him now, chuckling.

Slater's football life probably should have ended in 2007.

What Matthew lacked in brawn, he made up for in speed. And he increased his speed by working with Jackie's teammate Ron Brown, who won an Olympic gold medal in the 4×100-meter relay.



As a freshman at Servite High School, Matthew, at 135 pounds, played football for the first time. He found his niche as a wide receiver, lettering twice. Slater was modestly productive, but not a star. He also ran track, finishing second in state in the 100-meter dash with a time of 10.62 seconds and fourth in the 200-meter dash with a 21.39.

Slater initially planned to attend Dartmouth. But he couldn't resist the lure of big-time football and went to UCLA to play wide receiver.

In his first season, he suffered turf toe. In his second, he had a stress fracture. After two years, he had not played much and his future in the program was in doubt. A teammate and friend, more pragmatic than tactful, told him, "Man, you're never gonna play. Have you thought about transferring?"

Slater did think about transferring to Dartmouth but instead asked coach Karl Dorrell if he could switch to defense. He became a defensive back and also was allowed to start covering kicks.

Even though he would never start a game at UCLA, he became an excellent special teams player. As a senior, he had 25 tackles and averaged 29 yards on 34 kick returns with three touchdowns.

At the end of his college career in 2007, Slater asked his father if he thought he had a future in the NFL. Best-case scenario, Jackie reasoned, Matthew would be signed as an undrafted free agent and get a chance as a kick returner.

Matthew was not invited to any all-star games or the combine. But seven teams — the Bears, Bucs, Giants, Jaguars, Jets, Ravens and Texans — brought him in for a visit. And unbeknownst to Slater, the Patriots quietly had taken a strong interest.

During the draft, the Patriots made a trade, giving up a seventh-round pick to move up seven spots in the fifth round. That's when Slater's phone rang.

When Patriots director of football Berj Najarian told him New England was drafting him, Slater thought, "Have they made a mistake?"

Slater's football life probably should have ended in 2008.

In Slater's first rookie meeting, Belichick had a brusque message for the draft class.

"We don't need any of you guys," Belichick said.

The Patriots went undefeated in the previous regular season. At his first minicamp, Slater found himself in meetings with Brady, who had already won three Super Bowls, Randy Moss and Wes Welker.

"I was certainly intimidated," he says. "I felt I didn't belong."

Whether or not he belonged was one thing; where he belonged was another. On his first day, he was given three playbooks, one for offense, one for defense and one for special teams. For four plays, he lined up at wide receiver, then he slipped a blue pinny over his jersey and played defense for the next four.

He was overwhelmed. At one point, he called his father and asked if the team could cut him before paying his \$175,000 signing bonus. The rookie prayed that he would just make the practice squad so one day he could say he was in the NFL. But Slater somehow made the 53-man roster.

In late November, the Patriots were trailing the Steelers 13-10 in the third quarter on a rainy evening in Foxboro. Slater prepared to field a kickoff. The ball hit his facemask and bounced in front of him. He tried to retrieve it but kicked it. The Steelers recovered on the 8-yard line and scored two plays later. In a Patriots loss, that was the turning point.

"That moment was one of the moments I remember most in my career because I just wanted to crawl in a hole and never be seen or heard from again," Slater says. "That feeling of letting my team down was really tough."

The Patriots won their last four games but missed the playoffs on a tiebreaker.

Matthew Slater scores on a blocked block during a 2019 game. (Matt Stone / MediaNews Group / Boston Herald)  
Slater's football life probably should have ended in 2009.

In the Patriots' second preseason game of his second season, Slater was covering a punt return when a fair catch was called. He ran into the returner, drawing a 15-yard penalty. On the sideline, Belichick calmly told Slater how he should have avoided the penalty and in a meeting the next day went into further detail.

On the first punt of the game the following week against Washington, Slater did it again, drawing another penalty for running into returner Dominique Dorsey after Dorsey had called for a fair catch.

Sheepishly, Slater walked to the sideline where Belichick, with a contorted face, was waiting.

Belichick: "Of course you hit him! Yeah, you f—— hit him. Dumb football."

Slater: "I had a hard time when ..."

Belichick: "F— that. You hit him."

Slater walked away and took a seat on the bench. He looked up and Belichick was in his face again, with his back to the field while a play was being run.

Belichick: "We just talked about this. The same f—— thing you did last week!"

Slater: "Yes sir. Yes sir."

Slater's roster spot was far from assured. "My rookie year wasn't the best," he says. "I was thinking this was not going to end well for me."

Slater's football life probably should have ended in 2017.

With help from many, including special teams coaches Scott O'Brien and Brian Flores, as well as strength coach Moses Cabrera and fellow special teams ace Nate Ebner, Slater survived his early struggles. He was phased out of his role as a kick returner because of ball security issues, but he became one of the best special teams gunners and blockers in the league.

In training camps, he had an added value because he could run routes, especially deep routes, which allowed Moss and Welker, and later Julian Edelman and Brandin Cooks, to save their legs.

While running a vertical corner route about a week into camp in 2017, Slater felt a pop in the back of his knee. An MRI revealed a complete rupture of his hamstring tendon. He considered surgery but decided against it. After missing the rest of camp and preseason and the season's first four games, he returned. But he was in pain when he ran, and his speed was reduced by about 20 percent. In his fourth game back, he tore his hamstring biceps, which had been overtaxed from the tendon tear.

As the season ended, Slater was a beat-up 32-year-old in his ninth year with an expiring contract who never would be able to run the way he once did.

Five years and four Pro Bowls later, Slater is entering his 15th NFL season as the longest-tenured member of the Patriots. He is one of only nine players remaining from the 252-man draft class of 2008. And he and McCourty are the only current Patriots players with three Super Bowl rings.

Slater remembers being 4 or 5 years old and seeing the sparkle in his father's eyes as he talked about how Walter Payton worked out when they were teammates at Jackson State, and describing the challenge of lining up against Reggie White.

Matthew watched Jackie work to extend his career to 18, 19 and finally 20 years. Every summer in the sticky Mississippi heat, Matthew stood by as Jackie, with a gallon jug of water at the ready, pushed himself to places hardly anyone else could at the high school track. Then, at the Pump House, Matthew taped his wrists like Dad as Jackie went through his lifting routine.

"He saw the grind of being a football player, and it wasn't pretty," Jackie says. "But I think he identified with it."

Matthew Slater has always looked up to his father, Hall of Fame offensive tackle Jackie Slater. (Courtesy of the Slater family)  
To this day, Matthew has never seen anyone work harder. He has more memories of his father's training than his playing.

"I remember the look on his face of determination and the commitment he had to his process," Matthew says. "Those images still live on in my mind, and that fuels me. When I go out there and represent the name Slater, I'm representing a legacy that's much bigger than myself. I don't want to let him down."

Matthew, who takes no more than 14 days off a year according to Shahrzad, is recognized as the hardest working Patriot.

"When the other players and their wives go to his house for couples Bible study, we'll all get there before Slate," McCourty says. "Most of us have left the facility three or four hours ago. I'll leave, get a massage, pick up my wife and go to his house, and he still hasn't left the facility."

Slater's workdays can stretch to 15 hours.

At 7:30 a.m., after pitching in with the morning routines of his children, Hannah, Jeremiah, Micah and Noah, he can usually be found at Gillette Stadium, going over the day's scripts.

About 12 hours later, he's the last player in the facility, and Belichick often tells him, "Go home, Slate."

At 8:30 at night, he stretches on the bedroom floor for up to 90 minutes. It's a lot of yin yoga, from his pecs to his calves. He holds some poses for as long as two minutes.

At 10 p.m., you might find him on a dark road in his neighborhood carrying a flashlight, wearing reflectors on his torso and a headlamp on his forehead. He's going for a walk of a mile or two to flush out inflammation.

Determination enabled him to reinvent himself after his hamstring injury as a player less reliant on speed and more reliant on technique and physicality. Of course, the ravages of time have affected him — he's had seven surgeries — but Slater found ways to redirect himself.

Slater, a do-everything-the-right-way kind of guy, abstains from gluten and sugar. Alcohol holds no allure for him. Ninety percent of what he eats, he doesn't like.

It's not a burden. "I enjoy the suffering," he says. "I enjoy the grind. If it's easy and I'm not hurting a little and not questioning myself a little, then I'm not working hard enough."

Self-awareness is one of Slater's gifts. He is clear-eyed about what he is. More importantly, he is clear-eyed about what he isn't.

In Slater's first talk with Belichick on draft day, his coach told him he wasn't sure where he would play on offense or defense, but he was drafted to help the Patriots in the kicking game.

"My role was defined right then and there," Slater says. "I'll never forget that conversation for as long as I live."

In his first few NFL years, Slater was a wide receiver, but he rarely played on offense. In 2011, he started three games on defense in December when injuries wiped out Patriots safeties. The following season Slater went back to offense, but in the next 10 years, he had only two passes thrown his way. In 2017, after Slater ruptured his hamstring tendon, Belichick told him, "We're done with this offensive thing."

From then on, Slater has dedicated himself entirely to special teams. Other than kickers, punters and long snappers, there isn't another player in the NFL with as narrow a focus.

While every other player in the NFL who plays on special teams devotes maybe 15 minutes to special teams and primarily practices on offense or defense, Slater does special teams drills for the entire length of practice.

"He has his own practice routine," former teammate Benjamin Watson says. "I have never seen anybody in my 16 years in the NFL who had their own practice routine. He'd be over there doing his drops for kickoff return, his gunner work for punt, his breakdowns for tackles, all on his own. That's how much trust they have given him."

Slater made the first of 10 Pro Bowls and five All-Pro teams in 2011. In the latter stages of his career, he believes he has continued to improve in part because he has spent more time working on being a special teams player than anyone ever.

Others may have been frustrated by not playing on offense or defense. Slater is not.

"I realize now this was God's plan for my career, to play special teams," he says. "I feel very fulfilled with the career I've had, the relationships, the experiences. I wouldn't want it any other way."

Slater has been called a lot of things by his teammates.

Urkel

When he was about 3, Slater started wearing glasses for nearsightedness. It wasn't long before he was compared to the geeky character from "Family Matters." One of his lenses is a negative 1.25, and the other is a negative 1. He wears contacts for games, but they bother his eyes.

McCourty remembers lining up to cover Slater for the first time at an OTA practice as a rookie in 2010.

"We get out there at practice, all right," he says. "There's no way this guy wearing these big glasses is going to do anything. Then he ran by me in a hurry. I remember going back to the huddle saying, 'Who is that dude?'"

Slater isn't like most of his teammates. He has no tattoos or piercings. He shaves his head because if he didn't, he says he'd look like George Jefferson (Slater also makes references more likely to resonate with his parents than his contemporaries).

He won't do social media because he believes it's unproductive and negative. His musical tastes range from gospel to Motown to Disney — he hears a lot of the latter with four children under the age of 7. And when a teammate plays a rap song with words that were considered offensive in another time, Slater gives him a look.

"I've always felt different, and I'm comfortable with it," says Slater, who has some gravel in his voice that belies an innocent face. "The guys here have accepted me for who I am. I feel I'm called to carry myself a certain way, and it's a little different from what the world deems OK. But the beauty of it is I can find common ground to stand on with guys who are totally different from me and living totally different lives and value different things."

Matthew Slater, who is nearsighted, is usually seen wearing glasses off the field. (Matthew J. Lee / The Boston Globe via Getty Images)  
Slater

The double meaning is perfect.

Like the stone, Slater is solid as nature permits and uncommonly durable. Special teams players typically don't last, but Slater is 36 years old and has not missed a game since 2017.

The Professor

As Belichick told his team in 2020, Slater is someone everyone can learn from — even though Slater's wisdom seems to come from another realm.

He became The Professor the way most professors do, by learning from others. His father, head coach and former quarterback have been especially instrumental.

"I've learned more football from Bill Belichick than I thought possible," Slater says. "Situational football, dealing with teammates, late-game execution, preparation, you name it. I'm someone who thought I had a good understanding of what the game required and how to approach it. But Bill is master class. There is no one like him when it comes to overall understanding of the game of football, and that includes history. Who I am as a player in a lot of ways can be directly correlated with who he is as a coach."

Brady reinforced many of the lessons Slater learned as a child watching his father. The quarterback showed him, peer to peer, how to respect the game and appreciate the joy it brings. There were lessons about competition and sacrifice. Through Brady's example, Slater learned to experience success with humility and gratitude, and to maintain

perspective. There were tips about taking better care of his body and preparing for weekly challenges more efficiently.

"I can't say enough about the impact Tom's had on me professionally and personally as well," Slater says. "I consider myself very blessed to have played with him for 12 years."

But it has not been one-sided.

"As much as I've impacted him, he's impacted me," Brady says. "It's me seeing him and him pushing me to be my best. ... He's held everyone accountable to a very high level of success and discipline. He does everything the right way. He's enthusiastic, consistent, and he brings a positive attitude to work every day."

Red Coat

When Patriots are inducted into the team hall of fame, they are given red coats. Former teammate Kyle Van Noy, who knows how to make Slater squirm, calls him "Red Coat."

Slater would be even less comfortable if someone called him "Yellow Jacket." But someday, he might wear one as an inductee into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Not that he would ever acknowledge the possibility.

"I've never viewed myself as anything other than a guy who's scrapping and clawing and trying to find my way," he says. "Hall of Fame, that's for other folks to talk about and think about."

Captain

After a victory, the Patriots gather in a circle in the locker room and one voice rises.

"How do we feel about this big win?"

The others respond, "Ahhhhhh yeah!"

The one voice belongs to Slater.

Then he gives what Watson calls a "sermon," preaching about the game, the challenges ahead and how all of it relates to life. Slater might take a warning from his coach about being complacent and build on it, veering into how complacency can seep into relationships, fatherhood and responsibilities away from football.

His teammates voted him captain for the first time in 2011, and he has worn the C in each of the last 11 seasons. To him, it is more than a nominal title.

"When I look back at my career, I think it will be one of the greatest honors I've ever had is being a captain for all the years I have been," Slater says. "I hope I've served those guys well and loved them well and know I cared about them beyond the game of football."

He might not be the most common type of leader, but he may be the most effective type — one who leads by being himself.

"Matt is just an extremely genuine, heartfelt, caring man," Brady says. "But he's a very determined, disciplined, hard-working football player and he's a very selfless, incredibly talented teammate. You combine all these things and what he adds to a football team is truly one of a kind. He has every trait you're looking for in a teammate, a friend, a man."

Patriots owner Robert Kraft chats with Matthew Slater before a 2021 game. (Kevin C. Cox / Getty Images)  
Pastor Slater

When Slater was 4 or 5 years old, he talked about those in need as his family was leaving church one day. "People," he announced, "need Jesus."

Even then, he saw things others did not.

If Slater never was given an opportunity to play football, his plan was to return to Calvary Church in Santa Ana, Calif., and become involved in ministry. But he believes his football life was ordained.

With teammates, he does not hold back about his faith. There may be some condescension in this nickname, but mostly, there is reverence.

About nine years ago, Slater encouraged McCourty to go to chapel more often. Eventually, McCourty decided to get rebaptized with his wife, Michelle, at a conference by Professional Athletes Outreach. After the McCourtys made declarations of faith, they fell back into the arms of the Slaters in a hotel pool.

"It was phenomenal to have them be the ones who baptized us because they had been so instrumental in our walk with God," McCourty says.

My Guy

Slater has addressed many teammates, friends and acquaintances as "My Guy." They, in return, call him "My Guy." But it's more like "My Guy!"

"It's about the energy he gives off," McCourty says.

When Slater smiles, it's hard not to smile back. When he laughs — it's a hearty, deep laugh — he rarely laughs alone. If you are engaged with him, he's with you completely.

"I'll meet someone's girlfriend or wife and I'll tell them I'm Shahrzad Slater and my husband is Matthew," his wife says. "The reaction I get is, 'Oh, my boyfriend or husband loves your husband. He looks up to him so much and appreciates him so much.'"

Slater takes an interest in every player in the locker room and sees the good.

"There probably hasn't ever been a teammate that was a bigger fan of his teammates than Matthew," Jackie Slater says. "Everybody he's ever played with is special and he can recognize their special contributions."

Edelman once said Slater probably was the best teammate he ever had.

Patriots center David Andrews has said he and the other offensive linemen call Slater an "honorary offensive lineman." When the offensive linemen order sandwiches for themselves on travel days, Slater gets one. And he sits with them on the team bus.

"I've always said at heart, I'm an offensive lineman," Slater says. "It's what I learned from my dad about being selfless, being one of the guys, and the group being more important than the individual."

But that doesn't mean he is restricted to hanging with blockers. "He fits in with every group on the team," McCourty says. "Usually, you have pockets of people who get along. You could put Slater with any of those groups at any time. There's no one who hasn't had a one-on-one conversation with Slater or a group conversation where he's invested time and gotten to know you, your family."

In a most diverse workplace, Slater is welcome everywhere.

"Quite honestly, guys don't care if you wear glasses, if you are a nerd, or if you are a heathen," Watson says. "If they think they can trust you, that's what matters. And they can trust him."

Matthew Slater plays with his children Jeremiah and Hannah. (Courtesy of the Slater family)

With rare vision, you can see the punt return unfolding. You can read the intentions of the jammers and visualize the shortest distance to the return man. From the corner of your eye, you can recognize where the blockers on the other side of the field are heading. As you near the ball carrier, you can survey the space around him and identify the best angle to make a tackle.

And there is more with rare vision, much more.

In the fall of 2020, Slater and his wife adopted a fifth-grade class at William D'Abate Elementary School in Providence. Once a week, Matthew read with the boys and Shahrzad read with the girls. One of the children was a

few years behind where he was supposed to be in reading ability. When Matthew called on him to read initially, the student struggled. But Matthew kept calling on him and working with him. By the end of the school year, the student was volunteering and reading with confidence.

Slater had seen the potential in him and helped bring it out.

About seven years earlier, one of Slater's talented young teammates was struggling on the field because he wasn't living right off it. Slater met with him one-on-one every week for more than a year. They talked about priorities, temptations and discipline. Slater asked him to think about where he had been and where he was going. Eventually, the young player changed his ways and started excelling on the field.

Slater identified the player's problems and promise, and he helped the player move away from one and toward the other.

Slater views the opportunity to be a professional athlete really as an opportunity to do something else.

"Football," Slater says, "is a vehicle to connect with people and do ministry to love people."

Everything that has happened to him, he is certain, is a gift. But it is not his to keep.

That's why he and Shahrzad formed the Slater Family Foundation, which promotes community and individual health and wellness. It's also one of the reasons he still wears a helmet. He still has opportunities to do what he calls "kingdom work" because of his platform as a New England Patriot.

For a dozen years now, Matthew has been telling Shahrzad that his playing days could end any day. The fact that he believed it is why his career has gone on and on. But he is in the deep winter of his football life. His children need their father more and more. Shahrzad put her career as a physician on hold for her husband, and eventually she needs to return to her calling. And as a football player, Matthew is probably past his expiration date.

He envisions his future in pastoral counseling.

But for now, there are kick returners to wrap up and slam down, and there are teammates to hug.

Why is he being compared to Taylor and Brady?

Why didn't his football life end in 2007? Or in 2008, 2009 or 2017?

Why is he My guy?

Rare vision, that's it.



## **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 targetted. 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."

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## 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 punter 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.

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## 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.

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## **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."

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## 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."

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## **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."

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## The Boston Globe

### **Rhamondre Stevenson knows he has 'a very special story.' It's time to tell it.**

By Nicole Yang

Six years ago, Rhamondre Stevenson was working at Wal-Mart.

Stevenson had developed a reputation as one of the most talented running back prospects in the Las Vegas area, but his poor grades left him academically ineligible to play at the college level. So, instead of pursuing the next step in his football career after high school graduation, Stevenson started working at his neighborhood Wal-Mart as a stocker.

"There were really no options left for me," Stevenson recalled.

For a year, Stevenson took a break from the sport he loved. He earned a \$10 hourly wage, both at Wal-Mart and behind the counter of the sandwich chain Jimmy John's. His NFL aspirations seemed more and more distant by the day.

Stevenson's parents, Robert and Juran, questioned what the future held. Maybe football wasn't in the cards. Stable employment seemed more realistic.

"My husband and I, we talked about it a lot," said Juran. "If that was us, we probably would have given up. Because he had to do a lot of work. I mean, it was a lot of work."

But Robert and Juran never let their son see their doubts.

"They believed in me more than I believed in myself," Stevenson said. "Them always pushing me to be great, telling me I could actually do it, and putting that thought in my head, it made me believe it at one point."

After his year away, Stevenson decided to follow a group of his friends and enroll in junior college. That decision proved to be the first of several key steps in reviving his football dreams.

Now, six years, two schools, and numerous obstacles later, the 24-year-old Stevenson has established himself as a dynamic, productive running back for the Patriots.

"I have a very special story, I feel like," he said. "Thinking about it is kind of crazy, because of all the hardships I've been through. Some of it was just my fault, but it's crazy being where I am now compared to where I came from."

Size made him stand out

When Stevenson was growing up, his house was a popular hangout spot, because Juran had seven children and figured what's one or two more? Even though space was tight, she'd regularly open her home for gatherings and sleepovers.

Stevenson, along with his friends and six siblings, loved spending time outside, playing basketball, skateboarding, dirt biking, or racing in the backyard.

But his favorite activity by far was football.

Stevenson took up the sport when he was 6 years old. Even then, his big physique was a talking point.

"One of the parents asked me, 'Do you have him doing weights?' " Juran recalled. "I'm like, 'No.' That was just how he was. He's never been overweight, but he's just always had this muscle tone. In preschool, it looked like he had been doing weights."

Throughout grade school, Stevenson's size advantage was noticeable, as were his speed and explosiveness. That combination made him hard to miss on the football field.

"He started off as always being the biggest kid, and kids would catch up," said Ben Arave, Stevenson's longtime mentor. "Next thing you know, he'd have a little growth spurt and jump ahead of them and he'd be the biggest kid again for a while. Then they'd catch up and then he'd shoot up again."

Stevenson initially played football only in the fall, but Juran eventually had to find him a year-round program because he would mope around the house whenever the sport wasn't in season. Once Stevenson reached middle school and the buzz surrounding him picked up steam, Juran started to think there might be a future for him in football.

"They would never take him off the field," she recalled. "I used to complain to my husband, 'He needs to get out.' I'm like, 'He's too tired. He needs a rest. He needs to sit down. He needs to drink some water.' But he was that good on offense and defense."

"That's when I started thinking, 'Oh my gosh, we might really have something here.' It was just like a natural-born talent for him."

The eligibility hurdle

Centennial High School should have provided an opportunity for Stevenson to show out and collect offers to play Division 1 college football at a Power Five conference school.

Stevenson posted big numbers as a junior — 171 carries for 1,457 yards and 19 touchdowns — en route to first-team All-State and Las Vegas Sun High School Player of the Year honors. The play design for his coaches was simple: hand off the ball to him or isolate him one-on-one on a linebacker because he will surely win the matchup.

The stage seemed set for a productive collegiate career.

However, there was one problem: Stevenson didn't meet the NCAA's academic requirements. So he was automatically ineligible.

In hopes of becoming eligible, Stevenson and a small group of other students facing a similar predicament lived with Arave the summer between their junior and senior years. While there was never a question about whether Stevenson would graduate high school, he needed to boost his GPA if he wanted to secure a college football scholarship.

Stevenson enrolled in nine adult education classes that summer, taking a variety of math, science, and other core curriculum courses. Arave incorporated a few excursions, including a trip to Yellowstone National Park and a day of horseback riding in Idaho, but the group's schedule was fairly straightforward during that three-month period — study and train, study and train — all with the goal of playing college football.

"We would wake up, eat breakfast, work out for the longest time, then we would go to our classes, do our summer school, go back to the house, study, and work out again," recalled Stevenson.

Arave also took the group to a football camp at Boise State, where he remembers coaches wanted to offer Stevenson a scholarship on the spot. Soon after, Utah State started poking around, too. None of the interest materialized into anything because, despite the last-ditch effort, Stevenson was unable to raise his GPA. He remained academically ineligible.

"It wasn't a talent situation," Arave said. "Everybody could see the potential, the size, the speed, the quickness."

The disappointment only grew as a senior, when Stevenson broke his foot three games into the season. The injury sidelined him for the remainder of the year. He held out hope that he could still become a late academic qualifier, but eventually learned once again that his grades had come up short.

"That's when the doubts really started coming," Stevenson said. "When I couldn't get my GPA up to standard, I was like, 'Oh my God,' I didn't really know about jucos or things like that, so, at that time, I thought it was over for me."

Added Arave, "It put Rhamondre in limbo that year. He was kind of a fish out of water."

After graduating high school, Stevenson began working his part-time jobs. He also logged plenty of hours playing the EA Sports video game "Madden NFL" while wishing he were playing the actual sport instead.

"He was really down in the dumps," Juran said. "Because he really wanted to play football."

Schools and coaches had expressed interest in Stevenson since the ninth grade. He and his family always thought a college football scholarship would come. When that didn't happen, he wasn't sure what was next.

"This is when my parents believe in me more than I believed in myself," he said. "I thought it was over. I'm not in college. I wasn't a qualifier. What am I going to do?"

#### A second chance

Everything changed when two of Stevenson's close friends and high school teammates, Tishawn Barnaby and Juan Rodriguez, elected to enroll at Cerritos College, a two-year institution in northern California. The pair encouraged Stevenson to join them, telling him they could all share an apartment and play football together, just as they did growing up.

A few other former teammates planned to do the same, so Stevenson opted in.

With that decision came several costs. Not only did Stevenson have to find the money for his portion of the rent and other bills, but he also had to cover out-of-state tuition because junior colleges are not permitted to offer athletic scholarships.

To help her son, Juran worked two jobs: one at the Comprehensive Cancer Centers of Nevada and the other at Summerlin Hospital. Monday through Friday, Juran worked a typical 40-hour week at CCCN. Then, starting Friday evenings, she reported to the hospital and worked three night shifts over the weekend. On Sundays, after returning home at 4 a.m. earlier that day, she picked up an additional half-shift.

"My husband and I were not rich," Juran said. "We have seven children. We're not wealthy, but we're not able to get any kind of public assistance or any kind of grants or anything like that. Because our income — my husband makes good money, I make good money — but when you have seven children, it's barely nothing."

Stevenson offered to get a job at Target to help, but his mother told him no. She wanted him to focus on school and football.

By the end of Stevenson's time at Cerritos, his parents had to pull money out of their retirement accounts to pay the final invoices so he could have access to his transcript.

"We just made it work," Juran said. "And I'd do it all over again for any of my children."

The finances to attend Cerritos ended up being only half the battle.

Stevenson didn't play much his first season, stuck at the bottom of the depth chart behind three older backs, and contributed primarily on the kickoff team. Although he logged only 68 carries that year, he made the most of those snaps, registering three touchdowns and an average of 7.4 yards per carry.

Still, even with the limited action, Stevenson didn't get discouraged.

"As soon as I enrolled in a school, I knew I had the talent to progress and get to the next level," he said. "When I actually enrolled in Cerritos, I gained more confidence."

Stevenson continued to stick it out despite the limited playing time.

He stayed in a two-bedroom apartment with as many as six other guys, sleeping on the sofa many nights. His primary mode of transportation was his bicycle, because the car he drove in Las Vegas would not have made it to California, so, each day, he biked 20 minutes to and from practice.

"Now, looking back on it, it was one of the most fun parts of my life," Stevenson said. "But going through it, it was very tough. You had to be mentally tough, extremely mentally tough, to get through two years of doing that."

The grind paid off in Stevenson's second year at Cerritos, when he stepped up into a much more meaningful role. He put up monster stats, rushing for 2,111 yards and 16 touchdowns with an average of 9.4 yards per carry. His film started to garner attention from Division 1 recruiters, including Oklahoma's Jay Boulware, the Sooners' running backs coach for seven seasons.

"The film jumped out at us," Boulware said. "Then I saw him physically and was like, 'Oh, he's a big boy.' I was really, really pleased when I saw him move in person, that he moved better than I thought from watching film."

"That's when it hit me. This guy is more than just a physical presence. He's got the feet to be elite, to be able to play on Sundays."

Southern Cal, Texas, and Utah all showed interest, but Boulware, in need of a big-bodied back, was determined to land Stevenson.

"I tried to put a big ol' circle around him," Boulware said. "I did not let it try to go further than the University of Oklahoma."

Dean's List and the draft

After committing to Oklahoma, Stevenson joined the program late because he had to take an additional class to finish his associate's degree.

"In this day and age, when most junior college students leave mid-semester in December, he missed the entire spring," Boulware said. "He didn't come until the summer. When he got there, he was already behind."

Once in the mix, Stevenson contributed primarily on kickoff coverage his first season. Then, his second season got off to a delayed start because he was one of three Sooners to receive a six-game suspension for a positive marijuana test.

When he returned to the field, the production reached impressive levels. In six games, Stevenson rushed for 665 yards and 7 touchdowns. His explosiveness, strength, and nimbleness were undeniable.

"When he hits the hole and he gets underneath people and he pushes the pile, you see it," Boulware said. "It's just different. It was daily."

Not only was Stevenson's camp pleased with his performance on the field, they also were proud to learn he had made the Dean's List for the 2020 spring semester, meaning he earned a GPA of at least 3.50.

After two years, even though he could have returned for another season, Stevenson decided to declare for the 2021 NFL draft. He had to wait to hear his name called until Day 3, when the Patriots ended up selecting him in the fourth round.

With family and friends around him, Stevenson learned that he had been drafted by the Patriots in Stevenson's parents, six siblings, and extended family all were in Las Vegas to celebrate the accomplishment, a culmination of his long, winding journey to the pros.

"He's been through so many obstacles and he never gave up," Juran said. "I'm just smiling ear-to-ear now just remembering that day. That's something I'll never forget."

With Stevenson now in his second NFL season, the experience is surreal for all involved.

"To this day, I'll still go to practice and be like, 'Wow, I'm in the NFL,' " Stevenson said. "To this day, I promise you."

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## OL Cole Strange

**The Athletic**

### **How Patriots' Cole Strange rose from 2-star at Chattanooga to NFL first-rounder**

By Matthew Fairburn

Joe Pizzo didn't make it a point to stay awake for the entire first round of the NFL Draft on April 28.

Chattanooga's offensive coordinator was eager to hear a team call Cole Strange's name. But everything he heard in the lead-up to the draft was that it would most likely happen Friday night when the second round began. So he didn't think much of it when he dozed off Thursday night. Then he woke up to his phone buzzing like crazy with congratulatory text messages. It took him a second to realize what was going on.

"Then it hit me," he said. "Cole got picked in the first round."

Bill Belichick caught the NFL world off guard, taking Strange with the No. 29 pick in the first round. After trading back eight spots, Belichick plugged a hole on the Patriots' offensive line. And he did it with a player perfectly suited to thrive in New England.

No, Strange didn't go to a Power 5 school. Sure, some draft analysts had him as a third-round pick. But those who saw Strange's rise from under-recruited defensive end to mauling offensive lineman drafted in the first round insist he belongs.

"On the surface, is it surprising to see this guy from Chattanooga get drafted in the first round that wasn't really expected to go in the first round?" said Anthony Hobgood, who trained Strange at EXOS performance center in Pensacola, Fla. "Having talked to a lot of scouts and then working with him for a few months and getting to see the type of individual that he was, his athletic capabilities, what he can do — it didn't surprise me at all."

Hobgood learned long ago how little it matters where a player went to school. He trained Jahri Evans (Bloomsburg), Terron Armstead (Arkansas Pine-Bluff) and Akiem Hicks (Regina), who have combined for 10 Pro Bowl selections.

"The NFL is full of players from schools you've never heard of," Hobgood said.

Hobgood watched Strange train side by side with Boston College guard Zion Johnson, who got drafted No. 17 by the Chargers. Johnson was more talkative, but otherwise, Hobgood said the two were strikingly similar in terms of athleticism and tenacity during drills. As unassuming as Strange is as a person, Hobgood described him as a "freak"



of an athlete. The NFL Scouting Combine backed that up. There, Strange broad jumped 10 feet, just 1 inch shy of the record for an offensive lineman (Tristan Wirfs, 2020).

"That is what skill players do," Hobgood said. "Some skill players don't even broad jump 10 feet. So a 10-foot broad jump is what cornerbacks and receivers do. This 300-pound guy broad jumped 10 feet. It shows you it's just a great representation of how explosive he is. He was just the total package of a player."

Strange also had 31 reps on the bench press (tied for second most among O-linemen), ran a 5.03-second 40-yard dash (15th of 50 who ran) and a 7.44-second three-cone drill (sixth). As Patriots director of player personnel Matt Groh said, "There aren't many humans doing that."

Kent Platte measures relative athletic scores, which are a composite of a player's athletic testing times relative to a player's size. Strange had the seventh-highest relative athletic score of any guard since 1987. The Patriots didn't just draft a guard. They drafted a rare athlete for the position.

"This is a really big, strong, tough, athletic guy," Groh said. "If you value toughness, which we do, you value guys like Cole Strange."

They also drafted a person who is lauded by his coaches and trainers for his work ethic and reliability.

Hobgood remembered a particularly cold morning when temperatures dipped to 30 degrees with winds gusting up to 20 mph in the Florida panhandle. The EXOS athletes were doing speed work outside. Others scrambled for hoodies, but Strange strolled onto the field in shorts and a T-shirt, unfazed. He was routinely at least 20 minutes early for workouts, and Hobgood often found him reading, waiting for drills to start. Sometimes, athletes lose focus or effort as the program wears on, but Strange was going harder with each passing day.

"When you think of the old NFL Films (footage) of the offensive linemen that have short sleeves and long hair and steam coming out of their mouth, and they're playing up in Green Bay in the playoffs and they're just real gritty," Hobgood said, "they've got blood on their arm and don't even care, that's the type of player Cole is."

This is consistent with what his coaches said, going back to Farragut High School in Knoxville, Tenn. Farragut coach Eddie Courtney had to pull Strange out of drills his junior year because he didn't want him hurting teammates. Strange did everything with all-out intensity through the whistle, and not everybody on the roster could handle it. Strange was an all-state selection as a senior, playing edge rusher and tight end. He had 103 tackles (18 for loss), 7.5 sacks and five passes defended that season.

"He gets his hands on you, it's over," Courtney said.

Still, Strange didn't get much attention from recruiters. Tennessee was right down the road, but the Volunteers didn't give him the time of day. Air Force was his biggest offer, and Strange was prepared to take it until the last minute. He decided he wanted to stay closer to home. His mom died when he was young, and his bond with his father and brother was so strong that he didn't want to be far away in Colorado.

"He doesn't talk much about that," Courtney said. "He didn't want to go too far just in case his dad and brother needed him. That's why Chattanooga stood out to him."

Chattanooga has stuck with him through the process. He was the Mocs' type of recruit. Even though he was only a two-star, his athleticism was obvious. He was still growing into his body, but smaller schools have to project what a player could become more often than bigger schools. Recruits aren't coming to Chattanooga as finished products.

And Strange certainly didn't. After two 100-plus tackle seasons at Farragut, Strange got hurt his first year on campus and redshirted. Then Chattanooga's staff decided Strange's skill set would fit best on the offensive line. Rusty Wright was part of the staff that recruited Strange, but he left for two years before returning as Chattanooga's head coach in 2019. He saw right away how naturally blocking came to Strange.

Cole Strange was a two-star recruit after starring as a defensive end in high school. (Charles Mitchell / Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)

"He was still a little raw, but he had taken that defensive mentality and moved it over to the offensive line," Wright said. "He was aggressive and nasty and trying to hurt people, really. You could tell that was going to be a good fit for him."

What impressed Wright most was a game early in Strange's career. Chattanooga lost its top two centers in the game and didn't have a third. Nobody on the roster had ever snapped the ball in a live game. Wright took a timeout so Strange could take a few practice reps. Chattanooga was trailing by two scores when Strange entered the game but came back to win with Strange playing mistake-free at center.

"He didn't bat an eye," Wright said. "He didn't flinch. He said, 'Just put me in there, we'll figure it out and go from there.'"

Strange had the same matter-of-fact mindset when Chattanooga went without an offensive line coach during the spring 2021 season. He didn't complain or look to transfer to a bigger school. He just took charge.

That's what those who know Strange have come to expect from him. He's not going to complain or make excuses. He's just going to work. It's not difficult to see why he would appeal to Belichick and his staff. Belichick says he looks for players who are smart, tough and dependable.

Strange graduated in December 2020 and was working on a master's degree. He can play three spots on the offensive line. Smarts won't be an issue. His toughness was on display at the Senior Bowl when he chased down a defensive back who had intercepted a pass and brought him to the ground. He hardly ever missed a snap of practice in college and was never late to a weight-room session.

This is a guy who still calls Courtney every time he's back in Knoxville, asking to have Farragut's weight room open. He'll spend no less than an hour and a half getting his lift in. He would show up at Farragut's turf practice field at 1 p.m., the hottest time of day in the dead of Tennessee summer, to get his speed and agility work in.

"That's just his mentality," Courtney said. "He's always been that way."

When it came time for draft night, of course Strange didn't want any fuss. He spent the night with his dad and brother watching the draft. Courtney kept nagging him about what he would do when he got the call. He suggested Strange at least go get himself a steak or something. But he knows Strange well enough to know he wouldn't spend long celebrating.

"All he was doing was waiting on the call," Courtney said, "and then he was finding out whatever he needed to do to get there and get to work."

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## **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 Crary of the NFL on Aug. 31. Crary 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

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## **LB Jahlani Tavai**

# The Boston Globe

## **Jahlani Tavai has traveled a long way to find a home with Patriots**

By Jim McBride

FOXBOROUGH — Jahlani Tavai smiled and nodded his approval as he inspected the game ball handed to him at his locker last week.

The memento included the linebacker's name and the score of the game it commemorated: Patriots 29, Lions 0.

The shutout victory over Detroit was particularly satisfying for Tavai, who started his career in the Motor City before being released two seasons after Matt Patricia made him a second-round pick.

"This one's going in the frame," Tavai said to nobody in particular while still staring at the souvenir.

Tavai has come a long way since the Lions cut him at the end of training camp in 2021, developing into one of the Patriots' most versatile defenders on the second level.

Coincidentally, it was another call from Patricia, shortly after his Lions release, that kicked-started Tavai's career resurgence.

Patricia had a couple of items on the agenda when he reached out, one of them being a reunion.

"He was checking on me mentally and seeing how I was doing because it was my first time going through that type of situation," said Tavai. "And yeah, when I saw his name on the screen, I was just like, 'Yeah, I think this is where I'm supposed to be.'"

Foxborough is the latest stop on a long road for Tavai, who began playing football in California — where his parents and aunt introduced him to the sport — to Hawaii for college to Detroit.

Tavai's father, William, was a defensive lineman during his playing days and his mother, Nafanua, and aunt, Tania, also played defensive line after transitioning from rugby.

"My mom comes from a rugby family, so it was a cool transition for her to do that. And then, my auntie was actually my first coach, so she coached me when I was in Pop Warner," said Tavai, who has aspirations to play for the US men's national rugby union team when his football days are over. "From then on, it was just a lifestyle for me and my siblings."

Nafanua and Tania played professionally for the San Diego Surge and Pacific Warriors of the Women's Football Alliance.

All of Tavai's siblings — he has five brothers and a sister — were athletes and he acknowledged things were very competitive between them.

"One hundred percent," he said with a chuckle. "Every day was chaos. It was too much fun."

Tavai starred at Mira Costa High in Manhattan Beach as a defensive lineman and tight end. He was having trouble getting noticed by colleges — "It was because I was playing nose guard at the time, so I was way undersized for my position and I wasn't getting the looks that I wanted," he said — when he discovered a connection close by.

A friend told Tavai that Cameron Chow, an English teacher and basketball coach at the school, was the son of then-Hawaii football coach Norm Chow.

"I was like, 'Yo, can you just tell your dad to check me out real quick?' " Tavai said.

Tavai sent his tape to Chow and "they took that first look and called me the next day and offered me," he said.

Tavai blossomed on the big island, collecting 390 tackles, 16½ sacks, 2 interceptions, and 3 forced fumbles in 47 games. He earned All-Mountain West honors in 2016 and '17.

Attracting the attention of pro evaluators was not a problem.

"I worked him out at UCLA — We spent a day together out there at UCLA," Bill Belichick said last week. "Matt drafted him in the second round. We didn't really get a shot at him."

Then smiling, Belichick added, "But we always get our man. Not always, but usually. Sometimes we get our man the second time around."

Since Tavai first walked through the doors at One Patriot Place last September — "The first thing you see is the Super Bowl rings. It's their legacy and it's cool . . . It gave me goosebumps," he said — Tavai has meshed well.

He started on the practice squad but was quickly elevated to the active roster, contributing to defense he had some familiarity with through Patricia, and on special teams.

This season, Tavai has elevated his game, becoming an important cog in New England's ever-evolving defense. Tavai said the reason he's been able to flourish is simple.

"To be honest, it's just everybody on the defense doing their job. It's really hard to put one person on defense as the playmaker unless of course, they're [Matt Judon]," said Tavai. "But for us, it's a team defense. If one person's not doing their job, it makes everybody's job difficult. And I'm just grateful that I got a bunch of guys who are just dogs out there trying to go eat."

Belichick has been impressed with the way Tavai has immersed himself into the defense's multiple schemes.

"I think Jahlani has a few things going for him. One, he's a pretty smart kid and he's played both inside and outside in college, and then with Matt in Detroit. So, when we got him last year, he had a lot of familiarity with our system and a lot of techniques with things that we did and so forth," said the coach.

"Just overall, he kind of has that skill-set that he can play on the end of the line, play off the line, has some pass-rush ability, plays on all four phases of the kicking game. He's a pretty versatile player and can plug into a lot of different spots which is helpful, because not everybody can do that or has to be able to do that. But somebody has to be able to do it. He kind of fits that. He's got good size, runs pretty well, got good playing strength, and he's smart."

## **LB Josh Uche**



### **Josh Uche speaks on, shares mental health resources for athletes with Patriots locker room**

By Angelique Fiske  
Oct 28, 2021

A typical Wednesday in the NFL means a turning of the page to the next game, the next opponent. Local media ask questions of Patriots players as they prepare for Sunday, but Josh Uche's press conference took an unexpected, but important, turn on Oct. 27.

ESPN's Mike Reiss held up a sheet of paper that was distributed both to media and in the Patriots locker room from the Josh Uche Foundation with mental health resources for athletes. After an injury in college, Uche said he struggled with his mental health. In those difficult days, Uche realized how crucial these resources and conversations are for athletes in particular.

"It kind of took me to a dark place," Uche said. "In that process, I just thought to myself, 'Man, this is a hard way for athletes to live.' Athletes need a very accessible way to therapy and different things. I started jumping into the mental health side of things, and it's kind of something that's stuck with me ever since the injury."

Uche, whose parents are from Nigeria, said his last name means "mind" in Igbo, so for this mental health to be the torch he carries feels kismet.

Whether it's an injury, sidelining them from the sport they love, a clinical diagnosis or a personal crisis, Uche said athletes shouldn't be taught to bury it. More athletes -- from Simone Biles to Kevin Love -- are speaking up about what they deal with mentally and emotionally. Uche said there has traditionally been a stigma to just deal with it for men playing football, but he is hopeful that things are changing for the better.

"Growing up as males, you're always told to toughen up, kind of suck it up and stuff like that," Uche said. "I've seen the NFL do a lot of different initiatives to make mental health a priority. I feel like the tide changing, and that stigma is starting to soften up a little bit."

For Uche, this has become the cornerstone of his foundation, which also aims to help at-risk youth. Since coming to New England, Uche said there was an emphasis on allowing players to explore what interests them outside of football through their own work or the Patriots Foundation.

"One of the main things when I first got here was just making it known how many resources are available for whatever endeavor you're trying to pursue," Uche said. "The Patriots have done a great job, in my opinion, just allowing guys to know which avenues they need to take in order to get something done, whether it be for their foundation, marketing, or whatever it may be."

You can learn more about the Josh Uche Foundation here.

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## **DB Joejuan Williams**



### **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.

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## **LB Mack Wilson Sr.**



### **Here's how Patriots LB Mack Wilson overcame childhood adversity to thrive**

By Mark Daniels

FOXBOROUGH – Times were hard for this family. There were days they lacked food or housing and nights when they crammed into a car to find shelter. Other times they'd find a cheap hotel around the area. There were evenings when the kids were hungry, and it didn't feel like there was enough food to go around.

Sandra Wilson worked hard to provide for her children, but when she was out working, her son fell into a crowd that lacked authority and direction. They stole, vandalized and traveled a path to a life of crime there in Montgomery, Alabama.

Mack Wilson knew it was wrong but felt stuck.

"I used to try to talk to my friends and be like, 'Yo, like we shouldn't be doing this (expletive). We should be trying to do something to make our parents proud,'" Wilson said. "Staying in the household with five kids, and it was just our mom. She's working, trying to do as much as she can to take care of all of us. Sometimes things weren't always great. We went from staying in cars to all of us staying in a hotel. Things like that. Shoot, we had to find a way."

Wilson wanted to take the burden off his mother. That's one reason why he walked into a local Walmart when he was 14 and stuffed different snacks and food items in his pockets. He was hungry and wanted to help. The young teenager wasn't very coy. Security caught him on surveillance camera and stopped Wilson from leaving the store. They took him into a small room where they re-watched the footage.

"They had to call my mom. She had to come up there and get me," Wilson said. "I saw how bad it hurt her to even have to do that. ... She was hurt. She was crying. Ever since that day, it just motivated me to do something in life and really be able to take care of my mom."

That was the last time Wilson stole something, but it took a village to get this promising athlete on the right track. Now in New England, this 24-year-old is living his best life.

Mack Wilson found a father figure in Montgomery

When Wilson wasn't out with his friends, he was usually at a local community center in the King Hill neighborhood of Montgomery. He spent time here to get away from his problems at home. It was a safe haven where kids played sports.

It was during his eighth-grade year when Wilson truly needed help. He found both in Todd Dowell, who worked at center. The pair grew close and eventually, Wilson confided in him about his struggles at home

Wilson's father, Wendell Wilson Sr., spent the early portion of Wilson's life in and out of prison for offenses from drug possession to child abuse. According to the Montgomery Advertiser, the incident occurred in 2003 that left his oldest son, Wendell Jr., "with bruising about his face, leg and butt and a cut on his backside attributed to the excessive use of a belt." He was sentenced to five years in prison for that offense.

"His home wasn't bad. It was just where he lived – the area. So much of it was when his dad stayed in prison, so it was just his mom," Dowell said. "She did everything. It was just at a point where you had a kid who you would call an alpha male and there was only so much at that point, she could do with him."

Dowell dedicated his life to mentoring youth in the area. He created the Make a Difference Foundation with Tracey 'Tyrome' Varner and Chris Varner in 2002. Together they help young athletes who are negatively affected by situations out of their control such as peer pressure, gang influence or family problems. With Dowell, Wilson found a father figure at a pivotal point in his life.

In eighth grade, Wilson was suspended from his middle school and sent to Montgomery's Fews Secondary Alternative School after placing a classmate's hand on a radiator. Then there was the incident in Walmart. Dowell saw him veering on a path of destruction. That's why he met with his mother and offered to move Wilson in with him.

"Mack wasn't a bad kid. He kind of got into things. And so he got suspended," Dowell said. "I talked with his mom because I had taken kids in before. She basically needed help with him and she agreed that he could stay with me. It was in ninth grade when he did it, it was a transition for him. He lived with me from there. She was still involved."

Mack Wilson thrived with new structure

With Dowell, Wilson found structure. He moved in during his freshman year of high school. He had a strict curfew, but with new rules came his own bed, a roof over his head and a pantry filled with food.

Dowell remembers seeing Wilson stash oatmeal pies in his clothes and had to remind him that stealing food wasn't necessary anymore. He had everything he needed right there.

"Ever since then my life changed," Wilson said. "From me being a bad, bad kid in junior high doing bad things. I always had great, good grades A's and B's but it was just decisions I was making. Really didn't have a father figure for that guidance. Once I was able to move into his house, everything really just changed. There was discipline, like he didn't allow me to do a lot of stuff, so it definitely helped me."

Wilson had no choice but to adapt. This meant waking up at 4:30 in the morning so he could get to the gym in time for his weekday workout sessions. A part of the Make a Difference Foundation is the training program called 'Mad House' and Wilson spent his mornings before school working out with other young athletes.

It wasn't easy, but this teenager thrived with the new structure provided. In the gym is where he bonded with Tyrome Varner, whom he still trains with today.

"We train at 5 o'clock in the morning. So, it wasn't all hanging out late, it was no being out in the streets," Varner said. "It was no staying up playing your game or talking to your girlfriend like we trained at 5 in the morning. Not we get there at 5, so you probably get there at 4:45. You gotta be warming up."

"Todd is his godfather. We all do this together, so he had no way out. He knew what he was signing up for living with Todd. It was pushing hard work - lifting, running a discipline structure. We just tried to instill all of that in him."

Wilson found two father figures with Dowell and Varner. As a teenager, he was a ball of energy but the two men discovered that when pushed the right way, Wilson excelled and had otherworldly athletic gifts. They set him on the right path and Wilson excelled.

Under this guidance, he went from a boy once suspended in middle school to five-star recruit at Carver High School, who accepted a scholarship to the University of Alabama.

Wilson dealt with adversity back home and in the NFL

Under the tutelage of Alabama coach Nick Saban, Wilson received a similar type of structure and he thrived in college. Back home in Montgomery, however, problems persisted for his family.

After his junior season, Wilson wasn't sure if he should enter the NFL or return to school. Saban told Wilson he should return to improve his draft stock. Dowell and Varner explained that people around the NFL had questions

about Wilson's maturity. The problem was that Wilson saw his mother struggling. That's why he declared for the 2019 NFL Draft.

"I was like, '(expletive)' I know I got the ability to make somebody team, so I ain't tripping if I don't get drafted, I can make somebody team, whatever the case may be," Wilson said. "At the end of the day, I wanted to help my mom. I wanted to make sure she was straight. She's straight. I'm straight and I can really focus on what I'm trying to accomplish. So that was my main thing."

Wilson was drafted in the fifth round by the Cleveland Browns that spring. That allowed him to get his mother a new apartment. He's saving up to buy her a house.

His dream of playing in the NFL came with some early adversity. Following a rookie season where he started 14 games and finished with 82 tackles, the Browns made sweeping changes to the organization. The general manager who drafted him, John Dorsey, was out. So was coach Freddie Kitchens. With the changes, Wilson saw his playing time shrink.

After starting six games in 2021, Wilson approached the Browns and asked for a trade.

"It's one of those deals where they didn't draft you. So it was frustrating because personally, I felt like I was the best linebacker in the room. Like the film spoke for itself, practice spoke for itself," Wilson said. "I was super frustrated. I really didn't know what I was doing wrong."

"So at that point I just kept working hard every day. And I was just hoping I got a chance to get a fresh start somewhere else because I actually went to them at the end of last year and told them, 'I feel like we should part ways.' I told them, I'm not a backup in this league. I feel like I'm a starter. And I want to get a fair chance."

A proud father, Mack Wilson is a new man

Wilson confided in Dowell and Varner about his struggles. They stressed if he handled his business the right way, it would all work out. Varner even made a prediction that one day he was going to land with the Patriots and Bill Belichick.

Wilson couldn't believe it when he received a call from the Browns organization this past offseason. The Patriots acquired the linebacker in a deal for Chase Winovich.

"It was crazy... I kept telling him that because Coach Belichick reminds me so much of coach Saban," said Varner. "When he got the call, he called me and was like, 'You ain't gonna believe this. I just got traded to the Patriots.' He was emotional."

Wilson's life changed when he was traded to the Patriots, but the truth is he came to New England as a new man due to the birth of his son.

Born on Aug. 4, 2021, Mack Wilson II stole his father's heart and forced him to grow up. Wilson is a passionate father who can't wait to go back home after a long day at Gillette Stadium to hang out with 'Deuce,' who he's giving a life he often dreamt about.

"He's going to have a different life totally from the life that I lived," Wilson said. "Basically, he's got everything he needs. I'll be able to do whatever I want for him, take him wherever, get anything he wants as long as he's doing the right things. It's a blessing. A dream come true."

"Mack has always said even growing up, 'I'm not going to be like my Dad. When I have kids, they're going to know their father,'" Dowell added. "That's always been one of his things. 'They're going to know their father. I'm going to be in their life.' It's something he always said he would do. Then when Deuce came, it's been that and beyond."

For someone who's only 24, Wilson has been through a lot, but he'll never forget his roots. It's a scary thought to think where he would've been without the guidance of Dowell, Varner or football. There are kids he grew up with who weren't saved. That adds perspective to his life now. Add in the adversity he went through in Cleveland, the birth of his son and the trade to the Patriots, Wilson came to New England as a new man.

"The person you all see now is night and day from the kid we met," Varner said. "Mack was a typical kid. He grew up in a rough area. Tough upbringing. You can't say 100%, but we all feel like the streets would have got him. His mom feels like that. We feel like he was headed down that path."

"From what you all see now with him having a son and smiling and having the best time. That's why he's always smiling."

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## **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.

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