

2024 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 Weiss 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."

Executive Vice President of Player Personnel Eliot Wolf



Why Eliot Wolf was built to lead Patriots at the NFL draft

By Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- When the Green Bay Packers front office gathered on NFL draft day in the 1990s, it was a star-studded cast of scouts on general manager Ron Wolf's staff joined by a youngster dreaming of one day working in the NFL.

That youngster?

None other than current New England Patriots director of scouting Eliot Wolf, Ron's son.

Eliot developed a passion for scouting at age 10, and when he would go to work with his dad on draft day as a teenager, he had a specific assignment. Whenever a player was selected, he was to remove the player's card from the Packers' board, hold it up for everyone to see, and then place it with the team that made the pick.

According to those in the room, Wolf always knew where the player's card was located, which reflected what round the Packers had him graded.

"He was in high school at the time, probably a freshman. That was when we manually had tags on the board," recalled former Packers director of pro personnel Reggie McKenzie. "We trusted him, because to physically take the name off the board and put it with a team, that's special. He knew what he was doing."

The decisiveness with which he carried out the responsibility -- finding one player on a draft board composed of hundreds -- made an impression on the older full-time staff members around him.

"Ron was my boss, my mentor, and Eliot would be in the room and at first you're thinking 'He's the boss' kid.' But it didn't take long before you were like, 'Wow, he really knows his stuff,'" recalled Andrew Brandt, who joined the Packers in 1999 as vice president of finance.

Some of Wolf's closest friends say his memory is a steel trap. They also say you wouldn't believe his impeccable notes and scouting reports unless you saw them yourself.

Turns out McKenzie was the first to ever see a scouting report from Wolf.

"I remember his dad asking me, 'Can you get him some guys to write up and see what you think. He thinks he wants to be a scout.' So I gave him about five players to write up and he attacked that like Ray Lewis attacking an 'iso' play at the goal line," McKenzie cracked.

Wolf was in high school at the time, but McKenzie reviewed his work as if it was from anyone on the full-time staff. Wolf has never let him forget it.

"I had sifted through them and gave them back to him. We went over them a little bit and of course, his dad had asked me, 'How do you think he did?' I told him that I put some corrections on there and we talked it over, but he's going to be OK," McKenzie recalled.

"It may have been 10 years later, after he was hired and working on our staff in pro scouting, and Eliot said to me, 'Do you remember those very first reports you had me do? I still have them because there was so much red ink that you had on those. You put me in my place.' He is highly competitive and that was pretty cool. 'I kept those reports' was how he motivates himself."

Three decades have passed since those beginnings, but the essence of it helps explain why Patriots owner Robert Kraft appointed the mild-mannered Wolf as the leader of New England's personnel department after Bill Belichick left the team in January.

In two weeks, the 2024 NFL draft kicks off in Detroit -- one that Kraft has called the most anticipated draft in his 31-year tenure, mainly because of the No. 3 pick, the highest under his watch.

Wolf's debut at calling the shots this offseason comes at a pivotal moment for a franchise that has fallen on hard times -- coming off a 4-13 season with no clear quarterback for the future. Kraft is entrusting Wolf -- and his staff -- to pull the right card off the draft board once again.

"I think Eliot has good training, good pedigree," Kraft said. "We're starting new chapters in our development as we evolve here. I like the young people we have doing this and I've encouraged them to be collaborative."

WHEN ELIOT WOLF reflects on those early years in Green Bay, in what he describes as a "phenomenal front office," the lessons were plentiful.

The staff was loaded with those who would go on to lead their own teams -- former Packers GM Ted Thompson, former Browns and Chiefs GM John Dorsey, current Seahawks GM John Schneider, former Washington GM Scot McCloughan and McKenzie, who spent nearly seven years as Raiders GM.

There were others, too, such as the No. 3 overall pick in the 1987 NFL draft, Alonzo Highsmith, who joined the Packers in 1999 as a scout. Highsmith ascended in his post-playing career as a trusted personnel advisor and close friend to Wolf. Highsmith was hired in February to join Wolf in New England as a senior personnel executive.

Wolf learned from Thompson how humbleness and introspectiveness could form an ideal combination. And that's how some of Wolf's friends describe him today -- like an "old soul" with one unique twist: He loves reggae music.

Of course, Wolf watched every move his father -- a Pro Football Hall of Fame inductee in 2015 -- made with curiosity. He has fond memories of attending the NFL's annual combine in Indianapolis with him, where Ron would always sit at the start of the 40-yard dash alongside legendary coach Bill Parcells and late Raiders owner Al Davis.

It's hard to get a better education in football than that.

Wolf eventually enrolled at the University of Miami, where he studied English with a focus on creative writing. He volunteered for the Hurricanes' football team in recruiting and stayed involved with the Packers upon his return home during breaks.

"As he ascended to more of an actual full-time role -- first in summers when he was at college, then after college -- I noticed that he was such a respected member of the staff at such a young age," Brandt said.

Wolf's first official job with the Packers came as a pro personnel assistant (2004-2008). Mike Sherman was the Packers' head coach/general manager at the beginning of Wolf's tenure and he noted how Wolf grew up on the job -- literally.

"His dad ran the draft room previous to me doing it, and he was always right there by his side. He was quiet back then," said Sherman, who first met Wolf in 1997 while serving as a Packers assistant coach. "He's grown up a lot since then and he was someone you would seek his opinion on things, which I always did."

Wolf kept moving up -- to assistant director of pro personnel (2008-2011), assistant director of player personnel (2011-2012), director of pro personnel (2015-2016) and director of football operations (2016-2017) -- before the Packers hired his colleague Brian Gutekunst as general manager in 2018.

Wolf had also interviewed for the GM job, among other openings around the NFL, at a time he and his wife Regan were starting a family that now includes daughters Daisy, Liza and Sylvia.

Wolf departed the Packers' organization after 14 years in an official capacity. He'd work the next two years as the Browns' assistant GM under Dorsey before joining the Patriots as a consultant in 2020-2021 -- fulfilling a variety of personnel-based responsibilities for Belichick -- and then being awarded the director of scouting title starting in 2022.

"My time in Green Bay meant everything," Wolf said at this year's NFL combine, the lone time he's answered questions from reporters since assuming his elevated role. "It's where I learned my foundation of scouting, leadership, how to treat people, how to deal with people. Really, just everything in terms of the business of football.

"It's prepared me for this moment to help the New England Patriots get back to where we need to go."

GETTING THE PATRIOTS where they need to go starts with a decision on who to draft with No. 3 pick, with most expecting it to be a quarterback.

This will be Wolf's most significant decision since taking over leadership of the personnel department, and comes after an uneventful offseason in which the team has mostly re-signed its own free agents while taking an unsuccessful big swing for receiver Calvin Ridley (who signed with Tennessee).

On March 21, the day Wolf celebrated his 42nd birthday, he traveled with first-time head coach Jerod Mayo to the University of Michigan to watch quarterback J.J. McCarthy, among others, at the school's pro day. Wolf also attended pro days for USC quarterback Caleb Williams, LSU's Jayden Daniels and UNC's Drake Maye.

The Patriots had as many as nine staffers at pro days for Daniels and Maye, a reflection of how the organization has studied top quarterbacks extensively, which included bringing Maye and Daniels to the team facility over the past few days.

The Patriots' ideal scenario is by April 25 -- the draft's opening night -- they'll have conviction about one of the quarterbacks available to them. Mayo recently said they haven't reached that point yet.

If they don't reach that point, the team is open to other options, such as trading down.

Either way, Mayo said the presence of veteran quarterback Jacoby Brissett, who signed a one-year, \$8 million deal in free agency, provides them an ideal scenario in which Brissett can start while also possibly helping mentor a rookie.

Regardless of who that No. 3 pick will become, Wolf has a philosophy to stick with on draft day and beyond.

"Trust what you see and believe in it," Wolf said. "But also really lessons about people. I still believe, and this is great to be able to work with Jerod -- who also believes it -- this is a 'people' business. It's about developing people."

Mayo has already seen how Wolf, who friends describe as "loyal and a good listener," has put that philosophy into action as they take initial steps to establish a new culture.

"His steadiness. Eliot has a great attitude and mentality to not only picking players, but also the staff. He was very influential in putting together the coaching staff as well," Mayo said. "I've been watching him from afar for a couple years now, and it's just jelled nicely. He brings a fresh perspective."

Wolf changed the team's grading system, which he described as a transition from role-based to value-based. Wolf said it starts with a ranking of "this guy's the best, this guy is the worst, and everything in between falls into place," which is different from the prior system based on "more nuanced approaches."

His hope is that it makes it easier for scouts to rate prospects accordingly and help determine where players will get drafted. He also shared his belief in the "Packer Way" -- which will prioritize drafting, developing and re-signing players, and also "honesty, respect and treating people the right way."

Those are tenets he learned from his father, who is now 85, and had relied on them to help turn the Packers around in the 1990s -- which included a Super Bowl championship (over the Patriots) in the 1996 season.

At some point in the future, Mayo said the Patriots hope to have Ron Wolf visit Gillette Stadium; he's invited to stay as long as he'd like -- the hope that his presence would reinforce a culture of developing those within it.

Perhaps that visit will come during the NFL draft, when his son's passion for football was first hatched by pulling cards off the Packers' draft board as a teenager in the 1990s.

"Eliot has been doing this for so long, back when he was a kid. He was in every single draft," Sherman said. "So he's been surrounded by this his whole life and I think he's benefited from it quite handsomely."

Or, as McKenzie put it simply: "He was always built for this."

The Athletic

Jerod Mayo, Eliot Wolf and a new Patriot way in the post-Bill Belichick era

By Jeff Howe

FOXBORO, Mass. — For the first time in a quarter century, there's a fresh vision in Foxboro. Jerod Mayo and Eliot Wolf are teaming up to launch the New England Patriots into the post-Bill Belichick era.

In some ways, the members of the new brain trust have been preparing for this opportunity their whole careers. With Mayo as head coach and Wolf the newly appointed executive vice president of player personnel, the Patriots have entrusted a pair of respected leaders to guide them through what they hope to be a short rebuild and quick return to prominence.

Aiding that cause is the relationship they have already forged. Mayo and Wolf have worked together in different capacities for four years, and that familiarity has led to a smooth transition. While it's undoubtedly a challenge to take the reins from a legend, Mayo and Wolf have long been viewed by their peers around the NFL as rising stars who have earned the right to lead their own organization.

"To actually see it come together is pretty cool," Wolf told The Athletic. "We're on the same page. (But) we're in the honeymoon phase. We haven't lost a game yet. We haven't faced a ton of adversity or any adversity, you could argue. I'm excited to bridge those things with him as they come."

Mayo and Wolf know how they want this new era to look. They've both interviewed for other top jobs and have had plenty of time to hone their visions for a successful franchise. They've already started putting their own spins on the operation.

They haven't made changes just for the sake of making changes. They've left a tangible, unique imprint at the facility with the belief that it will foster better fortune after a 4-13 season, the franchise's worst since 1992.

"We see a lot of things the same way," Mayo told The Athletic. "Even before he was named to his role and the same thing with me, we always had conversations about football, roster development and structure. We're pretty much on the same page on how to build a team and what we're actually looking for."

"We've had a good relationship here for the last few years, and it's good to have a person who has come from outside the organization to help me think about things differently."

'It takes you through the journey'

Among the 38-year-old Mayo's top priorities after being named Belichick's successor was to empower his players and restructure the leadership dynamic to ensure their messages reach everyone in the locker room. Mayo, a seven-time captain during his eight-year playing career, remembered how difficult it became to relate to his younger teammates as he grew up and settled down with his family. To combat that, he's appointed leaders among players who are at various stages of their careers to encourage a diversity of thought across the locker room.

Last Wednesday, Mayo met with those leaders to discuss their unified vision. He expected everyone to communicate what type of culture they want to set as a team. By doing it now, at essentially the calmest point of the offseason program, Mayo hopes they can recall this vision when, inevitably, the waters get choppy during the season.

"I'm a huge believer in having a shared vision where the players have stock, the players do take accountability," Mayo said. "So when things do get bumpy — and they will get bumpy — they understand they were part of the vision when everything was good. Right now, we're 0-0. Everyone is happy, running around, and the vibe of the building is different. But that doesn't mean anything if we don't go out there and execute and perform and win games and continue to change the narrative and culture here."

Mayo isn't trying to be different than his predecessor. He is different. Yes, he played and coached for Bill Belichick, but he can't be Bill Belichick. And he believes his authenticity will carry significant weight with the players.

The changes around the building are Mayo-made. He hired an artist to paint an expansive mural throughout a long hallway between the coaching offices and locker room. The mural shows a football player at different stages of his life — the evolution from a kid, on the left side of the wall, to a professional, on the right side. "It takes you through the journey," Mayo said.

The message he hopes to get across is to always play for that kid who made every imaginable sacrifice to reach the NFL. They were all at that point, and Mayo wants them to do right by their younger selves and their families.

"Really going back and reflecting on the journey to get you here, (that) will help you and the guys to establish their why," Mayo said. "I think their why is very important, especially on those 100-degree days when I'm tired, my body hurts and all that stuff. And it's embracing the suck. It sucks to be out here, but you have to embrace that and be able to push through."

Mayo also has changed the vibe around the building. There's a basketball hoop in the locker room, and some coaches even have one in their meeting rooms for an added dose of competition. The cafeteria has turned into a spot where all these new faces are encouraged to hang out and get to know each other better.

Mayo has a new philosophy on meetings, too. Gone are the marathon sessions. Now, the Patriots conduct 25-minute mental sprints before taking five-minute breaks. It's a way to heighten the pace while giving the coaches and players a quick chance to relax before getting back after it.

Noticeably, Mayo has pared down the memorabilia from Super Bowls past. The purpose is twofold. First, to signify that this is a completely different team. Second, while it's important to see the results of the franchise's past seasons, it's more valuable to recognize and prioritize the process of achieving those results.

These ideologies translate on a smaller scale, too. In meetings, Mayo wants to teach his players how to think, not what to think. It's comparable to his five-year stint as one of Belichick's chief defensive assistants, when Mayo empowered his players to be like stakeholders on the field. So long as they played within the system, they were encouraged to play, adjust and adapt as they saw fit throughout each game.

"I think you have to empower them to make decisions because once they cross the white lines, there's nothing I can do for them," Mayo said. "That's a little different than what most people think where they want to put these tight

guardrails on everything. But those guys are on the field. As a coach, we're trying to put them in the best position. At the same time, they need to have the flexibility and the tools to go out there to perform their duty. I always try to include them as much as I can."

Mayo, the 10th pick in the 2008 draft, was a second-year captain and a bridge between the Patriots' two generations of Super Bowl champions. He learned from Tedy Bruschi and mentored Dont'a Hightower, and there was no question throughout Mayo's career that he'd eventually get into coaching.

He retired after 2015 and spent three years in the business field to challenge himself in new ways before joining Belichick's staff in 2019. As more teams requested Mayo for coaching interviews, word quickly spread around the league: The smart, charismatic and relatable former linebacker was destined for a top job once he tallied enough experience.

Mayo's diverse background has shaped his vision for this role. He was always preparing himself to be ready when this opportunity arose.

When he returned to coach, Mayo gave himself a timeline of five years to become an NFL head coach. He made it happen. He hasn't set a timeline for turning around the Patriots, but he believes he's going to make that happen, too.

'I just went to work'

The son of Ron Wolf, the longtime NFL executive best known for his decade as general manager in Green Bay, Eliot Wolf has vivid memories of being pressed by legendary head coach Bill Parcells on hypothetical personnel decisions as a middle schooler. At his fifth-grade graduation, Wolf wrote that he wanted to be an NFL scout when he grew up.

He joined the Packers' personnel department out of college in 2004, three years after his father's retirement, and spent 14 seasons in Green Bay, soaking up knowledge from some of the best to ever do it. His father taught him to treat people the right way, to always be honest and to stay true to his scouting evaluations: Write what you see.

Longtime player and executive Reggie McKenzie taught him how to write detailed scouting reports and which traits to zero in on during the process. Ted Thompson taught Wolf to ignore the hype about draft prospects — if you don't like a player after thorough research, don't worry if he's getting hyped as a top-five pick.

With executives like John Schneider, John Dorsey and Alonzo Highsmith and coaches such as Mike Holmgren and Mike McCarthy, Wolf worked around an array of respected leaders — and winners — with the Packers.

"As I got into it and took on bigger roles in Green Bay, it was kind of like, I can do this one day," Wolf said about running a front office. "I felt like I was definitely prepared and ready for it."

Wolf worked as Dorsey's assistant general manager with the Cleveland Browns (2018-19) before joining the Patriots in 2020. He bounced between pro and college scouting to balance out the department head's area of expertise, from Nick Caserio to Dave Ziegler and Matt Groh. He became more entrusted with contract negotiations as he grew in New England, all while having direct access to Belichick. In 2023, Wolf attended more college games and evaluated each of the top quarterback prospects in person, which proved fruitful on draft night as the team selected Drake Maye with the third pick.

When the Patriots replaced Belichick with Mayo in January, it sent a clear message to the rest of the league that Wolf's promotion was imminent. Wolf had established a strong reputation both inside Gillette Stadium and around the NFL, and there was symmetry with Mayo.

Right away, Wolf overhauled their scouting system. The new grading scale wasn't deemed an overly big deal, but the collaboration with the scouts and their empowerment to have a voice through the draft has already drawn favorable reviews. There's a strong belief that process can take off over the next year.

"We just started it in January," Wolf said. "As we go through a whole cycle with this process, I'm excited to see where we can get to."

Wolf was officially promoted May 11, so he had four months on an interim basis to prove his worth. He immediately met with Mayo to understand his head coach's vision for the team, identified their priorities in free agency and retained in-house talent like right tackle Mike Onwenu, safety Kyle Dugger, tight end Hunter Henry and edge rusher Josh Uche. They assembled a staff with diverse backgrounds and established a plan at quarterback that centered around Maye after discussing numerous permutations in free agency and the draft.

"I just went to work," Wolf said. "I just put my head down, took it and ran with it the way I would have done if I had been given the job at that time. ... Just putting pieces together and making sure every move we make is getting us in the right direction."

The Patriots didn't necessarily make any significant outside splash additions, but each move had a purpose. Wolf was determined to reward those players who had earned it, setting a standard for the future and something for younger players to aspire to.

But he knows the bigger challenge lies ahead. Wolf must keep finding players worthy of being rewarded, who will become the foundation of a new Patriots era.

'We haven't done anything'

Mayo and Wolf have spearheaded a new slogan: "Process. Progress. Payoff."

They've enacted their process. They're starting to see progress. Time will tell when they'll identify a tangible payoff.

"I'm not strapping it to a time frame," Wolf said. "That can be dangerous. A lot of it is just going to depend on how everything fits together and everyone meshes."

Mayo and Wolf are in constant communication at the building, and they've been jumping on the phone together each Sunday to set the table for each week, whether it was to discuss center David Andrews' impending contract extension or the need to respectfully release a player before he starts his morning workout. The conversations could be important or subtle, but they're emblematic of a pair who genuinely enjoy talking football.

However, while the coaching staff and front office are aligned in their purpose, they encourage pushback from every direction whenever it's warranted. They don't want an echo chamber.

Their most important objective will be to develop Mayo at an appropriate pace. Mayo and his staff share a uniform belief that Mayo should have every resource available to be set up for success, in the building and on the field.

Beyond the quarterback, there's a much bigger objective at stake. The Patriots have gone backward in the win column each of the past two seasons, and that's an objective indication of where the team sits as it prepares for 2024.

Everything looks and sounds great at the moment, but that doesn't mean Mayo and Wolf are in denial about the work ahead.

"We haven't done anything," Wolf said. "We haven't won a game. We haven't lost a game. We'll see how that vibe is after different points in the season."

They'll measure success in waves. New regimes are rarely beholden to standings-based results in their first year. Rather, will owner Robert Kraft be more or less optimistic about the future of his organization a year from now?

And as the Patriots take the field with a new identity, how can they continue to address the roster in a way that will be conducive to better results in the future?

Like the young players on the newly painted mural inside the football offices at Gillette Stadium, Mayo and Wolf spent years dreaming of these opportunities and working to achieve them. They've embraced the early challenges and prepared for the adversity still to come.

Head Coach Jerod Mayo

The Boston Globe

The grooming of an NFL head coach: Why Jerod Mayo was destined for this position

By Nicole Yang

When longtime Patriots linebacker Jerod Mayo decided to retire from football, he already had a job opportunity to join Bill Belichick's staff.

The immediacy of the offer came as no surprise to those inside the organization. Belichick, who coached Mayo for eight seasons after drafting him with the 10th overall pick in 2008, had become increasingly fond of his approach. Linebacker Dont'a Hightower said Mayo, then a week away from his 30th birthday, was more than equipped to serve as New England's defensive coordinator.

But Mayo declined.

"I needed a break," he said. "I wanted to learn something outside of football."

Mayo chose to work for Optum, a health-care services provider with offices in Boston. He served as an "executive in residence," bouncing around the company for a year before becoming a vice president of business development.

"I enjoyed it," Mayo said. "I loved going out and learning about health care. I joined the board at Boston Medical Center just to get fully immersed in something I didn't know. Health care is difficult. Football is a lot easier than health care, I'll tell you that."

Mayo had a feeling he would eventually return to the sport, though.

Three years later, Belichick called and again offered a job, this time even enlisting Mayo's wife, Chantel, to bolster his push. The plan was for Mayo to help fill the void created first by Brian Flores, who had accepted a head coaching position in Miami, and then by Greg Schiano, who had agreed to join Belichick's staff before backing out a month later.

The transition happened faster than anybody, including ownership, expected. Last year's dreadful 4-13 season expedited the timeline, pushing Belichick out. The team announced the change to Mayo over the course of two days in early January.

Mayo's promotion may have seemed sudden to some. He's a first-time head coach with no official coordinator experience. To those who have watched him grow, however, this opportunity to serve as the 15th coach in Patriots history has been years in the making.

From helping refresh fixer-uppers at the behest of his military grandfather, to matching wits with Tom Brady, to schmoozing with financial bigwigs, Mayo's path has proven to many he's ready for his biggest step yet.

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Mayo-Hinds, who worked as a civil servant at Langley Air Force Base in Hampton, Va., knew the best way to keep her sons out of trouble was to fill their schedules. She signed them up for recreational football, basketball, and soccer. She kept them involved in the youth group and choir at Zion Prospect Baptist Church, where her father, Walter Johnson, is still a pastor.

"I was very determined to make sure that my sons would go against the statistic that is often advertised for 1. single-parent homes and 2. African-American homes," Mayo-Hinds said. "It's easy for boys to get caught up in the 'wrong' environment."

"I was a working mom. There was definitely opportunity for bad decision-making and the consequences that come with that. I was trying to be that mama bear to keep them focused."

The presence of Johnson, a retired Air Force chief master sergeant, helped, too.

After working in the military for three decades, Johnson began renovating local rental properties. Whenever he needed assistance with a house, he knew exactly where to turn: his grandsons. Jerod Mayo was just 7 years old when he and his brothers started undertaking home improvement tasks, such as landscaping, painting, and installing drywall.

"I remember my grandfather making us, you know, jump in trash cans to push the trash down," Mayo said. "He would wake us up at 5 o'clock in the morning. As a 12-, 13-year-old boy, no one wants to wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning to go paint houses and things like that. At the time, it was crazy. Man, it was torture."

"But when I look back on those things — and I look back on those things often — I really appreciate all the lessons bestowed upon us."

The Mayo brothers learned first-hand the power of structure, of discipline. As they spent time with their grandfather and watched their mother go to work every day, they recognized the importance of commitment and accountability, too.

"My mom, she played all the roles," Shermont said. "Watching my mom navigate single parenthood, before she married my stepdad, it gave us a perspective of how a lot of people come up with excuses on why they can't do stuff. She didn't let that become an excuse for us, you know, raising us as a lazy parent."

At the end of most days, after the brothers returned home and devoured dinner, Mayo-Hinds organized an educational activity for them. Sometimes she'd make flash cards; other times, she'd pop in a VHS tape. When the weather was warm, she'd take them to a beach along Chesapeake Bay or to the local park. And every night, no matter what, nobody went to bed before they enjoyed a final snack together as a family.

"My mom is the glue," Shermont said. "She was very instrumental in making us men before we became men. She was going to make us develop that family time. Spend time with each other and love each other. We were always uplifting of each other."

As the boys grew older and advanced through high school, the chaos subsided. Mayo-Hinds married her husband, Wilson, whom she met at church. The family eventually moved into a more spacious, two-story home on a cul-de-sac. (Jerod's voice could still wake up the family when he crooned James Brown's "It's A Man's Man's Man's World" or Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" in the morning.)

Even after moving out, the Mayo brothers would carry with them the guiding principles instilled by their mother and grandfather.

"When I think about them during their developmental years, during that time, you didn't have a lot of young, African-American positive role models out there," Mayo-Hinds said. "We definitely had some humble beginnings in our life. What I didn't want any of my children to do was to have a narrow view on life and also their destiny."

Superior football IQ

As one of the few ninth-graders to earn a spot on the varsity football team at Kecoughtan High School, Mayo quickly separated himself from his peers with his elite football IQ. He showed why parents used to call him "a little LT" at the youth level, playing with an unmatched level of physicality and aggressiveness. But his processing ability impressed his coaches more.

"He didn't just understand what his role was and where he was supposed to be," recalled Tommy Austin, Kecoughtan's head coach at the time. "When he was out there, he knew everybody's job on offense and defense. He watched so much film."

Mayo had a nose for the ball. He could blitz and attack the quarterback. He could drop back in zone coverage. He could disrupt the backfield. Certain plays showcased his athleticism and versatility. Most, however, required his exceptional football awareness.

Mayo's study habits, in the words of Kecoughtan's linebackers coach Cory Thomas, "took him to a place where a lot of kids wouldn't go."

He could detect which substitutions signaled which plays, which formations correlated with which tendencies, which plays occurred most on which down and distances. He always kept a close eye on the offensive linemen, sniffing out information based on their alignment. More often than not, Mayo correctly predicted — and barked out — the opponent's call.

The coaches viewed Mayo as their conduit to the players. He served as the high school equivalent of the NFL player wearing the green dot. After the coaches called a play, Mayo would be the one tapping his teammates to tell them to adjust their positioning.

Mayo became the master of what Austin called "if/thens": If the opposing team did X, then Kecoughtan would do Y. Not only could Mayo diagnose play calls on the field, he also would raise questions during film sessions, asking, "What are we going to do if they do this?"

"He understood that if he had not seen something on film, and they did it in a game, chances were they were trying to go against a tendency they had shown on film," Austin said. "So even if he hadn't seen something on film, he always had an idea of what to do."

By the time Mayo was a senior, his impact was undeniable. Austin remembers one game in which an All-State running back on an opposing team logged more carries with negative yardage than positive yardage — almost entirely because of Mayo. After another game, an opposing coach came over to Kecoughtan's sideline and told Thomas, "That linebacker you got there, he was hollering all our plays like he was in the huddle!"

"That pre-snap read, the ability to know that something is coming, he's always had that," Thomas said. "He's a student of the game. His ability to know, 'This is coming. This is what they're trying to do.' "

Mayo continued to demonstrate his strong command of defense after he left for college, playing three seasons at Tennessee (with a redshirt year), and when he reached the pro level.

"You could do a lot of different things from a scheme standpoint because Jerod could get everybody on the same page and make all of the necessary tweaks to it," said Brendan Daly, who served on Belichick's staff when Mayo was playing.

Toward the end of his NFL playing career, Mayo regularly went toe-to-toe with Brady during walkthroughs before practice. Both had the same goal: Outsmart the other.

"It was mesmerizing," Daly recalled. "It would be the two of them messing with each other. Tom would make a protection call. Jerod would flip the alignments of people to try to screw with him. It was a cat-and-mouse game that was very entertaining.

"They had both been there for so long and knew the system so well. Tom would make a check, and then Jerod would make a check. Tom would try to re-check — and it honestly became distracting at times, but it was fun to watch such high-level operators working off each other."

Ability to connect

Injuries derailed Mayo at the end of his playing career, as a torn pectoral muscle in 2013 and torn patellar tendon in 2014 prematurely ended his season both years. In 2015, his final season before retirement, Mayo saw significantly less playing time while Hightower and Jamie Collins starred in bigger roles at linebacker.

Still, Mayo remained actively engaged with the team. He often grabbed Hightower and Collins walking off the practice field, for the same reasons he would take time to demonstrate concepts for his high school teammates. Mayo wanted to do whatever he could to aid their development.

"There are certain players when they get injured, you would prefer to have them with the team and on the sidelines on game day," Daly said. "He was one of those guys. You wanted him around more than you wanted him away. He just had such a presence."

As a multiyear captain in high school, college, and the NFL, Mayo exemplified traits that prompted people, at all levels, to believe he could coach one day.

"He had that knack of knowing how to teach things," Thomas said. "He was teaching when he was playing."

"He's a natural leader," added Daly. "He has great people skills. He had a very unique ability to connect to, as a player, all the different guys in the locker room. That trait hasn't left him. There's an 'it' factor. Tom had that characteristic in the locker room, as well."

For Mayo, cultivating relationships is at the core of his approach to coaching. He and Austin used to say, "Players don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Even before the Patriots promoted Mayo, that became clear in his approach.

Linebacker Mack Wilson still remembers how Mayo invited him, his now-fiancée, and his son out to dinner after he arrived in New England in 2022 — and they ended up talking more about his family than football. Matthew Judon referred to Mayo as not only "a coach of football" but also "a coach of men."

Building relationships, both inside and outside his typical domain, seemed effortless for Mayo. When he spotted Seth Klarman, a billionaire investor and founder of the Baupost Group, at a horse race at Saratoga, Mayo didn't hesitate to introduce himself. When Gautam Mukunda, a former research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School, invited him to dinner with a group of high achievers from different fields, Mayo chatted with William Forsythe, a former dancer and ballet choreographer best known for his work in Frankfurt, Germany.

"Regardless of who we're with, he can talk to anybody about anything," said former Patriots safety Devin McCourty, Mayo's friend and former teammate. "Sports, finances, politics, whatever it is, he's always had that about him."

That ability, along with his leadership style and playing experience, is among the main reasons players universally endorsed Mayo's recent promotion.

"I'm not just a football coach," Mayo said. "I'm a huge believer in just developing people. You can develop people in your own home. You can develop people in business. You can develop people on the football field. You can develop people anywhere. That's what I feel like my calling is."

Renewed hope

When the Patriots officially introduced Mayo as their new head coach Jan. 17, the day served as a chance to reflect on just how far he has come. His mother, stepfather, grandparents, three brothers, wife, and four children all sat in the first rows inside the G-P Atrium at Gillette Stadium.

"You look at how many people make it to the NFL," Shermont said. "You realize that's an awesome achievement. Then, you look at how few people actually make it to coaching. There's only 32 coaches. How many families really get to experience that moment?"

After Mayo finished his responsibilities that day, he spent the evening celebrating with his family at Toro, a tapas restaurant in the South End. But everybody understood the festivities would be short-lived.

"We set our goals," Shermont said. "Once we achieve that goal, we live in that moment for a little bit, and then it's like, 'All right, what's next?' You don't want to get complacent in celebrating what you've already done because it's done."

Mayo has plenty of work ahead, as the Patriots try to readjust the trajectory of the franchise. There's no shortage of hope, though, that he's the right choice for the future.

"I think we can get back to where we need to be," Mayo said. "At the top."

The Athletic

Jerod Mayo, Eliot Wolf and a new Patriot way in the post-Bill Belichick era

By Jeff Howe

FOXBORO, Mass. — For the first time in a quarter century, there's a fresh vision in Foxboro. Jerod Mayo and Eliot Wolf are teaming up to launch the New England Patriots into the post-Bill Belichick era.

In some ways, the members of the new brain trust have been preparing for this opportunity their whole careers. With Mayo as head coach and Wolf the newly appointed executive vice president of player personnel, the Patriots have entrusted a pair of respected leaders to guide them through what they hope to be a short rebuild and quick return to prominence.

Aiding that cause is the relationship they have already forged. Mayo and Wolf have worked together in different capacities for four years, and that familiarity has led to a smooth transition. While it's undoubtedly a challenge to take the reins from a legend, Mayo and Wolf have long been viewed by their peers around the NFL as rising stars who have earned the right to lead their own organization.

"To actually see it come together is pretty cool," Wolf told The Athletic. "We're on the same page. (But) we're in the honeymoon phase. We haven't lost a game yet. We haven't faced a ton of adversity or any adversity, you could argue. I'm excited to bridge those things with him as they come."

Mayo and Wolf know how they want this new era to look. They've both interviewed for other top jobs and have had plenty of time to hone their visions for a successful franchise. They've already started putting their own spins on the operation.

They haven't made changes just for the sake of making changes. They've left a tangible, unique imprint at the facility with the belief that it will foster better fortune after a 4-13 season, the franchise's worst since 1992.

"We see a lot of things the same way," Mayo told The Athletic. "Even before he was named to his role and the same thing with me, we always had conversations about football, roster development and structure. We're pretty much on the same page on how to build a team and what we're actually looking for."

"We've had a good relationship here for the last few years, and it's good to have a person who has come from outside the organization to help me think about things differently."

'It takes you through the journey'

Among the 38-year-old Mayo's top priorities after being named Belichick's successor was to empower his players and restructure the leadership dynamic to ensure their messages reach everyone in the locker room. Mayo, a seven-time captain during his eight-year playing career, remembered how difficult it became to relate to his younger teammates as he grew up and settled down with his family. To combat that, he's appointed leaders among players who are at various stages of their careers to encourage a diversity of thought across the locker room.

Last Wednesday, Mayo met with those leaders to discuss their unified vision. He expected everyone to communicate what type of culture they want to set as a team. By doing it now, at essentially the calmest point of the offseason program, Mayo hopes they can recall this vision when, inevitably, the waters get choppy during the season.

"I'm a huge believer in having a shared vision where the players have stock, the players do take accountability," Mayo said. "So when things do get bumpy — and they will get bumpy — they understand they were part of the vision when everything was good. Right now, we're 0-0. Everyone is happy, running around, and the vibe of the building is different. But that doesn't mean anything if we don't go out there and execute and perform and win games and continue to change the narrative and culture here."

Mayo isn't trying to be different than his predecessor. He is different. Yes, he played and coached for Bill Belichick, but he can't be Bill Belichick. And he believes his authenticity will carry significant weight with the players.

The changes around the building are Mayo-made. He hired an artist to paint an expansive mural throughout a long hallway between the coaching offices and locker room. The mural shows a football player at different stages of his life

— the evolution from a kid, on the left side of the wall, to a professional, on the right side. “It takes you through the journey,” Mayo said.

The message he hopes to get across is to always play for that kid who made every imaginable sacrifice to reach the NFL. They were all at that point, and Mayo wants them to do right by their younger selves and their families.

“Really going back and reflecting on the journey to get you here, (that) will help you and the guys to establish their why,” Mayo said. “I think their why is very important, especially on those 100-degree days when I’m tired, my body hurts and all that stuff. And it’s embracing the suck. It sucks to be out here, but you have to embrace that and be able to push through.”

Mayo also has changed the vibe around the building. There’s a basketball hoop in the locker room, and some coaches even have one in their meeting rooms for an added dose of competition. The cafeteria has turned into a spot where all these new faces are encouraged to hang out and get to know each other better.

Mayo has a new philosophy on meetings, too. Gone are the marathon sessions. Now, the Patriots conduct 25-minute mental sprints before taking five-minute breaks. It’s a way to heighten the pace while giving the coaches and players a quick chance to relax before getting back after it.

Noticeably, Mayo has pared down the memorabilia from Super Bowls past. The purpose is twofold. First, to signify that this is a completely different team. Second, while it’s important to see the results of the franchise’s past seasons, it’s more valuable to recognize and prioritize the process of achieving those results.

These ideologies translate on a smaller scale, too. In meetings, Mayo wants to teach his players how to think, not what to think. It’s comparable to his five-year stint as one of Belichick’s chief defensive assistants, when Mayo empowered his players to be like stakeholders on the field. So long as they played within the system, they were encouraged to play, adjust and adapt as they saw fit throughout each game.

“I think you have to empower them to make decisions because once they cross the white lines, there’s nothing I can do for them,” Mayo said. “That’s a little different than what most people think where they want to put these tight guardrails on everything. But those guys are on the field. As a coach, we’re trying to put them in the best position. At the same time, they need to have the flexibility and the tools to go out there to perform their duty. I always try to include them as much as I can.”

Mayo, the 10th pick in the 2008 draft, was a second-year captain and a bridge between the Patriots’ two generations of Super Bowl champions. He learned from Tedy Bruschi and mentored Dont’a Hightower, and there was no question throughout Mayo’s career that he’d eventually get into coaching.

He retired after 2015 and spent three years in the business field to challenge himself in new ways before joining Belichick’s staff in 2019. As more teams requested Mayo for coaching interviews, word quickly spread around the league: The smart, charismatic and relatable former linebacker was destined for a top job once he tallied enough experience.

Mayo’s diverse background has shaped his vision for this role. He was always preparing himself to be ready when this opportunity arose.

When he returned to coach, Mayo gave himself a timeline of five years to become an NFL head coach. He made it happen. He hasn’t set a timeline for turning around the Patriots, but he believes he’s going to make that happen, too.

‘I just went to work’

The son of Ron Wolf, the longtime NFL executive best known for his decade as general manager in Green Bay, Eliot Wolf has vivid memories of being pressed by legendary head coach Bill Parcells on hypothetical personnel decisions as a middle schooler. At his fifth-grade graduation, Wolf wrote that he wanted to be an NFL scout when he grew up.

He joined the Packers’ personnel department out of college in 2004, three years after his father’s retirement, and spent 14 seasons in Green Bay, soaking up knowledge from some of the best to ever do it. His father taught him to treat people the right way, to always be honest and to stay true to his scouting evaluations: Write what you see.

Longtime player and executive Reggie McKenzie taught him how to write detailed scouting reports and which traits to zero in on during the process. Ted Thompson taught Wolf to ignore the hype about draft prospects — if you don’t like a player after thorough research, don’t worry if he’s getting hyped as a top-five pick.

With executives like John Schneider, John Dorsey and Alonzo Highsmith and coaches such as Mike Holmgren and Mike McCarthy, Wolf worked around an array of respected leaders — and winners — with the Packers.

“As I got into it and took on bigger roles in Green Bay, it was kind of like, I can do this one day,” Wolf said about running a front office. “I felt like I was definitely prepared and ready for it.”

Wolf worked as Dorsey’s assistant general manager with the Cleveland Browns (2018-19) before joining the Patriots in 2020. He bounced between pro and college scouting to balance out the department head’s area of expertise, from Nick Caserio to Dave Ziegler and Matt Groh. He became more entrusted with contract negotiations as he grew in New England, all while having direct access to Belichick. In 2023, Wolf attended more college games and evaluated each of the top quarterback prospects in person, which proved fruitful on draft night as the team selected Drake Maye with the third pick.

When the Patriots replaced Belichick with Mayo in January, it sent a clear message to the rest of the league that Wolf’s promotion was imminent. Wolf had established a strong reputation both inside Gillette Stadium and around the NFL, and there was symmetry with Mayo.

Right away, Wolf overhauled their scouting system. The new grading scale wasn’t deemed an overly big deal, but the collaboration with the scouts and their empowerment to have a voice through the draft has already drawn favorable reviews. There’s a strong belief that process can take off over the next year.

“We just started it in January,” Wolf said. “As we go through a whole cycle with this process, I’m excited to see where we can get to.”

Wolf was officially promoted May 11, so he had four months on an interim basis to prove his worth. He immediately met with Mayo to understand his head coach’s vision for the team, identified their priorities in free agency and retained in-house talent like right tackle Mike Onwenu, safety Kyle Dugger, tight end Hunter Henry and edge rusher Josh Uche. They assembled a staff with diverse backgrounds and established a plan at quarterback that centered around Maye after discussing numerous permutations in free agency and the draft.

“I just went to work,” Wolf said. “I just put my head down, took it and ran with it the way I would have done if I had been given the job at that time. ... Just putting pieces together and making sure every move we make is getting us in the right direction.”

The Patriots didn’t necessarily make any significant outside splash additions, but each move had a purpose. Wolf was determined to reward those players who had earned it, setting a standard for the future and something for younger players to aspire to.

But he knows the bigger challenge lies ahead. Wolf must keep finding players worthy of being rewarded, who will become the foundation of a new Patriots era.

‘We haven’t done anything’

Mayo and Wolf have spearheaded a new slogan: “Process. Progress. Payoff.”

They’ve enacted their process. They’re starting to see progress. Time will tell when they’ll identify a tangible payoff.

“I’m not strapping it to a time frame,” Wolf said. “That can be dangerous. A lot of it is just going to depend on how everything fits together and everyone meshes.”

Mayo and Wolf are in constant communication at the building, and they’ve been jumping on the phone together each Sunday to set the table for each week, whether it was to discuss center David Andrews’ impending contract extension or the need to respectfully release a player before he starts his morning workout. The conversations could be important or subtle, but they’re emblematic of a pair who genuinely enjoy talking football.

However, while the coaching staff and front office are aligned in their purpose, they encourage pushback from every direction whenever it’s warranted. They don’t want an echo chamber.

Their most important objective will be to develop Maye at an appropriate pace. Mayo and his staff share a uniform belief that Maye should have every resource available to be set up for success, in the building and on the field.

Beyond the quarterback, there's a much bigger objective at stake. The Patriots have gone backward in the win column each of the past two seasons, and that's an objective indication of where the team sits as it prepares for 2024.

Everything looks and sounds great at the moment, but that doesn't mean Mayo and Wolf are in denial about the work ahead.

"We haven't done anything," Wolf said. "We haven't won a game. We haven't lost a game. We'll see how that vibe is after different points in the season."

They'll measure success in waves. New regimes are rarely beholden to standings-based results in their first year. Rather, will owner Robert Kraft be more or less optimistic about the future of his organization a year from now?

And as the Patriots take the field with a new identity, how can they continue to address the roster in a way that will be conducive to better results in the future?

Like the young players on the newly painted mural inside the football offices at Gillette Stadium, Mayo and Wolf spent years dreaming of these opportunities and working to achieve them. They've embraced the early challenges and prepared for the adversity still to come.

Defensive Coordinator DeMarcus Covington

The Boston Globe

'He was always ahead of the game': DeMarcus Covington was destined to coach. Now he's leading the Patriots defense.

By Christopher Price
March 8, 2024

Carl Covington knew his son had what it took to be a coach when he spotted 12-year-old DeMarcus explaining trick plays to his Little League teammates growing up in Alabama.

"When he was coming up, he was able to comprehend stuff quicker," Carl recalled. "We always had a lot of little trick plays, but he always knew exactly what was going on."

"He would just sort of understand things faster than his teammates. He was always ahead of the game, and knew the ins and outs of everything."

It's that sort of preternatural ability to look at plays and schemes and matchups and advantages that came to distinguish DeMarcus Covington as a player in high school and college, and has continued in his coaching career, one that has taken him from coaching assistant to defensive coordinator in his seventh season with the Patriots.

At 34, Covington is relatively young compared with many of his contemporaries. The opportunity to lead an NFL defense is something he takes very seriously, especially at his age.

"There are only 32 defensive coordinators in the world," Covington said last month when he was promoted. "I don't take that lightly."

"Even when I was a position coach — there are only so many defensive line coaches in the National Football League. There are so many people that are dying to get our jobs. Or want to get our jobs. I don't take that for granted."

The oldest of three children of Carl and Elaine Covington, DeMarcus was a three-sport star at John Carroll Catholic High School in Birmingham, Ala. With help from football teammates such as Riley Barnacastle, Andrew Steele, and others, Covington played on both sides of the ball, as a wide receiver and defensive back.

The stats were impressive, but his ability to dissect plays and provide insight became invaluable to his teammates and coaches.

"There were lots of times I can picture him explaining things to a freshman or a sophomore why the play was structured like it is," recalled Barnacastle.

"Just being around him every day, and seeing the way he treated people and the respect he had for people and administrators, and seeing the respect they had for him, that was really extraordinary," said Steele. "He was someone I looked up to. He just set an example for 'this is the way you go about doing things.'"

"At that time, you don't really know as a kid, but all of those elements lead someone into being a good coach. As you get older, you kind of connect the dots. With DeMarcus, you look back on the way he acted, and you say, 'Oh, it's no surprise he took the road he did.'"

A famous influencer

Heisman Trophy winner Pat Sullivan, a graduate of John Carroll Catholic who would go on to star at Auburn, was a sizable presence in Covington's life. Barnacastle remembers portraits of the high school's three most famous alums hanging at the entrance that students walked past every day: Sullivan, Nobel Prize winner Eric Wieschaus, and Archbishop Joseph Marino.

"Heisman Trophy winners at the same level as Nobel winners," Barnacastle recalled with a grin. "Maybe half the students knew who Wieschaus or Marino were, but everyone could tell you who Pat Sullivan was."

So when Sullivan got the head coaching job at Samford College in Homewood, Ala., Covington — after initially committing to Jacksonville State — followed. He was a member of Sullivan's first recruiting class at Samford in 2007, and ended up catching 62 passes for 586 yards and two touchdowns from 2007-10.

"Pat would always come home talking about DeMarcus and how proud he was of him," said Jean Sullivan, the widow of the former coach and Heisman winner. "Even back then, he said that he believed coaching would be a great fit for DeMarcus."

"Pat always had a close bond with DeMarcus; they were similar in a lot of ways."

In his early years as a coach, Covington hopscotched through the South as an assistant, going from Alabama-Birmingham to Ole Miss to Tennessee-Martin. His first major opportunity came in 2016 when he was named defensive line coach and co-defensive coordinator at Eastern Illinois.

However, when Patriots scouts came to Eastern Illinois that year to take a look at linebacker Kamu Grugier-Hill, Covington made an initial connection. And after leaving EIU a year later to take a position on the staff at Chattanooga, he had another encounter with the Patriots, this time involving Bill Belichick, who came down to work out Keionta Davis.

Belichick eventually called Covington to New England for an interview, and offered him a job as a coaching assistant.

"DeMarcus does a really good job," Belichick said in 2022. "He's coached linebackers, coached defensive line, really understands the entire defense. I'm sure he could coach a lot of positions on defense. Young guy that's really smart, works hard."

"That difference between our interior guys and our outside guys is quite distinct. Pass rush, pass coverage, interior run play, so forth. It's a lot of different techniques to coach. He's very well versed in the fundamentals and schemes. He does a good job. Really glad we have him."

In his early days with the Patriots, Covington made his mark with a tireless approach to film and scouting, all while building personal connections with players.

"He's always had so much respect for Belichick," his father said. "He would call all the time and say, 'Dad, I'm a sponge. I'm just listening to everything.'"

Grateful for the opportunity

When Mayo returned to Foxborough as an assistant coach in 2019, it was Covington who acted as his guide.

"When I first got here, he showed me a lot of the behind-the-scenes," Mayo said. "It was a mentorship — or reverse mentorship, however you want to look at it. I did it on the field, but he also knew how to do the back-end stuff."

Covington ascended relatively quickly, moving from coaching assistant to outside linebackers coach to defensive line coach, a job he held the last four seasons. This past offseason, with so much change in the air, it was easy to see why Covington not only was among the few Patriots coaches who were retained, but was promoted.

The play of the defense, his connection with Mayo, and his impressive body of work the last few years made it an easy decision, according to the head coach.

"He has a great relationship with the players — mind, body, and spirit," Mayo said. "He always talks about those things. You can see from the development of the players in his room, he was ready for the job."

Covington doesn't anticipate making wholesale changes when it comes to scheme or approach. He said last month that he plans on being the primary play caller, and his philosophy is one based on physicality and sound fundamental football.

"I think when you turn on the tape, I think what we want to see is a physical team," he said. "A team that plays with good discipline and fundamentals. A team that attacks the football and takes it away from the opponent."

"That's what we're trying to look for with our defense. And a team that goes out there and plays together, for one another. That type of togetherness."

In the end, he understands that for all his talents as a coach, he wouldn't be the one chosen to lead the New England defense into the post-Belichick Era if he didn't have a lot of assistance.

"I have a lot of people who helped me along the way," he said. "There are people who opened up the door like Coach Sullivan, who gave me the opportunity to coach."

"I know where I started. I know where I'm at now. And I know what I want to be and what I want to do. So when you get put in these positions, you can't help but be grateful and thankful."

Inside Linebackers Coach Dont'a Hightower

The Athletic

For Dont'a Hightower, it was either golf or coach. Patriots' Jerod Mayo made the decision easy

By Jeff Howe

FOXBORO, Mass. — As far back as 2012, Dont'a Hightower thought about the idea of coaching alongside Jerod Mayo.

Back then, they were linebackers with the New England Patriots, and the rookie Hightower was taking the veterans' lunch order before making a sushi run to Skipjacks. Mayo, who always knew coaching was in his future, was picking out his future coordinators with teammates Devin McCourty and Vince Wilfork when Hightower walked up.

"(Mayo) was like, 'You can be my special teams coach,'" Hightower recalled last month in a conversation with The Athletic. "I was like, 'Damn, bro, special teams?' It was all fun and games. Whenever I think about it, that's the first event that pops up. It's really surreal how it's unfolded."

There's usually a hint of truth inside a joke, and that was no doubt the case that day. Mayo and Hightower were two of the smartest and most respected leaders to ever suit up for former Patriots coach Bill Belichick, so it was apparent coaching would be their calling when they finished playing.

Mayo, who joined Belichick's staff in 2019, kept the bug in Hightower's ear as his career was winding down. And in January, when Mayo was chosen to succeed Belichick as coach, he solicited one of his closest friends to lead the inside linebackers group.

It was an easy decision for Hightower, who had been retired for two years.

"It was something I was kind of looking forward to," Hightower said of coaching. "I enjoyed my time off with my family, but I think it was kind of getting to the point where my wife (Morgan) was like, 'You either need to concentrate on golf, or you need to go coach.' I feel like it all happened pretty good and at the right time."

Hightower needed the time away to mentally recharge with his family back at home in Tennessee. Whether it was gardening with his wife or making breakfast with his son, who turns 4 in July, Hightower took advantage of time that wasn't necessarily available during his decorated playing career with the Patriots.

But with every lost Titleist ProV1 golf ball — about four dozen in his first week alone — and every holler at the TV during a game, Hightower knew he was a step closer to the sideline. Morgan Hightower was fully onboard, too, probably because she didn't want to hear any more about the differences between coverage shells, and she knew the itch was there from all the in-game texts he'd send former teammates like Kyle Van Noy to congratulate them for big plays or get on them for missing assignments.

But as Hightower envisioned his future, he just wasn't sure if he wanted to take on a positional role or become an adviser or strength coach. It just so happened that one of his closest confidants came calling. Mayo, a first-time head coach after five years as an assistant, was in elite company on Hightower's short list.

Jerod Mayo, Eliot Wolf and a new Patriot way in the post-Bill Belichick era

"It was really honestly like if (former Alabama coach) Nick (Saban) or Mayo would have called me, those were the only two people I would have wanted to get with," Hightower said. "Other than that, I probably would have just stayed at home and worked on my golf game."

"The transition has been great. Some days you wake up, and it doesn't even feel like work. Sometimes when I was playing football, I was going in and my knees hurt. My shoulders hurt. Surgeries, all this other stuff. Now it's just me talking football, spreading my knowledge, being able to relate to these guys. It's really awesome to be back in the world of football, just to talk about it and be around it."

Hightower, a three-time Super Bowl champion dubbed "Mr. February" by Belichick for his penchant for making huge plays, was a pseudo-coach during his career, but he acknowledged this is much different. Appropriate for someone who grew up under Saban and Belichick, Hightower isn't trying to overcomplicate anything simply because of his past accomplishments.

Rather, the 34-year-old is just trying to teach and lead and find his strengths on a brand new staff.

"Honestly, there are players you play with that you're thinking this guy is just on it," Mayo said. "His knowledge of the scheme, how the offense was trying to attack us and what we needed to do as far as adjustments, he was one of those players."

"He has a chance to be a very special coach. And he has that instant credibility because he did it at a high level."

Mayo referred to Hightower as "a rookie." He's still learning, including how to teach and relay messages to players who have come from different systems in which a new defense is like learning a new language.

There are also more subtle responsibilities. He's never had to write up a scouting report or evaluate someone's job from the perspective of someone who's higher in command. But for de facto general manager Eliot Wolf, who had limited prior exposure to Hightower, the work ethic has come as advertised.

"He was really inquisitive, wanted to sit down and ask a ton of questions to not only me but guys on the staff," Wolf said. "He's got an eye for it, so that obviously made it easier. Really just his presence and his ability, sometimes you run into former players who really just still want to be around it but they don't want to work. That hasn't been the case with him."

Hightower isn't just in this for a quick football fix. He acknowledged he'd like to someday work his way into a position where he could become a head coach, although that's a long time from now.

"I mean," Hightower laughed, "I've been doing this for two months."

'It's terrible': Players, coaches, execs on the NFLPA's proposal to reshape NFL offseason

It really is like starting over. He was a star at Alabama and a first-round draft pick but still faced a tangible learning curve early in his Patriots career, and there have been similar adjustments with this coaching role.

He's leaned heavily on Mayo, just as he did as a player.

"I want to be a good coach, so I want to be a good teacher," Hightower said. "I want to be a guy they're comfortable talking to. I don't want anybody to look at whatever success I had. I'm trying to share what knowledge I have and share it to be used across the board.

"I just want to be able to help develop and empower those guys to continue to be good players, continue to develop and grow as great young men."

Offensive Coordinator Alex Van Pelt

The Boston Globe

Meet coordinator Alex Van Pelt, the man charged with reviving the Patriots offense

By Christopher Price

FOXBOROUGH — You want to get someone to say a bad word about new Patriots offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt? Good luck.

Ask around the NFL, and you'll find that Van Pelt is one of the most well-liked people in the game, someone who has artfully managed the balance between the daily grind of life in the league and finding a way to have a good time.

"If he wasn't in football, he'd be an event coordinator," said college teammate Doug Whaley, the former general manager of the Bills. "He knows how to coordinate get-togethers and parties and stuff like that.

"He's a magnet for people," said Whaley, who is looking forward to connecting with his pal at their annual Fourth of July party. "People get around him, and they have a good time. He's always at the center, in a good way. He's the glue."

Make no mistake, Van Pelt is a worker. In an NFL environment where twentysomething offensive coordinators and thirtysomething head coaches are commonplace, Van Pelt, 54, has mastered the long game. He's been in pro football for almost 30 years as a coach and a player, and without the benefit of serving as a branch on an elite coaching tree, he has crafted an impressive offensive résumé while winning the hearts and minds of just about everyone in the NFL.

"He'll find an interest that you have, and then go down the path with you to gain trust and confidence," Whaley said. "In the end, once enough players believe you're out to make them better, they're going to buy in.

"He has a unique ability to gain that trust, and that, combined with the pelts on the wall when it comes to his résumé and football knowledge, he can get guys on board."

But he also has a lighter side, one he embraces when it comes to his close friends. Van Pelt spent two seasons as a radio analyst with the Bills, building a relationship with play-by-play man John Murphy. After Van Pelt left the booth, he joined the Buffalo coaching staff. Murphy recalled one night a couple of years later when he called Van Pelt after a bad loss to check and see how he was doing.

"I'm OK, other than the fact that I'm out of Crown Royal," Van Pelt replied with a laugh.

Van Pelt's occasionally lighthearted approach, mixed with his ability to quickly forge relationships with players and fellow coaches, has won people over in Foxborough since he took the job Feb. 1.

"He makes you feel comfortable, immediately," Murphy said. "I also think he works hard, but he doesn't care if you know he works hard. I think he really likes to work more than anything. He likes the work, and he's good at it."

However, it still raises the question: Can that approach help bring success to a New England offense that reached anemic lows last season?

His old boss thinks so, saying his personality, work ethic, and background as a player will set the stage for success.

"You're not going to find a better person in this profession," said Browns coach Kevin Stefanski. "AVP is a great friend of mine. I'm excited for him and that opportunity. Former player, has played in a bunch of systems, coached in a bunch of systems. He's collaborative. I think the Patriots got a great one."

From player to coach

Van Pelt was born in Pittsburgh in 1970 and played for Paul Hackett at Pitt. He was the starting quarterback as a freshman, and ended up breaking Dan Marino's records. His mark of 10,913 passing yards stood as a school record until Kenny Pickett, a first-round pick of the Steelers in 2022, broke it with 12,303.

Van Pelt's college teammates noticed his cerebral approach in practice.

"When you're in spring practice, you're going against people you've seen for years, but he would still play us off with a different cadence or a fake check," Whaley said. "This was before Peyton Manning was doing the 'Omaha' thing at the line. Alex was doing that sort of stuff back then in the early 1990s."

An eighth-round pick of the Steelers, Van Pelt was cut as a rookie. He bounced from Pittsburgh to Kansas City to Buffalo, where he eventually became the starter in 2001, throwing for 2,056 yards and 12 touchdowns.

Van Pelt, who ended up playing 11 seasons in the NFL, backed up Drew Bledsoe in his last two years with the Bills (2002-03) before retiring. He took a job as a volunteer assistant at the University of Buffalo, and stepped into the broadcast booth soon after that, working with Murphy.

"He could instantly identify what he was looking at," Murphy said. "He knew what to look for, and was able to diagnose offenses before they got to the line of scrimmage. That was how quick he was."

Van Pelt pivoted to coaching full time, first working with the Bills before stints in Tampa Bay, Green Bay, Cincinnati, and Cleveland. He built a reputation as a sharp offensive mind, but also as someone who engendered loyalty and trust among a wide swath of signal-callers, including Aaron Rodgers and Baker Mayfield.

"The open communication is pretty essential to what has been our success so far," Mayfield said in 2021. "AVP is just like that. He wants to talk through it and hear our thoughts as well."

When he was with the Browns last year, they averaged 23.3 points per game, good for 10th in the league, despite starting five quarterbacks: Deshaun Watson, Joe Flacco, Dorian Thompson-Robinson, P.J. Walker, and Jeff Driskel.

Van Pelt wasn't the primary play-caller, but his ability to craft multiple game plans for a series of quarterbacks that had a wide skill set was undeniable. In all, Cleveland started nine signal-callers in Van Pelt's four seasons there: Mayfield, Case Keenum, Nick Mullens, Jacoby Brissett, Watson, Driskel, Walker, Thompson-Robinson, and Flacco.

"It's about the players, and he understands that," Brissett said.

After the Browns lost to the Texans in the playoffs in January, a "reassignment" was discussed when it came to the coaching staff. Stefanski said it wasn't an easy call when it came to letting Van Pelt go.

"Somebody I love as a person, as a coach," Stefanski said. "We make decisions that are tough sometimes in this league, but that doesn't change how I feel about him."

What can we expect?

The Patriots' hiring of Van Pelt was made official Feb. 1, their fourth offensive coordinator in four years.

"Obviously, he understands the X's and O's of the game, but also developing talent," coach Jerod Mayo said after the move was announced.

"Really, he's a relationship guy, which I fundamentally believe is very important. Before you really get into X's and O's with the guys on the field, they've got to know that you care about them. One thing about AVP, which you guys will see here shortly, he is a people person, but also has an extensive knowledge of football."

As the Patriots' offensive play-caller for 2024, what sort of philosophy will he ultimately embrace? The overall feeling seems to be that he'll use some of the elements of the West Coast offense because of his deep connection with Hackett, but those who know him say it would be a mistake to slap that label on the scheme.

"His roots are really based in the West Coast offense with his time with Paul Hackett," Whaley said. "Then he took some of the stuff that he learned with Mike McCarthy in Green Bay, and then he throws in some of the K Gun offensive philosophies he picked up as a player in Buffalo.

"He's got a nice little mix of things, where he can take the best of all those styles, see how they evolve, and then put it all together moving forward."

As for the rest of it, he has been leaning on the leadership skills that got him to this spot, with a player's eye for the game and a knack for interpersonal relationships that gets guys to buy in. It's an approach that is resonating with all of the Patriots' quarterbacks, including first-round pick Drake Maye.

"He understands it," Maye said. "He played the position and coached a lot of quarterbacks, so he understands it.

"That's the best thing you want to see from a coach. He knows it's going to be a growing side, a mental side to it. So he's understanding, but also, if you're not doing a great job, he's going to tell you. It's been awesome so far."

T Calvin Anderson



The harrowing tale of Patriots player Calvin Anderson's near-fatal bout with malaria

By Christopher Price

Fifty-fifty.

The words rang in Sherée Lanihun-Anderson's ears. Those were the odds the doctors gave her husband, Patriots offensive lineman Calvin Anderson, of survival.

Training camp was set to start in three days. Anderson, who had signed with New England as a free agent in the spring, was supposed to help shore up the offensive tackle position. In 72 hours, he was expected to be on the practice field, going through drills in Foxborough.

Instead, Anderson was laid out in the emergency room at Newton-Wellesley Hospital with a 105-degree fever and 50-50 odds on whether he was going to live or die.

The morning of July 22, 2023 marked the start of a harrowing journey for Anderson, one that began in the days after a trip to Africa and included a hospital stay, a brief return to the field, another scare a few months later that forced him to the sideline, and mental health concerns that stemmed from guilt as he watched the Patriots struggle to a 4-13 finish.

Now, fully cleared for a return and looking stronger than ever, the 6-foot-5-inch, 305-pound Anderson is attempting to do something no player in the history of the NFL has ever done — return from a near-fatal bout with malaria to play a full season at a high level.

"I know that Calvin has had a long road to recovery and I am eager to see him return to the field and compete this year," Patriots coach Jerod Mayo said.

His friends and family joke about the 28-year-old Anderson being the early favorite for Comeback Player of the Year.

"If I were to win Comeback Player of the Year, it would come with a lot of good play ... which is why I'm in the gym getting crazy-big right now," he said with a laugh. "Don't let that get lost, either.

"But if I were to win Comeback Player of the Year, it wouldn't be about me, but about how God brought me back from this."

He also is aware of the debt of gratitude he owes to his wife, Sherée. If she hadn't insisted on a hospital visit that morning, who knows what would have happened?

"I trust her with my life, and in this case, it was a good example of why that's important," Anderson said. "If left to my own devices, I might have decided to not prioritize my health in that moment. As football players, a lot of times we end up prioritizing a lot of things ahead of our health so we can continue to play."

"But this was a case when I had someone in my corner who made a judgment call and had to veto me a little bit there. It ended up saving my life."

Circling back

A heady offensive lineman who went undrafted out of Rice, Anderson made an early claim to fame with an almost eerie proficiency with the Rubik's Cube. He majored in mathematical economic analysis in college, and he can solve the Cube behind his back using a complex mathematical formula.

On the field, Anderson carved out a niche as a smart, versatile, and cost-effective lineman capable of playing in multiple systems. He bounced around at the start of his career, signing with the Patriots as a rookie free agent in 2019. He was quickly poached by the Jets, then added to the Broncos' 53-man roster, playing left and right tackle in Denver for three seasons.

He made his name as a dependable presence who could play on either end of the line, and his snaps grew from 132 in 2020 to 439 in 2022. In 2022, he made seven starts at left tackle for the Broncos, allowed just two sacks, and wasn't flagged for a holding penalty all year.

While playing for the Broncos, he met Sherée Lanihun, and the two connected instantly. Anderson soon laid his cards on the table, explaining that he was an "all-in or all-out type of guy," and they were destined to be together.

"I didn't know someone with so much persistence and conviction existed," Sherée recalled. "I felt relieved. I had never felt like I had found my person. And here he was. My person."

Last spring brought his first real opportunity in free agency, and he was the first external free agent signed by New England. In March, Anderson agreed to a two-year deal, \$7 million with the Patriots, a contract that included a \$1.69 million signing bonus and \$4 million guaranteed.

For an undrafted free agent, it provided a sense of validation. Bill Belichick was showing a level of faith in him that was unprecedented.

Belichick told him it was a shame to lose him the first time, "and I'm hoping we can right the previous wrong this time around."

"Circling back and coming back to the Patriots was exciting, and an interesting moment," said Anderson. "My first experience, acknowledging I was going to be an NFL player, was with the Patriots organization. There was certainly a happy, giddy feeling about that."

"It was not only free agency, and I had a team and I was going back," he said, "but I'm also talking to the man who I consider to be the greatest coach ever, and he was giving me a call back."

At the same time, the contract came with the weight of expectation. He was going to compete for a job at tackle on a team that needed dependable offensive linemen. Anderson was going to have to be available on a consistent basis. Dependability is more important than ability was a favorite Belichickism, one Anderson took to heart.

For a guy who once finished a game with a broken nose, that wasn't going to be an issue.

"You sacrifice a lot to be on the field," Anderson shrugged.

The NFL traditionally takes a break between mid-June and mid-July, a final chance for players and their families to catch their breath before training camp. For Calvin and Sherée, they had one final trip planned, as they had been going to Africa for several years doing philanthropic work in Nigeria, including looking for businesses and families to support.

It was a chance for them to give back on a number of levels and allow Sherée — who is half-Nigerian and half-Dutch — an opportunity to make a difference in her home country.

On the plane coming back in July, Anderson's focus had shifted. Now, the singular thing ahead was football.

But on that first night back in New England, it all went sideways.

A dire diagnosis

Anderson's body temperature spiked wildly in the early-morning hours of July 22. Sherée used Instacart to track down a thermometer. She stuck it in Calvin's mouth, waking him up. After a minute, the temperature popped up: 104.5 degrees.

"I had to double-check it to be sure," she said. "We're not going to play around with this anymore. We're now going to the hospital. He was like, 'No, no. I don't have time for this.' I literally was like, 'No. We're going to the hospital. Now.' I really persisted."

After a call to apprise the Patriots, Sherée put Calvin in the car and they drove from Foxborough to Newton-Wellesley Hospital.

"It was past the point of me getting checked out and thinking it was some sort of flu or whatever," said Anderson. "Everybody knew something else was happening, with the exception maybe of me."

"I had woken up now, and was moving around a bit, and I started to understand that I wasn't functioning normally. When I got there, I almost passed out."

Blood tests and consultations among doctors — including Anderson's father DeVry, a doctor who FaceTimed into the conversation — determined that it was malaria, the result of a mosquito bite in Nigeria.

While there have been cases of soccer players contracting fatal cases of the disease in Europe and Africa, malaria historically has had little impact on the North American sports world. According to an NFL spokesman, there had been no recorded cases of malaria in the history of the league. So there were no specific health and safety protocols to follow.

The Patriots put Anderson on the Non-Football Injury list, a designation for players who suffer an ailment outside the realm of an NFL practice or game.

While there are incidents of malaria being transmitted in ways other than a mosquito bite, those are rare, particularly in the United States, "where it's basically been eradicated," according to Dr. Gabriela M. Andujar Vazquez, an infectious disease specialist affiliated with Tufts.

She said it's important to note that malaria isn't contagious; if Anderson shared a water bottle with his teammates, or spoke with the media, they wouldn't be at risk.

Anderson's condition eventually stabilized, but the hospital stay was harrowing, according to his wife.

"It was scary because at some point, he just lost it," Sherée recalled. "I remember the nurse was in the room, and he randomly stood up and had all these needles and IVs in him, and he just started pulling them out and started pulling off his clothes."

"I had to really sit him down: 'I'm here with you. Let's calm down. Breathe.' And he's like, 'What am I going to do? I don't know how I'm going to fight this.'"

Anderson was released from the hospital after four-plus days, but as his teammates prepared for the 2023 season, he remained on the NFI list. It was a strange and difficult period for him; by his own admission, he did not handle it well.

"There's a difference in how you should deal with it and how I did deal with it," he said. "I was really hard on myself. I think the way I was hard on myself about something I couldn't necessarily control just wasn't really healthy."

Rejoining the team

Sherée, who compares Anderson to a “shining star” because he’s so full of “positive energy,” said he spent days with his hoodie pulled up over his head.

“I told him he became like a dark cloud; he was wearing his hoodie like a dark cloud,” Sherée said. “It was difficult to see him in that way. It was difficult for me to see a different side of him. So yeah, I just wanted to heal him and help him heal.”

Throughout the recovery, Anderson heard from Belichick, who served as a lifeline to the team.

“At the start of camp, as a head coach, you have a hundred million things going on in your mind about the team, the season, etc.,” said Anderson. “I know he had all that going on, so I appreciated that he called me.

“I know my teammates weren’t aware of everything that was going on with me, so I was happy that at least he knew so I could be connected to the team, the guys.”

Anderson continued to study the playbook and work the mental side. When he was cleared medically, he was put back into service shortly before the start of the season.

“It’s good to have Calvin back out there,” Belichick said in the days before the season opener against Philadelphia. “He’s a young player, but he’s experienced enough to where he can handle a lot of things and pick things up quicker than a rookie would, even though he played for another team.

“He’s been able to, I would say, transition pretty well from an assignment standpoint, technique standpoint. We’ll see how it goes.”

Remarkably, without the benefit of a full training camp, he played every snap on offense against the defending NFC champions, as well as a couple on special teams. Coaches and teammates marveled.

“I definitely made sure to let him know how much I appreciated his effort Sunday, because that’s tough,” said David Andrews in the wake of the game. “Obviously, he’s a veteran player, but it’s really hard missing a training camp. You need a training camp. And a new system. So I really appreciated his effort.”

“Test of fortitude,” said offensive line coach Adrian Klemm. “There was a point in the game that he was gasping and he was tired and all that, but he pushed through it.”

Week 2 was a different matter. While he again played 100 percent of the snaps (a team-high 77, with 74 on offense and three on special teams), he was struggling to stay on the field. In his mind, it was the worst performance of his career.

“I know what I’m capable of and what the guys next to me are capable of,” he said. “Me not being at my best just made me feel ... it was hard not to feel like you’re letting guys down.

“I was just fighting to keep myself moving. I really didn’t want to come out of the game at all. I told myself at some point, midway through the first quarter, ‘No matter what, I’m staying in this game,’ as long as I’m not inhibiting the team’s ability to win. It was a different focus.”

The truth was that he didn’t have his legs underneath him, not yet. Robbed of the conditioning that comes with training camp, he was rusty.

In the next three games, the Patriots did some shuffling, moving Mike Onwenu from guard to tackle and leaning on a variety of options at the other tackle spot. Anderson transitioned to a reserve role, playing fewer than 10 snaps a game over the next three weeks.

The hope was that he could continue to build some cardio and work his way back into the starting lineup. To that end, it appeared he would be good to go the first week of November against Washington.

A complication and a mental strain

It had been a good week for Anderson. He was taking practice reps with the first-team offense. Feeling healthy, there was real cause for optimism that he could become a consistent contributor and help stabilize the offensive line.

But toward the end of the week, Anderson was hit by a defensive teammate. Suddenly, his world was spinning again.

"I get hit in the chest in kind of an awkward way," he said. "I didn't think anything of it. We kept going.

"I started feeling like a chest pain that I had never felt before. I asked one of the trainers, 'Hey, I'm having a little chest pain. I don't know what it is. Do you guys have any thoughts about that?'

"So the doc came over and said, 'Well, let's just make sure everything is OK.' They get on the sideline and I sat down, and my heartbeat wouldn't stop. It just kept going ... boom-boom-boom-boom-boom. I'm sitting there, at rest, and my heartbeat is just going.

"We ended up going and getting it checked out, and after a long period of time trying to figure out what it was, the cardiologist assessed it was a heart contusion from a hit. They didn't really know what was causing it.

"But just imagine how rare this is. We get hit in the chest on every single play as an O-lineman. It just so happened that it was a combination of the position I was in and not seeing it, it caused temporary damage to my heart. Like a bruise.

"At that point, the level of frustration I had was just through the roof."

Vazquez, the infectious disease specialist, said it was unlikely that the malaria made Anderson any more susceptible to a heart problem.

"Having heart conditions after a bout of malaria is rare," said Vazquez, who did not treat Anderson. "It's more likely to have complications in other organs before the heart."

Anderson said a sizable part of his annoyance was that the health issues couldn't be attacked via rehab. They were about sitting and waiting. Adding to his dissatisfaction was the nagging thought that he was continuing to let his teammates down.

"Embedded in the culture of offensive line play is accountability and sacrifice," he said. "And so when you're not able to be counted on, and when you are not able to sacrifice, to show your brothers that you're there, it's just really tough, man.

"You watch guys like David [Andrews], a great example of someone who, over the course of his career, has constantly been put in situations where he had to be counted on.

"It was hard, playing next to those guys and knowing how much they were sacrificing and not being able to do that also."

Sherée recalls the mental struggles being as difficult as the physical ones. One night, she awoke at 4 a.m. to find Anderson standing in front of the mirror, yelling at his reflection.

" 'They think it's over? This [expletive] isn't over yet! I worked my whole life to be here!' I literally thought that he was going crazy," Sherée said. "He was shouting at the mirror and saying, 'This [expletive] ain't over! I am Him! I am Him! I'm coming back!' I was like, 'Calvin, it's 4 a.m. Calm down. Lay in the bed.' "

Anderson tried to fight, especially as he watched the offense struggle, but the Patriots placed him on injured reserve on Nov. 3, effectively ending his season. He had played five games, starting two.

"The conversations primarily started with trying to assess where I was in the recovery process," he said. "I think we just tried to get a gauge of how long it would take to be back at 100 percent, to be able to give everything I had on the field."

Carrying on, with scars

When Belichick and the Patriots parted ways in January, Anderson took to social media to offer a tribute, acknowledging that Belichick was the "first to call me when getting out of the hospital both times this year. I consider it an honor. 2024 season I will prove you right. Thank you legend."

Now, after basically losing a year of his career, Anderson is determined to make up for lost time. He has been an active participant in the offseason program, showing up in Foxborough the first day and working with his teammates to prepare for the upcoming season.

He again has a chance to make an impact. The Patriots are in desperate need of offensive line depth — particularly at tackle — and a healthy Anderson would make a colossal difference in stabilizing things up front.

Anderson and his wife are not planning to travel overseas this summer, instead focusing on the Lanihun-Anderson Foundation, dedicated to promoting financial literacy for teens and young adults.

"We want to focus on financial literacy so we can close the gap in education," Anderson said. "Because when kids aren't able to focus on learning these skills in early development, they spend a lot of their older years working through the setbacks of not having garnered that info when they were young. And you spend all of your twenties trying to figure those things out. We want to help out with that."

And with a new head coach and new coaching staff in place, no one is looking forward to training camp more than Anderson. The grind. The sweat. The tedium and drudgery of two-hour practices in pads in the heat of July and August.

Missing nearly a year of doing something you love — something you really love — will make you wistful for odd things, such as knocking the head off a defensive end.

"This is a new year, a new opportunity," Anderson said. "And I'm looking forward to that."

"When I think about approaching this year, I think about authentic expressions. I think about walking in truth and oneness with the expression of me, and who I am. Who I am includes the scars that come from the moments that I've had. The moments of weakness, the moments of defeat.

"I look forward to many things, but most of all, I look forward to authentically being Calvin Anderson."

CHRON.

The man behind the mask: Calvin Anderson

By Stephanie Kuzydym

Every year, we learn their names, their numbers and their stats. If we're lucky, we see their personality shine through after a big play or during the slice of a quote in the newspaper.

The men in Rice Owls jerseys are more than a number in a program or a group of men trying to reach another bowl game. They are student athletes with stories waiting to be told. Each week, the Houston Chronicle will feature another football player. This is the "man behind the mask."

Calvin Anderson, freshman, left tackle

Article continues below this ad

Nickname: King Boost

Twitter handle: @the_conda25

If I weren't playing football, I'd be focused completely on pursuing my MBA.

If I could trade positions for a day, I'd choose tight end.

My favorite part of Rice is the network I'll have after college.

My favorite part of football is the teamwork.

The weirdest question I've ever been asked is: 'Do you wish you were a girl?'

My favorite meal my mom makes is burgers.

I chose Rice because of Coach Bailiff and his staff and the education.

Most people don't know this, but I can solve a Rubik's cube in 19 seconds.

The toughest part about being a student athlete is balancing the rigorous course load and excelling in football.

I chose my number because it was my best friend's number at Georgetown High School.

I wish I could be wiser.

My best stress reliever is prayer.

On game day, I listen to rap.

My favorite super hero is Blaze.

Nothing pumps me up more on Game Day than reminding myself how many people have doubted me.

My celebrity crush is ... my girlfriend Manika is a celebrity.

Something you should know about this team is that we are playing for each other.

If I could be C-USA commissioner for a day, I would give Coach Bailiff a new award.

The people who motivate me most is right tackle Caleb (Williams).

C David Andrews

Boston Herald

Legacy, football and fishing: Inside a day with Patriots captain David Andrews

By Andrew Callahan

FALMOUTH — David Andrews is daydreaming.

He sees himself at home, dropping into his couch with a cold beer in hand and the Patriots on TV.

On the screen, Drake Maye might be whipping a cross-body, cross-field pass for 30 yards. Or Ja'Lynn Polk could be toe-tapping inbounds to complete a spectacular sideline grab. Perhaps little-known left guard Sidy Sow is delivering a crunching run-block to clear space for a go-ahead touchdown.

The screen can change because on its own, it doesn't matter. The point of the dream is the Patriots are back in the Super Bowl, some season after Andrews has retired as their starting center. On the couch, he swells with pride.

His former team has returned to its former glory.

He smiles.

Andrews shares this daydream while living out another type of paradise: sitting in the back of a 41-foot, deep sea fishing boat with a black hull and white interior that trolls outside Martha's Vineyard on a sunny Saturday afternoon.

It's two days before the Patriots report for minicamp, the sunset of a long offseason that tossed out several franchise cornerstones in favor of a fresh rebuild. Yet Andrews, after nine seasons in New England and six as a captain, remains. A cloudless sky smiles down on the 31-year-old and every other angler in the Patriots Alumni Club fishing tournament, a charity event that annually draws players past and present.

The clock shows a couple minutes past noon.

In Andrews' boat, an unlucky bluefish just ended a four-hour drought filled with small talk and morning beers. When the fish landed inside, Andrews stood up. He wore outdoor slippers and a gray John Deere cap over his curly, chestnut hair, with a navy sweatshirt and cargo shorts covering the rest of his generously listed 6-2, 300-pound frame. His energy pulled everyone else onboard into a small huddle around him.

"All right!" he shouted. "That's the one we need!"

Andrews' teammates today are mostly strangers: the boat's captain, two locals assisting the captain, two Patriots fans from Rhode Island – brothers in their mid-30s – and me. The bluefish is returned to the sea, and lines drop back into the water, one off each side. Andrews sits down again, facing the four black engines powering us over the ocean.

Waiting for the next bite, we talk about how strange he must feel standing both at the start of a rebuild and the end of his career. Then it's on to fatherhood, legacy, and what he's chasing now with championships well out of reach.

"Just whatever I can do to help reestablish a winning culture," Andrews says before detailing his daydream.

His voice trails off at the mention of this imaginary, far-off Super Bowl.

"I'd really have nothing to do with it," he says, "but you do tell yourself that."

Andrews is not quite wistful, but he can see the sun setting on his career and feel its waning warmth. Soon, football won't be something he does, but someone he was, and the lessons and memories he leaves behind. Those remnants matter to him.

Then, the rod nearest Andrews snaps down. Fish on.

He leaps up, pulls the rod from its holder and reels, soaking in the moment every angler chases.

Tension in the line flowing into your hand, up your arm and into your heart, the place someone somewhere once planted a love of this moment. Nature's two-minute drill packed into 30 seconds, no timeouts. Wonder, hope, excitement bursting all together, all at once.

Then, the line goes slack. Andrews stops. He waits a few seconds, and reels again. The line stays straight, but the loss of tension tells him the fish is gone.

He reels all the way back into the boat, and discovers something cut the line during his retrieval. A rock sticking up from the sea floor perhaps, or maybe a buoy. Only the ocean knows for sure.

Andrews plops down again, surrendering to circumstance. He stares into the distance, watching every wake we leave behind, determined to keep this new line in the water as long as he can.

Go fish

This story was supposed to start six months ago with a card game.

A card game Andrews organized weekly in a quiet corner of the Patriots' facility to build camaraderie among players while a lost 2023 campaign crumbled around them. I heard about the card game late in the season, and approached most of its regulars in separate moments asking if they'd talk for a story. They all had the same condition.

They would speak if, and only if, "DA" said it was OK.

So Andrews and I talked first about the game in mid-December, and for reasons that will die with that miserable, rotten, no-good season, my story of the card game will forever stay unwritten. But Andrews offered to make it up to me that same day, so I tossed up a Hail Mary.

"What if we went fishing sometime this offseason?"

He agreed.

Once the Patriots' organizational dust settled, I shot Andrews a private message in May. He remembered our talk, and after a couple weeks, suggested we meet again the weekend of the tournament.

Deal.

That day, June 8, I pulled into our agreed-upon Cape Cod Dunkin' at 5:50 a.m. Ten minutes early, but not early enough. Andrews sat in the parking lot, alone in his Ford truck, which he loves more than you would think, even if I gave you three guesses.

We shared a 17-minute ride south; long enough, I figured, to break ice after six years of friendly, surface-level conversations contained largely to the locker room. But there was no need. Andrews melted it immediately.

Unprompted, he told stories the whole drive down. I couldn't tell why just yet, but he was clearly comfortable, if not eager, to open up. Most of his stories were about simple times, simple joys.

Like, the first alumni fishing tournament he attended, just a few weeks after signing with the Patriots as an undrafted rookie in spring 2015. Ex-Patriots offensive tackle Marcus Cannon drove him down the night before, the details of which are now a bit ... fuzzy.

"The night before kinda got away from us, and the next morning he woke me up at like 5 a.m. And I was not in great shape," Andrews remembered later. "First of all, I was dressed for May in Georgia, not May in Massachusetts. And later, I was, uh, chumming the waters a little bit that morning.

"A tough day of fishing, but a great day of fishing."

Then, there was the weekend that same spring his girlfriend, now wife, Mackenzie, visited, and Andrews spent his week's paycheck to put them up in a Boston hotel room. Or the Saturday he ducked anonymously into a Back Bay bar, Clery's, because it had the Georgia game on — two days after he'd made his NFL debut as a starter on Thursday Night Football.

About enjoying an espresso martini now and then after dinner. The turkeys and deer that roam on his 176-acre farm back in Georgia. His two German Shepherds back home.

At last, we pulled into a parking lot on the Falmouth coast and sat for a minute. He scoped the marina lot for teammates.

Andrews had invited more than a dozen players to fish today, and relayed lodging requests to Pete Brock, the president of the Patriots Alumni Club and a former offensive lineman from the '70s and '80s. The club reserves motel rooms across the street from the marina, where players can stay the night before an early wakeup Saturday.

Andrews hoped attendance would be strong, but couldn't be sure.

We stepped down from his truck and walked around the corner of what looked like a large, red warehouse, maybe three stories high. The facility was mostly empty, save for one long, rectangular table sitting front and center with coffee and donuts and 12 circular tables behind it, each draped in a white cloth and surrounded by eight folding chairs.

Around the tables, a mix of 20 ex-Patriots, organizers and a few fans milled about. Andrews entered not with the cold distance of celebrity, but a type of warm gravity. Shoulders back and chest out, he wore a soft smile and extended open arms to all in his path. Every angler receiving a hug or handshake.

Here, he wasn't future Patriots Hall of Famer David Andrews, ex-teammate of Tom Brady, friend of Kenny Chesney, personal favorite of Bill Belichick, leader of men. He was Dave. Just Dave.

That is, with one nervous exception: a rookie who arrived minutes after us.

After eight or so players strolled in and stopped for coffee after a late night of team bonding, an undrafted youngster meandered to Andrews' table; like he'd come to pay his respects.

"Thank you, Mr. DA," he said.

(Late in the day, I asked Andrews about the title, sensing it might have tweaked him a little bit. "Yeah, that made me want to puke," he said.)

Back at the table, Andrews began pouring his stories into Tyrone Wheatley Jr., a journeyman offensive tackle, and rookie guard Layden Robinson. One was about how he shared a hotel room at the Residence Inn during his first

Patriots training camp and was forced to sleep in the living room. He went on about how veterans should support rookies, not disavow them.

Minutes from the start, organizers finally divided the anglers into different groups. Players accompanied fans whose donations secured their place on one boat and helped fund Tommy's Place, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that runs vacation homes on the Cape for kids fighting cancer. More than a dozen Patriots players attended.

Heading to the docks, I told Andrews that Keion White, a defensive lineman who kept his own company last year as a rookie, made it just in time. This made him happy; a captain knowing he's reached his team.

We climbed aboard precisely at 7:30 on a brilliant day fit for fishing. Eight minutes later, cruising slowly out of the harbor, Andrews' phone lit up, and so did he.

It was a FaceTime call. His two-year-old son, Ford, wanted to talk with his dad.

Football Dave

Close friends of the Andrews family have a favorite joke about their favorite center.

He's two people in one.

There's "Football Dave," and "Offseason Dave."

Football Dave is grumpy. Myopic. Sometimes a bum, even after wins. He lives from July until January, but sometimes February, then goes into hibernation.

Offseason Dave? You just met him.

Fishing. Drinking beers. Telling stories. A good hang.

The day Mackenzie learned she was pregnant with Ford, Football Dave came home after a long day during a never-ending 2020 season. He'd texted her earlier, wondering what their plans were that night. No real answer.

Once he walked through the door, Football Dave asked again what was going on. He remembers her barking back three words: "Feed the dogs!"

He grumbled in thought.

OK, so I try not to be grumpy, and now you're giving me an attitude?

Football Dave walked to the closet where the Andrews keep their dog food. Opening the door, he slapped whatever crap rested on top of the food container, knocking it to the ground. He scooped some food out and turned around.

Mackenzie stared at him.

"What?" he asked.

That crap, she explained, was a positive test and a parenting book she'd left him as a surprise. His jaw dropped. They embraced.

Andrews laughs retelling the story to me on the boat, returned to the joy of the moment in his mind.

"It was a wild 10 minutes of emotion," Offseason Dave says.

Since then, raising Ford has served as a life lesson that often comes with age: how the things that matter, truly matter, are those that last. Ford is already a greater piece of Andrews' legacy than his two Super Bowl wins.

While championships are forever, trophies live in cases, and children live with you, then beyond you; breathing reflections of who you were as a parent and person. His mind runs to Ford next.

"Now we make him feed the dogs," Andrews says. "He loves it."

Football Dave still lives, he assures me, but he's an outdoor dog. Mostly.

Andrews leaves the toll football exacts on him outside the house as best he can. Ford is the line he draws between what happens in Foxboro and inside his house.

"If I'm being honest, he doesn't really care about what happens at work," Andrews admits. "So how can I bring that home with me?"

But drawing that line has never been harder. The Patriots, specifically their offense, has been an abject disaster for two straight years. A portrait of dysfunction, from coaches to players and scheme. Andrews has been at the literal center of it all, and will soon lead a team projected to finish in the bottom of the AFC.

He insulates himself with a newfound outlook and balance.

"I think as you get older in your career, you try to find joy in little things. Maybe when you're younger, you take it for granted," he says. "Even when things aren't going good or what you think they should be, you've got to try to find some joy in it. Because if not, those types of years will make you want to be done with it."

Andrews, firmly, is not done yet. He signed a one-year contract extension last month. He cherishes wins over bad teams now, triumphs he might have dismissed before; like the Patriots' wins at Pittsburgh and Denver last December when fans and media clamored for them to tank for a higher draft pick.

"Everyone was just like, 'please lose!' And you hear that noise," Andrews says. "But I got to come home for Christmas after a win. And that made Christmas that much better."

It's a stark contrast from the first half of his career, when Andrews only knew winning and the harsh, Hall of Fame coaching of Belichick and former offensive line coach, Dante Scarnecchia. Super Bowl or bust, every year. It suited him, the tough love, hard teaching and perfectionist standard.

Yet Andrew can distinctly remember relief washing over him after one Super Bowl, not euphoria.

"Dante was always like, 'Enjoy the wins.' But sometimes they could feel worse than the losses," Andrews remembers. "And it's hard to win in the NFL. But I think we took 'em for granted sometimes."

Joy, he's since learned, can be found outside the scoreboard. Before he retires, Andrews wants to play in every NFL stadium. He wants to witness the Patriots' young offensive linemen grow around him and have a hand in their development. That fills his cup.

It strikes him later that even in the Patriots locker room, away from Ford, he's assumed a paternal role.

"You don't realize how many times guys are looking at you, what you're doing, how you're carrying yourself," he says. "It's not like being a dad, but I guess it kind of is."

But Andrews knows the bottom line. The moment the Patriots can replace him with a cheaper, younger center capable of playing at a similar level, he's gone. Finished.

Cut, like the line he's lost to the deep blue sea.

The thing they don't tell you about shots of Dr. McGillicuddy's at 8 in the morning is they're even worse than they sound.

Before zipping across the open ocean that morning, our captain claims his cooler was overstocked. His solution was to empty the sleeve of shooters he'd purchased the night before. He passes them around, one by one.

Why not?

The seven of us toast. Doctor's orders, right down the hatch.

But the cooler, apparently, was still too packed. The captain calls for another round.

Down that went, minty and unsettling; like your dentist wasn't content with just cleaning your teeth and insisted on your esophagus, too.

Now, the other thing they don't tell you about shots of Dr. McGillicuddy's at 8 in the morning, is you might divulge more than you expect.

Within minutes, Andrews pulls up a picture on his phone. It shows a spot of blood on the tip of his index finger. The blood, he explains, hurtled out of his lungs on the first day of training camp, 2019.

Believing he had a case of pneumonia, Andrews refused help throughout training camp and preseason games that summer. His performance suffered. Finally, in late August, he relented and saw a specialist who discovered blood clots that would cost him his season.

He went on blood thinners for months, and to this day, doesn't know what caused the clots. Andrews still takes precautions, though, and pride will never push him that close to needless danger again. He's matured with age, yes, but there's more.

Three days after the Patriots' season ended last January, Mackenzie posted a photo to Instagram.

In the picture, darkness envelops an empty Gillette Stadium. Snow covers the ground and the stands. She, David and Ford are on the field, hours after the Jets beat the Patriots for the first time since 2015; a dark day during the franchise's darkest season in decades.

It's a happy photo.

"BABY BOY #2 coming in hot in July," the caption reads.

They're expecting again. Overjoyed. But, Andrews shares, he's unsure if he could love another child as much as he does Ford, and has even sought counsel from ex-teammates with large families, like Matthew Slater and James Ferentz.

They all reassure him. There's nothing like it. You're ready.

Andrews doesn't only open up himself. He puts personal questions to everyone on the boat.

Where are the Rhode Island guys from? What do they do? How about the captain? What about his buddies?

Conversations cover shark fishing and cars, raising kids, college stories, bachelor parties, the Celtics' run to the Finals, last meals, on and on. These little talks fill the large gaps over a day that ends without another catch after the bluefish.

Our boat coasts back into the marina around 2:30 p.m. Faint music plays in the distance. It's the new pop country hit, "A Bar Song," by Shaboozey.

Gasoline and groceries, the list goes on and on

This nine-to-five ain't workin', why the hell do I work so hard?

I can't worry 'bout my problems, I can't take 'em when I'm gone

It's a song about booze and escapism, a party anthem timed perfectly for graduation season. But beneath the catchy chorus and acoustic strumming, deeper themes run: about shared human connection, the inescapable grind of day-to-day work and the choice to extend fleeting joys when you can, together, for as long as possible.

When it's last call and they kick us out the door

It's gettin' kind of late, but the ladies want some more

Oh my, good Lord

... Someone pour me up a double shot of whiskey

Andrews climbs out of the boat, looking back at the sea and the day behind him.

He takes a step closer to land, then another; toward Mackenzie, Ford and his unborn son. Toward the start of next season and his dream of restored Patriots glory.

Toward the rest of his life.

He smiles.

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."

CB Alex Austin

THE PATRIOTS BEAT

'All I Needed Was a Chance': From Adversity to Success – The Inspiring Journey of Alex Austin

By Ben Belford-Peltzman

All Alex Austin ever needed was a chance. All the 22-year-old cornerback wanted was an opportunity to showcase his raw ability. In a way, Austin has been mentally preparing for this moment his entire life. Born in Long Beach, where distractions were everywhere, Alex had to find a way to stay focused and out of trouble. At the age of six, he discovered his passion, football.

"I started playing the game my father put me in just to keep me out of trouble," Austin said.

Most football players, like all people, have role models. Uniquely, Austin had the luxury of developing a close relationship with, a Patriots legend, Willie McGinest. Yes, that's the same Willie McGinest who won three Super Bowls with the New England Patriots. So, how did McGinest find his way into Austin's life?

Austin went on to play for the Long Beach Patriots and was coached by McGinest, whom he refers to as his uncle. Through countless hours of coaching, McGinest taught Austin life lessons, including how to conduct himself like a pro at a young level. When talking to Austin's coaches, one thing remained the same: his ability to respect everyone and be a natural leader, on and off the field.

Transitioning from Pop Warner to competing at the high school level, Austin's determination and skill set remained the same. After three years of playing at Long Beach Poly High School under coach Antonio Pierce, a new coach was hired at Long Beach Poly. Head coach Stephen Barbee. Coach Barbee had the tall task of learning the ins and outs of Long Beach Patriots football. Austin's work ethic stood out from Day 1.

"As far as not knowing any of the kids coming into this job, his work ethic was elite. From a high school ranking standpoint, there are a lot of players that were higher rank. But Alex pretty quickly asserted himself, just through his work ethic," Barbee said.

Part of what made him stand out was his ability to be a football player and play whatever position was necessary. While his football journey began on the offensive side of the ball, eventually he started to play more and more defense.

"It was always, 'Whatever you need, coach,'" Barbee said.

Throughout his career, Austin's versatility on the football field has always been one of his top traits. He embraced playing multiple positions.

"I love football. I feel like I'm a true football player. Anywhere you put me on the field, I'm going to bring value," Austin said.

Even his teammates admired his work ethic and how he conducted himself.

"You never heard of Alex getting in trouble off the field, which led other players to do the same," said Austin's former teammate Damaje Yancey. "What makes a good leader, though, is he is able to connect with everyone on the team. Real funny, down-to-earth guy," Yancey stated."

Coach Barbee had no trouble convincing coaches that Austin was the real deal. The Long Beach native committed to Oregon State University after high school.

"As a team leader and as, honestly, one of the best athletes that we had on the team and, when colleges would come asking about players, he was the one that I was pointing out first; this is the kid that's under the radar that you need to take a look at," Barbee said.

At Oregon State, Austin played all four years, appearing in 36 games and recording 140 tackles, four interceptions, 24 passes defended, three fumble recoveries, and one sack.

One thing you might not know about Austin is his love for giving back to the community. It's not a surprise that Alex enjoys volunteering in the community as both his parents are civil servants. In 2022, Austin used his NIL money to create his scholarship, the Alex Austin Overcoming Adversity Scholarship.

"I'm extremely blessed & fortunate to be able to launch my Overcoming Adversity Scholarship, created in partnership with Access Scholarships and Hirect," Austin tweeted in February of 2022. "The scholarship is open to all US high school and college students. Head over to the link in my bio to apply now!"

The scholarship provides aid to disadvantaged high school or undergraduate students, offering 5 \$1,000 prizes. To apply for the scholarship, students must have a 2.5 GPA and write a 500-word essay about a challenge they encountered. This year, the deadline to apply is April 15, 2024.

"This scholarship is important to me because I know that everyone battles with adversity at some point in their life," Austin said via his scholarship website. "I had to overcome adversity to get me where I am today. I want to give back to students who have shown resilience in overcoming challenges."

One of Austin's goals is to help out more in Foxborough and the greater Boston area. He plans on helping out in the community before next season.

The transition to the NFL didn't come easy at first for the rookie. In the 2023 draft, the Buffalo Bills selected Austin with the 252nd pick in the seventh round. And, before the roster-cutdown deadline at the end of the summer, the Bills waived the 22-year old. His release was partly due to the number of defensive backs on the Bills' roster. Before Buffalo could sign Austin back to the practice squad, the Texans claimed the cornerback off waivers.

His stint with the Texans didn't last long, and he was released on October 14 and was waived again. This time the Patriots claimed the cornerback due to depth and injury concerns. On November 2, the Patriots signed Austin to the 53-man roster.

Besides having a connection with McGinest, the 22-year-old had several other Long Beach connections in New England. Former cornerback Jack Jones and wide receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster were two players Austin had already been familiar with.

"Jack and I played on the same Pop Warner team and the same high school," Austin said at his first media availability. "Now, we're on the same NFL team. It's surreal."

Although he was a healthy scratch on gameday for his first two contests, Austin made his Patriots debut in primetime on Thursday Night Football against the Steelers. Coming into a historic franchise, there must have been some pressure, especially with your uncle winning three Super Bowls...right? Well, not for Austin, who's learned how to deal with stress and pressure on a professional level.

"Pressure is all an illusion in your mind," he states.

It wasn't all easy at first, and it took guidance from older veterans in the locker room, like Jonathan Jones, Jalen Mills and Matthew Slater, to help him acclimate to the Patriots locker room. With all three of them sharing insights and lessons with Austin, he didn't take long to make plays on the football field.

"He's somebody who never missed a workout, did what was ever needed, and brought along his teammates," Coach Barbee said.

Austin studies the films of veterans like Jalen Ramsey and former Patriots cornerback Stephon Gilmore and tries to replicate his game off them. Austin notes that Gilmore is a "technician" at the line of scrimmage with his feet.

After having a rough start in his rookie season, Austin found his groove late in the season and became a force for the Patriots. During his last five games of the season, opposing quarterbacks completed 2/11 (18%) passes when targeting the rookie corner. Revenge against his former team was just the cherry on top for Austin.

In Week 17 at Highmark Stadium in Buffalo, the cornerback pinpointed a deep pass from Josh Allen and made a leaping catch, recording his first pro interception.

During his first offseason, he doesn't want to take a moment for granted. He aims to get better at his technique and is committed to getting stronger and faster. He wants to come back even more explosive to have a breakout in his second year. Currently, Austin is an ERFA. An exclusive rights-free agent is a player with two or fewer seasons in the NFL and an expired contract. All the Patriots now have to do is extend a qualify contract to Austin. If they do that, he'll re-sign with the team. As a result, Austin will be unable to negotiate with other squads.

Through perseverance and his unwavering work ethic on and off the field, Austin has continuously defeated any challenges that have been thrown his way. His resilience and dedication have given him the opportunity of a lifetime. And he will do everything he can to carve his path in professional football.

P Bryce Baringer

The Boston Globe

Patriots rookies Chad Ryland and Bryce Baringer have bonded over football, as well as a shared love of reading

By Christopher Price

FOXBOROUGH — Kicker Chad Ryland and punter Bryce Baringer initially connected during the pre-draft process, and enjoyed the happy coincidence that saw them both end up with the Patriots. But in the months since they arrived at Gillette Stadium, they've been bonded by books.

The rookie duo has found common ground in reading, both for entertainment purposes, as well as looking for subtle ways to gain an edge as specialists in the National Football League.

"I think it really came down to the fact that we both had a desire to start a healthy habit outside of football," Ryland said after practice Wednesday. "Both of us wanted something where we could take our minds off football, but still have something that was applicable to what we do, and help us build in a positive direction, mind-set-wise."

Buoyed by Ryland's suggestion, the two are currently tackling "Atomic Habits" by James Clear. The New York Times best-seller highlights ways for readers to create good habits, break bad habits, and become 1 percent better every day.

"I'm slacking off a bit — I need to do a better job. He's far ahead of me," Baringer admitted. "I've read four or five chapters. He's further along than that. But that's neither here nor there."

"The book is full of great stuff. It could be just a split second of reading a paragraph and it's like you envision in your mind, 'Holy crap, this legitimately relates perfectly to this scenario. How can I respond? What can I do to change the outcome?' Anything of that nature."

The book focuses on small ways to improve daily through a variety of actions, something that has resonated with Ryland and Baringer.

"I go through and underline things, and the first thing I just opened to was, 'Breakthrough moments are often the result of many previous actions,'" Ryland said, leafing through the pages.

"For me, I think it's just staying true to the process and continuing to chip away, and knowing what we're doing, it'll all break through and continue to get better and progress. We both know what it looks like for us to be where we want to be. And it's just about continuing to develop to be better pros at our craft and reach that point."

As for what book might come next, there are a few possibilities. Ryland mentioned "Row the Boat," which was co-authored by University of Minnesota coach P.J. Fleck and is focused on learning how to lead with enthusiasm and optimism.

Baringer, who acknowledged it's "probably" his turn to pick, has his eye on "The Obstacle Is the Way" by Ryan Holiday or "The Subtle Art Of Not Giving A [Expletive]" by Mark Manson.

Baringer already has read the latter but would welcome a re-read.

"At the end of the day, you've got to just move past things," Baringer said of Manson's message. "You can't just change what's happened. You have to move forward. And you can't care sometimes. Life's trajectory is that things might be going up, up, up, and gravity brings you back down. When you get to that low point, what can you do to get back up? Like the title says, you can't give a . . ."

Baringer's current trajectory is a good one. He leads the NFL in punts inside the opponents' 20-yard line with 35 and has the third-longest punt of the season (79 yards). He's a Pro Bowl candidate in his first season.

Ryland, meanwhile, has tasted the bitter with the sweet. He missed a field goal against the Giants that would have sent the game to overtime, was off the mark on a field goal against the Chiefs the week before, and missed a 47-yarder (and an extra point) against the Broncos, before delivering the first game-winning kick of his career.

It was a happy moment in a year that's been an occasional struggle.

"I got a good amount of texts from people back home. Connections I've made all over. It was fun to hear from everybody," Ryland said. "The messages I get via text are the ones I got and respond to. It was all people that are near and dear to me. It's always good to hear from them."

Chief among those supporters? Ryland's fellow book enthusiast.

"A lot of our job as specialists is to be mentally tough," Baringer said. "When things aren't going right, what can we do to shift our focus and be neutral? Another big thing I believe in is being neutral. You can be at the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, but it's about being neutral. Right in the middle. Monotone, as people like to say. Just be locked in. He's one of the best at doing that."

"I trust that kid to win every game for us," Baringer added, looking at Ryland across the locker room. "And I just hope we get more chances like that to prove ourselves. But I believe in him 100 percent."

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 gear 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."

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.

QB Jacoby Brissett



Bill Parcells: Patriots QB is like 'my own son,' bond incredibly meaningful

By Karen Guregian

Like a proud father, Bill Parcells tuned in to the Patriots preseason opener Thursday night against the Carolina Panthers.

He was dying to watch "his kid" play.

While Jacoby Brissett is technically not related to Parcells, they do enjoy a special father-son dynamic - even to the point where the Patriots quarterback affectionately refers to him as "grandpa."

"I'm just pulling for him now. It stresses my Sundays, but that's nothing new," Parcells told MassLive Friday when asked to characterize his relationship with New England's presumptive starter. "He's a special kid. People would have a hard time putting two guys like us together. They wouldn't think things like this could happen. But they can.

"That's what football does. That's one of the good things about it. Football is color blind."

As the story goes, Parcells first encountered the young signal-caller during a Dwyer High School practice in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, when Brissett was 15. The Pro Football Hall of Fame head coach has a home in Florida and knew Dwyer High head coach Jack Daniels. So he'd often show up at Friday practices and watch the proceedings.

After that first meeting, Parcells and Brissett forged a longstanding friendship. Parcells saw something special in the highly-recruited, two-sport athlete who wound up choosing football over basketball. During the early stages of their relationship, Parcells helped the quarterback hone his skills, preparing him for college and, later, the NFL Draft.

As for Brissett, it was hard not to be taken by the Super Bowl-winning head coach who was larger than life. He was awed by the coaching icon who showed an interest in him.

Ultimately the union evolved into Parcells being a trusted confidant and advisor to Brissett, who was originally drafted by the Patriots in 2016, and is on his second stint in New England. Of late, however, Parcells is more like a doting father.

"I told him, 'I'm tired of staying up Sunday nights just to watch you,'" Parcells said. "He says 'What else you got to do, old man?'"

"But I will tell you, I really do love him. I really do," the former Patriots coach went on. "I have a strong affection for him. He is an absolute No. 1, high-class kid."

The feeling is mutual.

Brissett feels fortunate to have the now 82-year-old Parcells in his life, keeping watch, and guiding him from afar. He loves that he's been able to break through Parcells' gruff exterior. It seems the curmudgeonly coach has a big heart.

Who knew?

"He's a softie. If you get to know him really well, he's a big softie," Brissett said of Parcells, who initially guided Drew Bledsoe in New England after the quarterback was taken first overall by the Patriots in the 1993 NFL draft. "He's always been somebody I've talked to throughout my career ... he is like my grandpa. I go to him all the time with stuff."

Parcells, who has three daughters, actually choked up a couple of times during the call talking about what Brissett means to him, and how he's weathered the ups and downs of the quarterback's career, bouncing from New England, to Indianapolis, then Miami, Cleveland, Washington and back.

He loves that Brissett is now getting a chance to be a starter right out of the gate with the Patriots, even with third-overall pick Drake Maye waiting in the wings.

"One time (Brissett) told me, he says, 'Coach, I've done everything exactly like you told me how to do it, and I still can't get a chance to play.' And he'd be so sad. And that makes me sad as we're here talking about it," Parcells said. "And I know it's true. I know he did what he said he did. And he still couldn't get a chance."

"I just think now, he's a more veteran player, he has more experience, and he understands things," the Tuna went on. "He still has that chip on his shoulder about proving to himself what he's capable of in this league. That's what he's still about."

Brissett, who is expected to be the Week 1 starter when the Patriots take on Cincinnati in the season opener, played in just one series during Thursday night's 17-3 win. He's looked good in camp, and having played in Cleveland, knows Alex Van Pelt's offense.

The veteran quarterback, who signed a one-year, \$8 million contract with the Patriots in March, is well aware he's a placeholder until Maye is ready. He's been a good mentor to both Maye and fellow rookie Joe Milton III. But Brissett, a longtime backup in the NFL, has also made a point of letting people know he plans on making the most of his opportunity and starting assignment.

He wants to prove his worth and make it difficult for Jerod Mayo to replace him. That kind of attitude doesn't surprise Parcells.

"Everyone wants what's new, but that's fine. I'm just happy (Brissett is) doing OK and getting a chance," Parcells said when asked about the clamor for Maye. "He's just a very special young man. I know a lot of them. I've run into a lot of young guys. But I have a really strong feeling for Jacoby."

"He's like my own kid, he really is, my own son," the legendary coach went on. "I want the best for him. And so far, he's made his way in this world pretty well."

Brissett is 30 years old now. Parcells has known him for half of his life. From setting him up with a coach (Dan Henning) to help him with his mechanics early on, to teaching him about conditioning, Parcells has done what he could to help Brissett succeed along the way.

Since Brissett has been in the league nine seasons, Parcells' work is pretty much done. But the caring doesn't stop.

"I talk to him differently now than when he was 15 or 16. You try to guide him, direct him to go on the right path. But that was easy with him," Parcells said. "He was hungry for it. And I try, without being a jerk, to help him, and let him know I care about what's going on, and I do."

Brissett, who is his own agent, will often run football matters by Parcells - even some non-football issues. He'll recite chapter and verse about what his "grandpa" has done for him, and how much he's aided him in his career. The biggest thing he's taken from Parcells, however, has nothing to do with football.

"He's always been a good person in my life. He's been consistent," said Brissett, who was raised by a single mother. "I think that's what I've learned the most, his action of being consistently a good person to me. That's something I try to exude on my own."

Parcells loved hearing he had rubbed off on Brissett in that way.

"I keep telling him, you can make a difference in this world if you want to. I preach that to him. I say you can do things for your community ... if you try," Parcells said. "And he's good. He does it. He buys bikes for the kids. He does a lot of stuff."

Brissett was a Walter Payton Man of the Year nominee in 2020 in part for his commitment to philanthropy and community impact. During his previous stop with Washington, Brissett gave away free bikes to kids as part of his Start the Cycle Community Bike Ride in partnership with the Metropolitan Police Department. He's held that event in every city he's been the past four years.

Along with football, that side of Brissett also makes "grandpa" incredibly proud.

"You know, when you're emotionally tied to somebody, it makes a difference," Parcells said. "I'm fortunate that he's a friend of mine. He's what you see. He's not phony. He's just a really nice young man, and I'm proud to know him."

ANDSCAPE

Jacoby Brissett has been here before. Only now, he has a chance to become a star.

By Jason Reid

Here's what one needs to know most about quarterback Jacoby Brissett: He has done this before.

To this point, the career understudy, who's beginning his fourth season, has been defined by the solid performances he delivered when he replaced two of the game's headliners. And now, if Brissett delivers a showstopper in his biggest role yet for the Indianapolis Colts, well, he could have a star-making turn.

The stage belongs to Brissett, who again takes the reins of the Colts after Pro Bowl signal-caller Andrew Luck retired suddenly on Aug. 24 at only 29, his body and mind battered after seven years in professional sports' most violent workplace. Brissett is better equipped than many former second-stringers for this daunting task, replacing a superstar at the game's most important position on the eve of the regular season.

With Luck, the Colts were roundly viewed by league observers as a playoff-caliber team.

Brissett will have to prove he's capable of quarterbacking Indianapolis to its full potential. There's evidence, however, to suggest he may just be the right guy to replace Luck for the long haul.

To hear the Colts tell it, despite Luck's departure, they're still quite capable at quarterback.

"This is a good football team," general manager Chris Ballard told reporters the night of Aug. 24 at Lucas Oil Stadium. "We're young, good on both fronts, [with] some good young skill players and a good young quarterback in Jacoby Brissett."

At only 26, Brissett has more NFL game experience than most young backup signal-callers. This will be Brissett's second stint stepping in for Luck when the wins and losses actually matter.

Luck was battling a major shoulder problem in 2017, so the Colts traded for Brissett, who was a backup with the New England Patriots, on Sept. 2, 2017. Brissett crammed for two weeks to learn the Colts' playbook.

Although the Colts went just 4-11 in Brissett's 15 starts that season, he played remarkably well under the circumstances, passing for nearly 3,100 yards with 13 touchdown passes and seven interceptions. What he did was tantamount to a trial attorney stepping into a major class-action lawsuit and taking the lead chair right before closing arguments.

What's different about this season as opposed to 2017 is that this iteration of the Colts' roster is just better. If the quarterback, one of eight starting black passers in the league this season, is up to the challenge, the Colts should be able to do big things in the AFC South.

Talk to people around the league about Brissett and they'll tell you he's razor-sharp in the film room, has a good passing arm and is a big-time athlete. As important, though, they say he's a selfless teammate who is well-respected in the locker room. While officially announcing his retirement Saturday night, Luck touched on who Brissett is as both a football player and a man.

"Diligent, sharp, loves football," Luck told reporters. "I hope I can continue to support him in different ways, so thankful for our friendship. On a personal note ... coming back into the building [after being sidelined because of his shoulder problems] early last year, I was very jealous and resentful of this fun, happy dude that was in my spot as [the] quarterback on this team."

"I obviously did not have any confidence in myself either. I obviously could not have been more wrong in so many ways. A lifelong friend, he means so, so much to me. He's a big part of me, and a big part of me having one of the most rewarding years of my life last year. Cannot wait to support him and see him lead this team. Excited for the future of the Colts, in large part because of Jacoby."

Indianapolis Colts quarterbacks Andrew Luck (left) and Jacoby Brissett (right) talk before a game against the Tennessee Titans at Nissan Stadium in Nashville, Tennessee, on Dec. 30, 2018.

Besides Brissett focusing on his work ahead, his thoughts are also with his friend. "It's been a roller coaster of emotions," Brissett told reporters. "The main thing is not being able to see Andrew every other day."

That's part of the business of the NFL, which Brissett learned quickly.

He had hoped to put down roots with the Patriots, who used a third-round pick (91st overall) in the 2016 NFL draft to select the West Palm Beach, Florida, native. Brissett was impressive as a two-year starter at North Carolina State after spending his first two years in college as a backup at the University of Florida.

And because of a confluence of events during his rookie season, Brissett even had to step in at quarterback for the greatest of all time: Tom Brady. In the process, he became the first African American to hold that distinction in franchise history. Considering the racial discord in Boston's past, Brissett's accomplishment was noteworthy.

He went 1-1 for the Patriots, completing almost 62% of his passes for 400 yards with no touchdowns and — here's the key — no interceptions. In a spotlight moment, Brissett avoided the types of major missteps that many rookies would make in such a situation.

Granted, Brissett only shot up the depth chart because Brady was serving a four-game suspension for his role in the Deflategate saga, and then-No. 2 quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo was sidelined because of an injured passing shoulder. The Colts, however, saw a lot they liked in Brissett's brief audition. And every day since he arrived at their headquarters, Brissett has only further validated their belief in him, Colts officials say.

"We're not gonna ask Jacoby Brissett to be Andrew Luck. Andrew Luck was a unique, unique player," Colts general manager Ballard said. "But Jacoby Brissett is a winning football player in this league."

"Jacoby Brissett is a rare, rare leader. He is. He's a rare human being, man. That locker room loves Jacoby Brissett. They love him."

For Brissett and the Colts, the curtain is about to be raised on a production that received an unexpected jolt shortly before opening night. But the show must go on, and Brissett now has top billing.



Jacoby Brissett: Leading With Style

By Heather Lloyd

A leader on the field, in the locker room, and on the runway, Colts quarterback Jacoby Brissett isn't afraid to make a statement.

Whether he's talking or letting his clothes do the talking, Brissett's style is a lot like him.

"You are who you are in every facet of your life," he says.

Bri

For Brissett, that's young, fun, laidback, and approachable.

He's always been into fashion, but chasing his dream to the NFL opened up a whole new world (and a whole new closet) for him.

"When I was young, I couldn't afford it," he said. "Now, I can get the stuff I always dreamed about wearing."

Growing up, he looked up to guys like Denzel Washington and admired their style.

"That sharp look," he says.

As for his own style, "It depends on the week and how I'm feeling."

Brissett knows what he likes and he knows where to find it - mostly in two places.

"Topman in Nordstrom and Zara. I literally drove to Chicago one morning and went shopping for the season. It was fun."

He does his own shopping, buys off the rack, and doesn't use a tailor.

"This year, I was really into the patterned pants, so that was my thing this season."

He's also got a trademark.

"I always wear tube socks with all of my clothes just because they bring out more color."

And he constructs his outfits from the ground up.

"Everything starts with my shoes."

The key to pulling it off is confidence.

"Some of that stuff people wouldn't wear, because you're going to get laughed at," he says.

But Brissett takes it all in stride. He embraces the feedback - both good and bad.

Like the time he took layers to the next level.

"My friends killed me for that one," he says. "One of my friends was like, 'Why do you have on two jackets?' But we were playing Jacksonville and it was raining there, but it was cold here. I wore that rain trench and if it was hot, I was just going to take the trench off and wear the blue jacket."

The Monday morning quarterbacks come out in full force on Instagram, like the guy who commented he was "dressing like a backup 70s singer."

He respectfully disagrees.

"I'm not a backup singer," he says. "I'm the lead singer."

His teammates are also quick to chime in.

"You look ridiculous. What are you wearing?" I wore corduroys and they were like, "How old are you?"

But the fact that they're paying attention at all tells him something.

"If they're looking at it, they must like it somewhat."

An even more telling sign that they respect his eye - many of them ask his opinion.

"You'd be surprised how many players and coaches, they call me the night before, text me, FaceTime - they want me to tell them if it looks nice or not," he says. "Dudes will ask me to go to the mall with them."

The team player that he is, he's happy to help - but he's going to be honest.

A few of his pet peeves? Dirty shoes and clothes that aren't seasonal.

"You've got to be in tune with your surroundings. Don't wear a turtleneck in the summer, you're not proving anything."

And fit is everything. He likes to wear his clothes tight and isn't a fan of anything baggy.

For Brissett, fashion is a way to express himself. It's also a way to present himself and market himself.

"What's the old saying? You look good, you feel good, you play good, you get paid good."

As competitive as he is in football, Jacoby Brissett is just as competitive when it comes to fashion.

And he feels like he's at the top of his game.

"I think I'm definitely the best dressed on the team. I think everybody else knows that."

"Fashion is about dressing according to what's fashionable," said Oscar de la Renta. "Style is more about being yourself."

Jacoby Brissett is his own man.

And he's got the wardrobe to prove it.

THE LAND ON DEMAND COM

From afar, Jacoby Brissett has a Hall of Fame mentor pulling for him

By Tony Grossi

Jacoby Brissett received a text message from Hall of Fame coach Bill Parcells on Tuesday.

That's not unusual. Generations apart, they are close friends.

In light of the Deshaun Watson suspension news, which makes it official that Brissett will be the Browns' starting quarterback for at least the first six games of the season, Parcells wanted to reinforce one of his inspirational messages to the quarterback he's been mentoring since he was 15 years old.

"I tell him, suckers don't stay in town forever. You only get so many shots," Parcells said over the phone from his summer hangout near Saratoga Race Course in New York.

Parcells, 80, always has spoken plainly to his guys. He has lasting relationships with players he's coached. Brissett wasn't one of them, though Parcells wondered how that would have went.

"I've known him since he was 15," Parcells said. "He was the quarterback at Jupiter (FL) Dwyer High School. I knew the coach. I was snapping to him in two-minute drills in the mud when he was 16.

"I really love this kid. He's a special kid. He's a high-class, benevolent young man and has zero bad habits. He's a good listener. He's a big, strong kid. He's durable."

Parcells has always tried to keep his distance from impeding on Brissett's pro coaches. He was hesitant to talk now that Brissett will be in charge of the Browns' fortunes because he does not want to infringe on coach Kevin Stefanski, whom he likes but doesn't know. But Parcells has maintained that mentor relationship with Brissett through the years and he wants him to succeed in the worst way.

"If anything, our relationship has grown," Brissett, 29, said in April. "He won't even let me call him coach anymore. I always joke and call him granddad. Our relationship has gone strong and way beyond football."

Bill Belichick consulted Parcells when New England made Brissett a third-round pick in 2016. That year, Tom Brady opened the season on a four-game suspension. Brissett was thrown in as a raw rookie in Game 2 when Jimmy Garoppolo suffered an injury. He held the fort for a New England win, and then made his first pro start the following week in a 27-0 win against Houston.

A thumb injury and the return of Brady landed Brissett on the injury list the rest of his first NFL season. The next year, Belichick – blessed with a surplus at quarterback – traded Brissett to Indianapolis at the roster cutdown to fill a huge need at receiver.

With the Colts, Brissett was thrust into action prematurely again and wound up starting 15 games. Two years later, Andrew Luck shocked the Colts with a retirement announcement in the middle of preseason and Brissett had to take over on the fly.

Brissett had the Colts off to a surprise 5-2 start, including an upset win over future Super Bowl champion Kansas City.

"He stepped in, and he was a pro," said linebacker Anthony Walker, a key player on that Colts' defense. "He handled it the right way. People forget that we were a really good football team with him as our starting quarterback before a lot of guys went down [with injuries].

"Jacoby is a pro. He is prepared and he is going to prepare every day like he is the starter whether he is a starter or he is a backup. He is always prepared to go, and he is always ready, so he never has to get ready."

Last year, Brissett signed a one-year deal with the Dolphins. He popped in early again after an injury to starter Tua Tagovailoa in Game 2. Brissett wound up making five starts for the team whose owner infamously wanted his coach to lose games for better draft position, and he won two.

Now Brissett is in Cleveland. He will be surrounded by undoubtedly his best supporting cast -- at least through six games, maybe more.

"Bill [Belichick] thought he was a good backup," Parcels said. "Now, I think different. I think he's better than that. I know I'm biased. I know he can be successful. You just have to know what he can do."

On Tuesday, Brissett faced the media for the first time since the Watson suspension. For the first time perhaps in his NFL career, Brissett can train for weeks in advance to be the starting quarterback for his fourth team in seven years.

"I am excited for the opportunity," he said. "I have extreme confidence in myself and my abilities."

Parcells said, "This kid wants it bad, now. He's not gonna shoot his mouth off. He's been raised like that. I told him, 'Nobody gives a [crap] what you think. Just get your team in the end zone.'"

LS Joe Cardona



Joe Cardona discusses balancing life in the NFL and life as a lieutenant in Navy reserve

By Matt Geagan

FOXBORO -- Joe Cardona is best known for wearing his Patriots uniform. But there is another uniform that he dons that is much more important than the one he wears on Sundays.

That would be his Naval uniform, which Cardona wears with an incredible amount of pride. The Patriots' long snapper is going to be a popular man this week, with Gillette Stadium set to host the annual Army-Navy game on Saturday.

Cardona is always down to talk about his time at the Naval Academy and his "day job" as a lieutenant in the Naval reserves. His unit is based out of Newport, Rhode Island, where he's a supply officer who handles logistics for 500 sailors.

"I hope my sailors look at me like an officer who cares about the mission, who cares about his sailors, and I think they probably look at me as a Patriots player. That's indistinguishable," Cardona told WBZ-TV's Steve Burton in an interview for Patriots GameDay.

"But ultimately, when I put on the uniform, it doesn't matter that I've played nine years in the NFL. It doesn't matter that I'm a two-time Super Bowl champion. It doesn't matter any of those accolades -- all that matters is that I'm there for them and doing my job and performing," he added. "When you talk about a job that important, it's unmatched. You have to show up and do it because it's national security. It's the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy. You have to be on all the time."

That is what Cardona has always wanted in life. The fact that he also gets to play professional football is a nice bonus for the 31-year-old.

"Going the Navy route was, I don't want to say it was predestined, but I grew up in San Diego. My dad was in the Navy. It was my dream school, where I wanted to be," he said. "I never had any sights of playing in the NFL. Not for a second. Never thought I'd play a down in the NFL."

"I wanted to go to the best school I could and serve my country after. The Naval Academy, when you talk about those two goals, that is all you could ask for," he said.

And just as his Naval officers are intrigued by Cardona's other career on the football field, his Patriots teammates are equally as interested in his life away from football. Cardona is more than happy to share his experiences with them.

"When my teammates look at me coming in from work or doing different things, they have a lot of question," said Cardona. "They ask what I do on that side. When i got back from Djibouti, they ask what it was like over there and what the mission was.

"It's a pleasure to share these experiences with them. I have a good bunch of guys on this side that have a great interest in what the men and women are doing around the world to defend their freedom," he said.

The Patriots have stumbled their way to a 2-10 record this season, which has not been easy for a lot of players to handle. Cardona has the unique experience of handling adversity in the military, and while he doesn't believe he handles it any different than others, his background does have him well-equipped to deal with this disappointing year.

"In the military we're given tools and training to handle tough times and difficult circumstances. When we're called to do something that is very hard, we have to be prepared to do it. My hope is that in this season, we can compartmentalize, set aside what has gone on and focus on what is immediately in front of us," he said. "That's what I stress to some sailors; when time is tough there is no magic pill or anything that will work miracles. It's just work.

"We have no choice but to come out and play hard, and that is what it's about," he said of the 2023 Patriots. "Doing the different things, overcoming adversity, and becoming better players and better men in the long run. We have a great group of guys that is committed to each other and committed to making the most of the opportunities we have left. You can't take anything for granted in this league."

WR Demario Douglas

The Boston Globe

Demario Douglas has always wanted an opportunity. He's getting one with the Patriots.

By Nicole Yang
August 23, 2023

From their seats at Gillette Stadium, Yolanda and Angie Mack could hardly contain their bubbling mix of emotions the evening of the Patriots' preseason opener.

"We were tapping each other, like, 'He's really out there. He's really up on the big screen,' " Yolanda said. "You wanted to cry. Except there were too many people around us."

The mother/daughter duo had flown up from Florida to watch Demario Douglas, Yolanda's grandson and Angie's son. Douglas, the wide receiver drafted in the sixth round out of Liberty this year, has emerged as one of the Patriots' most dynamic performers in training camp.

When Douglas walked onto the turf for warmups, Yolanda and Angie made themselves heard. When the public address announcer introduced New England's starting offense, they clapped and cheered after hearing his name. When Douglas fair-caught a punt — the height of his action — they rejoiced once more.

Yolanda and Angie, each wearing a custom No. 81 jersey made earlier that day at the Patriots Pro Shop, celebrated every moment of the night. Even though Douglas's time on the field proved to be short-lived — he took just two offensive snaps — Yolanda and Angie beamed.

"It's one of those feelings that just takes you away," Yolanda said.

Added Angie, "Proud isn't even enough. I've been trying to create a word that can explain how I feel about everything that he's done. I'm about to cry talking to you. I'm just overjoyed."

The limited playing time, in this instance, is encouraging. The Patriots coaches seem confident in their evaluation of the 22-year-old Douglas. He regularly vows during practice, with his twitchy movements, strong hands, and elusiveness in space.

For Douglas, an undersized (5 feet 8 inches, 192 pounds) and often underrated player, securing a spot on the 53-man roster would represent the latest accomplishment in his football journey. And Angie and Yolanda haven't missed a step along the way.

Making an early impression

Angie was a sophomore in high school when she learned she was pregnant with Douglas.

At 16, she didn't know what to expect from motherhood. The unknown scared her. Douglas's father was not involved, so Angie relied on her parents for guidance. In December of her junior year, she gave birth. By January, Angie had returned to school full-time. She graduated the following year with her class.

"I'm not advocating for teen pregnancy at all, but it was my drive to do the right thing," Angie said. "To do well and to want more."

Soon enough, Angie was driving 5-year-old Demario to and from football practice while balancing her job working in the mortgage industry.

Even at 5 — the age when children can start playing organized football in Florida — Douglas was already a stickler for punctuality. He took his practice schedule very seriously, insisting on timely arrivals. When Angie or Yolanda would occasionally run late, they could see him squirm.

"I would never have to remind him about practice," Angie said. "He was never that child. He was always ready to be there. It's just in him."

Although Demario was always on the shorter side compared with his peers, Angie can't remember a time when she heard him lament his size — probably because he could still impress on the field, his quickness, burst, and shiftiness apparent from an early age.

Bernard Harrell, who coached a 9-year-old Demario at the Pop Warner level, still remembers people asking after games, "Who is this small dude from St. Augustine?" Coaches on the sidelines and parents in the stands all seemed to have the same question.

"Every time he played in the game, he was the best player on the field. The first time I seen him, I was like, 'Man, this kid reminds me of Santana Moss.' He was short, real small, but he had a chip to him. There was something different about him."

Wherever Demario played football, he managed to leave a mark. When he was 14, competing in a seven-on-seven tournament in Atlanta, he made a seemingly effortless play that the league ended up using as the centerpiece of its promotional materials.

"He caught a slant pass between a safety and an outside linebacker," recalled Koreen Burch, Douglas's seven-on-seven coach. "He made the outside linebacker miss, he split the safety, and he scored a touchdown from, like, 30 yards."

"It was one of the craziest things ever done in seven-on-seven. Because seven-on-seven is touch football. They just weren't able to touch him at all."

As football grew into a bigger priority for Douglas, so did the time commitment and cost. Angie eventually left her corporate job and launched her own custom children's clothing company, so keeping the bills paid wasn't always easy. But Angie's efforts — staying up in the wee hours to fulfill orders — earned her the nickname "Miss Make It Happen."

Angie and Yolanda did whatever they could to support Douglas and his football dreams. Angie helped him review terminology and plays. Yolanda, a longtime clerk at the St. John's County Courts, took time off to attend games. They both worked the concession stand if the team asked parents to help, and brought refreshments.

When Douglas decided to transfer high schools after his sophomore year, he moved about 45 minutes away from his hometown and lived in Jacksonville with Yolanda for his junior and senior seasons. Angie still didn't miss a game, driving across the state to watch her son play.

"Being a statistic, being a teen mom, people are always telling you that's the end of your world," Angie said. "It wasn't for me. Or for Demario."

Fueled by rejection

Nobody can talk about Douglas's high school career without mentioning the Class 8A Florida state championship game his senior year.

On his 18th birthday, Douglas played almost every snap to help Mandarin High School upset undefeated Miami Columbus, 37-35. Douglas, who played both wide receiver and defensive back, caught a state-record four touchdown passes, intercepted a pass in the end zone, and picked up 48 yards as a return specialist.

"When I say he had a phenomenal game, like, oh my, it was crazy," Burch said. "I'm getting chills thinking about that night."

The performance caught the eye of Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, who tweeted, "These college coaches are sleeping on @dreamchaser031 [i.e. Douglas]. I've watched 100's of HS FB games in person & seen dozens of current & former NFL players in HS. This young man is one of the most impressive players I've ever seen. Someone going to get a steal by signing him."

Rubio, who graduated from the University of Florida, then tweeted at his alma mater, "Go get [Douglas] before he goes somewhere else and lights us up. Don't make me say I told you so!"

The championship game essentially served as a "who's who" for high school football, with players bound for Florida, Florida State, Clemson, and other Power 5 programs. Mandarin's quarterback that year, Carson Beck, was named Mr. Florida Football, an annual honor given to the top player in the state, and now will start for Georgia.

Douglas, however, couldn't get a sniff.

"Carson Beck threw for all these yards, but who was he throwing to?" asked Harrell, then Mandarin's wide receiver coach. "Demario Douglas!"

Headed into the championship game, Douglas's highlight reel was already full. An 80-yard slant to the house one week, a 100-yard kickoff return the next, a few interceptions sprinkled throughout. Douglas finished his senior season with 72 catches for 1,382 yards and 16 touchdowns, plus 8 interceptions. His tape showed deft body control, slipperiness in the open field, and an uncanny ability to stop and start on a dime.

"Everybody has a superpower," Harrell said. "That's his superpower — his stop-and-start. One-on-one, you're done. He's been cooking people in one-on-one since he was 10 years old."

Collecting college offers was challenging for Douglas because of one thing: his height. As a senior, Douglas measured in at 5-8 and 140 or so pounds.

"I knew he was going to get nickel-and-dimed on that," said Bobby Ramsay, Mandarin's head coach. "He did it all. But just knowing how the recruiting game goes, some coaches — you could be Emmitt Smith and Reggie White rolled into one; if you're not the height they want, they don't care."

Harrell remembers getting a call on a Friday from Wake Forest offensive coordinator Warren Ruggiero, who asked if Douglas could come to their camp the next day. So, late that night, Harrell drove Douglas up to North Carolina. After Douglas performed well in drills and ran a 4.41 in the 40-yard dash, the head coach wouldn't even talk to him.

"That's how bad it was," Harrell said. "He was like, 'Coach, I give up. This is terrible. I did everything they asked me to do.' He was just so frustrated."

But Douglas, rarely one to grumble, did his best to stay positive. He reminded himself: It only takes one. Douglas, his coaches, and family knew all he needed was an opportunity.

"I feel like that just put a chip on my shoulder to work harder," Douglas said. "I believe that helped me, that pushed me. I wouldn't say that started my drive, I always had a drive, but I believe that just helped me focus, lock in, and separate myself."

Picking up steam at Liberty

Florida State tried to sneak in for a last-minute push, but Douglas's mind was made up. He was going to Liberty, a private Christian university in Lynchburg, Va. It was the lone official Division 1 offer he received.

"Liberty showed him love before the hype," Angie said.

Douglas red-shirted his freshman year, playing in just four games. The skill set was there, but Maurice Harris, Liberty's co-offensive coordinator and wide receiver coach at the time, felt Douglas needed to do two things: gain weight and learn the playbook better.

Harris watched Douglas embrace the grind. He bought into the school's strength and conditioning program, cleaned up his nutrition, and bulked up from 149 to 170 pounds. He sat front-row during meetings. He organized extra practice sessions, in which he and his teammates could run through seven-on-seven periods, one-on-one drills, and routes on air without the coaches.

When Douglas wasn't at the athletic complex, his roommates found him watching YouTube videos of other receivers, looking at their technique, identifying how they get open. Growing up, Douglas loved watching highlights of Brandon James, a fellow St. Augustine native, and Tavon Austin.

"I don't care how quick you are, you have to use really good technique to get off press," Harris said. "He put the work in."

Douglas ended his red-shirt year by playing in the Cure Bowl against Georgia Southern. On one of his two receptions, Douglas caught a bubble-screen pass and dodged the incoming safety to convert the first down. The play reaffirmed something for Harris: "The first guy is not going to tackle Demario Douglas."

From there, Douglas started to shine. As a true freshman, he logged his first 100-yard receiving game and began returning punts. As a sophomore, he had back-to-back games with more than 100 receiving yards.

After Douglas caught four passes for 128 yards against Alabama-Birmingham that season, UAB's wide receivers coach called Bernard and said, "Damn, why did we pass on him?"

With each year, Douglas's role grew. The goal was always the same: Get Douglas the football in the open field, so he can make people miss. As a junior last year, Douglas finished just 7 yards short of a 1,000-yard season, with six receiving touchdowns and one rushing touchdown. He also was the team's primary return specialist.

Against Wake Forest that season, Douglas not only caught seven passes for 124 yards and two touchdowns, he also gained 79 yards on four kick returns. After the game, coach Dave Clawson — who wouldn't talk to Douglas after he came to Wake Forest's camp in high school — shouted out the performance.

"That guy, No. 3, Demario," Clawson said. "Oh my goodness. That guy could play anywhere in the ACC."

Support system

As those back in Florida hear and read updates from Gillette Stadium, the news that Douglas has established himself as a consistent contributor comes as no surprise. They've known what he's been capable of for years.

"You don't always see people get what they deserve," Ramsay said. "I think he is in this case."

For Douglas, the doubters are no longer his primary motivation. As he works to lock up a spot on the 53-man roster and perhaps carve out a long-term role as a slot receiver, he keeps his family top of mind. He hopes to allow his mother to retire soon, and to eventually buy his grandmother a new house.

"My why is my family," he said. "They're why I go so hard."

There's certainly precedent for a player such as Douglas to succeed in New England. Troy Brown, Wes Welker, Danny Amendola, and Julian Edelman all entered the NFL as late-round selections or undrafted rookies. All were under 6 feet and weighed less than 200 pounds.

No matter how much playing time Douglas earns this season, Angie and Yolanda will surely be found — or heard — in the stands.

"I always believe that us being able to call his name out, him hearing us yelling, just knowing that we're there, makes a different presence," Angie said. "To know that somebody is out there in the stands with their eye on me, who loves me, I'm big on that. I always tell people, show up for your kid. You never know how much it means to them."

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."

DT Daniel Ekuale

The Seattle Times

After a transformative offseason, WSU nose tackle Daniel Ekuale is playing the best football of his life

By Stefanie Lowe

The worst day of Daniel Ekuale's four years at Washington State came last July, when the entire Cougars football team was punished after some players were accused of starting a fight at an off campus party.

Two WSU students were injured in the brawl, and in initial reports, two Samoan WSU football players were accused of being the responsible parties, though one, Robert Barber was later found not guilty by a Whitman County jury. The other, T.J. Fehoko, has since been dismissed from the team.

But way before all that played out, WSU coach Mike Leach put the entire football team through a hellish summer day of extra conditioning as penance.

Wearing thick metal chains around their necks, the team marched up and down every single flight of steps at Martin Stadium before being forced to roll their bodies down multiple lengths of the football fields.

"It was terrible. That was my worst day," says Ekuale, now the starting nose tackle who will lead 20th-ranked WSU's defensive line against Boise State this Saturday at Martin Stadium.

It wasn't just the punishment that made that day so hard for Ekuale. The party fight struck off a 10-month ordeal for Ekuale's roommate, Barber, WSU's former nose tackle who was initially expelled by the school's conduct board for his alleged role in the fight, then spent months fighting his case before he was finally cleared of the assault charge in court in May.

Looking back on last season, Ekuale says Barber's ordeal affected him deeply, and in some ways, it served as the catalyst for the drastic improvements he's made to his game this offseason.

Even though he did not participate in the fight, Ekuale was one of the many football players who attended the party last July, and he came away from the incident feeling as if he'd disappointed both his football family and his Samoan family at home in Pago Pago, American Samoa.

"It was really a letdown, not only for our team, but for our culture too, where Rob and I are from," Ekuale said. "It was really bad, the timing and the situation. It was not a good time for us, and what we were trying to build last year.

For Ekuale, Barber's ordeal reinforced the notion that one wrong step could potentially wipe out all that he'd spent years working toward.

He's completely changed his mindset as to how he's approached practice and the games, and he's done a tremendous job being a leader on the team." - WSU defensive line coach Jeff Phelps

"I think it was eye opening for me, just trying to stay away from the trouble and all the chaos that goes on," Ekuale says. "I think it was just another eye opener for the people back home too, (about) all the things going on over here. For them to know too that if their kids get a scholarship over here, just to stay out of trouble and lay low and keep your nose clean."

So, going into his senior year, Ekuale channeled all his efforts into football and resolved to make this the best season he's had at WSU.

One game into the season, he's off to a good start. Ekuale had two tackles, including one for loss, against Montana State in the Cougars' season opening win last weekend. But statistics aren't always the best measure of a nose tackle's performance.

"A lot of times in the battle of the trenches, he's right in the middle of it and you don't really see a lot of the production that he has," says defensive line coach Jeff Phelps. "If two guys have to block him and one of the linebackers gets free, the linebacker gets credit for that play. But the defensive line really made that play. To us, that's a victory."

Another strong barometer of Ekuale's performance is WSU coach Mike Leach's uncharacteristically effusive praise for his senior nose tackle this week.

"He's had an incredible offseason, the best offseason I've ever seen him have. He had a huge offseason, (with) work and focus and all those things and some leadership qualities too, and (Ekuale), I thought, played one of the very best games of our entire defense this last game," Leach said.

It's a lofty compliment from a coach who's usually reserved in his praise for players. But, says Phelps, it's well-deserved.

"I saw Daniel make some plays that – in talking with the staff – he possibly didn't make last year," said Phelps, who joined the Cougars in January to replace Joe Salave'a, after the latter left for Oregon. "He was more active, he looked healthy, quick and strong, and he was disrupting plays.

"He's completely changed his mindset as to how he's approached practice and the games, and he's done a tremendous job being a leader on the team."

Growing pains

Success didn't come easily to Ekuale through his first few years in Pullman.

During his freshman year, Ekuale's greatest battles took place in the classroom, where he struggled to keep up with lessons taught in English – a language he says he wasn't fluent in until his sophomore year of college.

"When I first got here, I was not comfortable with English and stuff because it's not my first language. It was really hard, really complicated for me to speak English over here. School was really hard for me," said Ekuale, who will graduate in December with a criminal justice degree.

At Nu'uuli Technical High School in Samoa, classes were taught in both Samoan and English, Ekuale said. But outside of school, he never spoke English until he got to WSU, defaulting instead to his native Samoan when around friends and family back home.

In Pullman in 2013, Ekuale found himself suddenly immersed in an all-English world. Having Samoan teammates like Barber and Destiny Vaeao, and a Samoan position coach in Salave'a, helped ease his transition. But his struggles with the language, coupled with being far away from home and having to learn a new defensive scheme, made freshman year more challenging for Ekuale than most.

He's had an incredible offseason, the best offseason I've ever seen him have." - WSU coach Mike Leach

He also discovered an unfortunate tendency in himself: Whenever he got fatigued on the field, his brain would switch off and he'd become more consumed with regulating his breathing instead of concentrating on the play.

That, combined with how he shuffled through three different positions on the defensive line over his first four years, made it difficult for Ekuale to find his niche on the field.

Yet, despite his struggles, Ekuale's raw talent stood out enough that he played 12 games as a redshirt freshman in 2014, and has since appeared in every game over the last two seasons at WSU, making 10 starts.

Salave'a's departure for Oregon this winter came as another big blow because the coach had been a father figure and mentor to Ekuale and many other Samoan players on the team.

"It was really hard the day I found out about it. It was really sad, that day," Ekuale says, emphasizing that he has no hard feelings toward Salave'a, because he understands that "at some point in life, you've gotta do what you gotta do for the family."

"I'm happy for him," Ekuale says. "But we'll look forward to playing Oregon this year."

A new outlook

Ekuale moved to nose tackle full-time this spring to fill the void created by Barber's graduation in December.

His play was average at first, and after the Cougars' first spring scrimmage, Phelps sought out Ekuale for a chat.

"The first spring scrimmage we had, he didn't have much production at all," Phelps said. "That's what we talked about, and you can tell it really hit home for him. Then, he came out in the second scrimmage and scored a lot of production points."

After his talk with Phelps, Ekuale really re-evaluated himself.

"I felt like, at some point, I had to stop what I was doing because I was thinking, 'I'm not doing anything, I'm not making progress for the team, not making a commitment to my teammates,'" Ekuale said. "I was thinking, 'I need to step up and be a leader and show it in my play.'"

Since then, Ekuale's stock has been on an upward trajectory.

To minimize his tendency to slip into mental lapses when he's fatigued, Ekuale did a lot of extra conditioning by himself this offseason, regularly running stadium stairs or sprints. He was also conscientious about building his body, putting on more than 15 pounds of good weight over the summer.

Now at a robust 6-foot-3, 305 pounds, the senior tackle has transformed his physique, says defensive coordinator Alex Grinch.

"He's taken that next step going into his senior year, understanding that this is it for him," Grinch said.

The transformation wasn't just physical. Ekuale adopted an entirely new mindset going into this season. For one, he's relaxed a bit and doesn't put as much pressure on himself.

"I think he had the mindset that he had to make every play, and it ultimately forced him not to make a lot of plays. He just wasn't very productive," Phelps said. "When you do too much, you find yourself in bad positions. I told him that ultimately, that's what he needed to get better at."

"He really took pride in that and worked his butt off as far as getting an understanding of his body and the details and fundamentals that would help him finish the play."

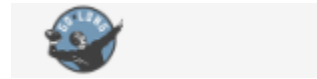
Also, the old Ekuale, Leach says, was inconsistent, and often took too long to rebound from disappointment or a bad game.

The new Ekuale has truly learned – to borrow from one of Leach's catchphrases – to play the next play, and this shortened memory has brought a level of consistency he never had before.

"The game of football, sometimes you get emotional and it gets to you if you don't respond the right way," Ekuale said. "You just have to have the mindset that you will come to practice and get better and move forward. I'm just trying to be the best I can be."

"This is my last year. I've got to make it count. There's no more excuses. All I've gotta do is put it all on the line and help this team win."

RB Antonio Gibson



'AG' takes DC: Antonio Gibson is unlike anything we've seen

By Tyler Dunne

BROADLANDS, Va. — Welcome, all, to the light at the end of the tunnel. Right here is the sign of hope everyone associated with the Washington Football Team has been longing for.

A franchise forever embroiled in misery is finally exiting the Dark Ages.

Don't call him a savior. Don't call him the franchise player. He rattles off three, four, five other names on the roster at the mere suggestion but, of course, we all know the best heroes are reluctant heroes and if anyone can make you care about football in the nation's capital, it's him.

It's the man sitting here with the blinding silver necklace that reads "AG" and "WEAPON." Even though you might see "The Weapon" promoted on his social channels, it's "AG" that Antonio Gibson really loves.

That nickname is simple. Smooth. Rolls off the tongue.

If... no... when Gibson sets defenses ablaze, that's what we'll all be calling him.

And this scorching July day feels something like a calm before the storm. Gibson chooses Clyde's Willow Creek Farm to grab lunch, and it's a classy establishment. The feel here is very old school with portraits of jockeys and horses all over the walls. Conversations at nearby tables are held two notches above a whisper. The waiters are dressed to the nines.

And here's "AG," a fluorescent new school beam of hope.

It's impossible to pigeonhole this running back in the velvet Von Dutch orange trucker hat, two different-colored shoes and spastic "Trippie Redd" t-shirt seemingly pulled straight out of Spencer's. Gibson's not even a rabid fan of the rapper — he just thought the shirt was sweet. When it comes to music, he likes everything. Pop, rap, R&B, country. Gibson recently heard Johnny Cash's "A Boy Named Sue" and cracked up laughing. That classic instantly made its way to a playlist. So did the Lumineers' "Angela." And while explaining how he could never be like Kanye West or any famous rapper constantly "flipping wives and girlfriends" — such a lifestyle never appealed to him — Gibson hears Eminem's "Stan" hum over the speakers and interrupts himself to say he likes this song, too.

AG cannot be put in a box on the field, either.

There's not another weapon in the NFL quite like this collegiate wide receiver turned No. 1 running back on a reigning division champ. Nobody in the league brings this perspective to this position and his timing is perfect. The WFT is absolutely starving for a new identity. The WFT is doing everything in its power to drive the entire franchise in a new direction. These last two years alone have seen an unprecedented amount of turmoil with everything getting so bad that owner Dan Snyder essentially pulled all skeletons out of the team's closet to burn them for good.

A quick recap. Try to keep up.

Jay Gruden is fired. Dwayne Haskins flops. Bruce Allen's decade as GM finally ends. Four of Snyder's most trusted employees with a combined 55 years of experience leave.

Ron Rivera is hired. The “Redskins” are no more. The franchise’s three minority investors reportedly are sick of Snyder and want to sell.

An explosive Washington Post story drops with 15 women alleging sexual harassment and verbal abuse. The WFT hires attorney Beth Wilkinson to investigate.

Snyder makes a legal claim against a former front-office assistant, saying Mary-Ellen Blair led a campaign against him by taking money to spread negative information.

Second-rounder Derrius Guice is released after being arrested on domestic violence charges.

Jason Wright is hired as the first black team president in NFL history. He vows transparency.

Rivera is diagnosed with cancer and undergoes seven weeks of chemotherapy and proton therapy.

A lawsuit is settled with team cheerleaders.

With Rivera in charge of everything, the front office beefs up with Martin Mayhew, Chris Polian and Marty Hurney. Wright announces the team will have a name in 2022.

As Go Long first reported, Snyder becomes the sole owner of the team with the league’s finance committee approving a \$450 million debt waiver to allow Snyder to buy the 40.5 percent of shares owned by those three minority investors.

Snyder files a suit against Allen, seeking access to his former GM’s texts and documents that he alleges led to negative reporting.

The NFL fines the WFT \$10 million after a year-long investigation into the team’s workplace culture. Tanya Snyder, Dan’s wife, is named the co-CEO and must take over day-to-day operations for the next “several months.”

Such is life in the D.C. swamp, I suppose. A whirlwind of utter chaos.

There’s also one other tiny, little detail to consider: Washington has won two playoff games since 1992. On the field, for a generation, this team has been irrelevant. The calls for Snyder to sell the team only got louder, and louder. But now? That dark cloud hovering over the franchise is dissipating. The organization has real structure. Rivera is one of the best coaches in football. This is the most ferocious defensive line in football. The roster — top to bottom — is strong, deep and let’s not forget that Washington made the eventual Super Bowl Champions sweat to the final horn with Taylor Freakin’ Heinicke.

One problem: They need an identity.

This franchise without a name is begging for a headliner and that headliner is Gibson, a player who’ll force everyone to stop whatever they’re doing in 2021 to replay that juke, that spin, that 70-yard touchdown on their phone. Nobody at his position thinks the game like he does. And the 23-year-old also knows that — like the WFT itself — his darkest days are behind him.

An absent father. A mother in the Middle East. An offseason that challenged his mental health. A cloud over his own life has also dissipated. Now, his “humble” goal this season is to hit 1,200 rushing yards with 12-plus touchdowns and he believes 2,000 total yards from scrimmage is extremely doable considering how much the WFT coaches plan on using him.

Here, he looks down at his tattoo-covered right arm. His “family sleeve.” On the inside of his forearm is his deceased grandmother’s name. She was “the rock” of the family, he says, and a huge Redskins fan. On his right bicep are three black silhouettes. He’s the smaller one in the middle, holding hands with his mother and sister. Above it are the words: “We may not have it all together, but together we have it all.”

He turns his arm over and, in huge swooping cursive, are the names of both adjacent to a lock and a key.

Two roads led Gibson to this point, this takeover in DC.

There’s all of the football, the X’s and O’s he’ll twist in directions we have not seen before. And there’s family, the moments of trauma and hope that molded him.

Football

Long before “AG” and “WEAPON” were dangling around his neck, everyone else gave Antonio Gibson a nickname that was slightly less terrifying: “Lil Tony.”

The name stuck through his entire childhood in Stockbridge, Ga., mainly because Mom made a habit of sticking Gibson in leagues above his age.

Elementary to middle to high school, Lil Tony was the frailest dude darting all over the field and he played everything from quarterback to running back to wide receiver to corner to safety to linebacker. The “Honey Badger” almost inspired him to stick with defense. Karl Joseph, too. One hit particularly? “You can feel it,” he says. “Like, ‘Pow!’ Oh Lord!”

Gibson was always the runt of the lot and his technique? Shoddy.

But Gibson was also athletic... fast... fearless.

Into ninth grade — when his head coach at Eagle’s Landing — deemed him too light to play varsity, Gibson made everyone’s practice a living hell on the scout team. Right then is when he learned not to give a damn about his size. Released on rocket motions and jet sweeps, Gibson pissed off the seniors daily.

“I was humiliating guys at practice,” Gibson says. “I’d make a good play and they’d say, ‘Relax!’ or ‘Calm down!’ and I’d say, ‘Nah! You’re not about to hit me.’”

When he did get tagged, they made him pay but whatever. He learned to shake it off.

And the next year — his year — Gibson broke his ankle two days before his first game in practice. He was devastated. He cried for three days straight, unable to accept the reality that football was taken from him. Of course, even then, Gibson’s raw talent bubbled to the surface. He remembers sprinting through the hallways with his cast on and dunking a basketball with his boot on. A windmill jam, to be exact. By the time he returned as a junior, Gibson only felt stronger. He did his thing on the field and started getting college looks that following summer when he won MVP awards at three different camps.

The bad news? His grades. They scared off everyone. Power 5 schools were interested — Clemson even liked Gibson at safety — but, one by one, he remembers schools saying “We would offer you, but...”

Gibson only had himself to blame. He did not take school seriously.

“Not caring,” he says. “Barely passing.”

Which proved to be ironic, right? From East Central Community College to Memphis to the WFT, Gibson has been used in imaginative ways that demand intelligence. As he learned, success in the public school system does not always equate to success in the real world. Heck, when Gibson returned to Georgia this year, he saw the smartest kid in his graduating class working at a gas station as the attendant. He wanted to tell him that he should be doing so much more in life with a brain like that.

If that classmate’s struggling to apply his skills to the real world, Gibson certainly is not.

On to JUCO, coach Ken Karcher first planted the idea of playing running back in his head. Karcher saw a ripped 6-footer with broad shoulders who’d decimate defenses from the backfield in the pros — and he’d know. He used to back up John Elway on the Denver Broncos. But, eh, Gibson wasn’t interested. Gibson wanted to zero in on receiver, once and for all, and totaled 1,674 all-purpose yards with 16 total touchdowns those two JUCO years.

Off to Memphis he went where he’d need to wait. Again.

Gibson isn’t sure why he barely touched the ball in 2018 but took the year to master Mike Norvell’s dizzying playbook and truly sharpen his receiving skills with assistant John Simon.

Four other future NFL backs were on the roster, so there was no need for Gibson in the backfield, either.

Finally, in 2019, Norvell unleashed Gibson and he was a threat to go the distance any given play. He caught 38 balls for 735 yards (19.3 avg.) with eight touchdowns. And when Patrick Taylor, who spoke to Go Long here, went down?

Gibson also started getting the ball in creative ways on the ground, totaling 369 yards and four scores on 33 attempts.

A human cheat code, indeed.

Norvell describes his scheme as one “built for playmakers,” one that’ll get you in a 1-on-1 situation.

For Gibson, it was a match made in heaven.

“He has extreme speed,” says Norvell, who’s now the head coach at Florida State. “He’s an explosive mover. He’s one of the hardest people I’ve ever been around to tackle. I mean, whether it’s a spin move or his physical size and strength coupled with game-changing speed, it’s just a perfect combination. He’s got a true knack for being able to make the explosive plays happen and operate in small spaces. He is a true game-changer.”

From afar, NFL agent Rodney Williams watched No. 14 in blue light defenses up and saw a potential star... at running back. Williams knew this sport was evolving, quickly, and was convinced that running back would unlock all of that potential greatness in Gibson.

Mano a mano, Gibson will win more than he loses. He needed to play a position where he’d touch the ball 20-plus times a game.

“You could also see his ability to sit there, read, lean in, dip back out,” says Williams, who helped 14-year veteran cornerback Tramon Williams bust onto the scene. “He was also breaking through a lot of tackles. You saw it all. You saw footwork. You saw speed ability. He wasn’t afraid to run between the tackles. The fact that he could catch the ball was the icing on the cake.”

On to the Senior Bowl, Gibson played running back and Washington fell in love. They loved him so much they barely even talked to him all spring — God forbid another team find out — and made him the 66th overall pick. The result? A pure weapon bringing a completely different view of the field. He is no robot trained to the step. Gibson isn’t obsessing over D-Linemen and linebackers, no, he’s looking to the next level.

Where most backs see the potential for seven yards, Gibson sees 70.

“I would say playing receiver is a lot of finesse,” Gibson says. “You’ve got to get open. And when you get into the open field, my mindset is to score. You don’t just fall down. You’ve got to go score. With me being shifty, that comes from receiver. Having to beat man-on-man press. In the open field, having to make moves and get to the end zone.”

Where most backs study film 24/7, Gibson frankly is not. He doesn’t want to be too influenced by anyone else. He cautions all not to try this at home, but it’s the truth: Gibson doesn’t agonize over film because he believes teams adjust a ton week to week anyways.

AG will be AG.

AG isn’t going to react to you, rather you must react to him. And on his way to the end zone, he just may switch the ball to his other hand so he can wave “goodbye.”

As a rookie, Gibson rushed for 795 yards with 11 scores and, according to PFF, forced 37 missed tackles. As he says, other backs “get hit and give up.” He does not. And that mentality came back to bite him. After winging it at running back most of the season, Gibson was just starting to turn a corner when his season ended prematurely with a turf toe suffered while fighting for extra yards.

“It’ll take more than one person to take me down,” Gibson says. “I ain’t going down easy.”

He stops eating his salad for a moment when asked if that mentality — off the field — has roots.

There is something deeper here, beyond his ascension on the field. The real story’s written on that bicep.

His mother made sacrifices. He recalls Annette Williams working three jobs at a time. One job had her checking the energy meters at homes of strangers. When dogs started chasing her out, she started carrying pepper spray just in case she was attacked. Another job was with Southeastrans, a transportation service. And for four years, Annette actually lived overseas. She left her son because this was the best thing for his future. A contracting job in the Middle

East opened up and since this was such a dangerous part of the world — “Iraq or Iran,” as Gibson recalls, “a war area” — it paid really well.

Mom knew each penny would go a long way back home so she took the risk. Bomb threats were common.

His sister made sacrifices. When Mom flew to the Middle East, Danielle Moore put her own life on hold to look after Gibson. She was fresh out of college. She had her own career in the works. But Lil Tony was also in fifth grade and needed a parental figure. They bumped heads, grew closer and Gibson subconsciously started calling Moore “Mom.”

It wasn’t easy to say goodbye to his Mom back then. (“I hated it,” he says.) But this all made Gibson who he is today, too.

“I feel like I owe it to them,” Gibson says. “Now, that I’m here, I feel like I’m far from done.”

Of course, there’s one silhouette missing on that tattoo. A father. Ask Gibson where his Dad was through this all and he fidgets in his booth. His mood changes. Clearly, this is a sensitive subject.

“Nah. He wasn’t around much at all.”

To understand who Antonio Gibson is and where Antonio Gibson is going, you must understand the Dad he didn’t have and the Dad he is today.

Family

As Lil Tony morphed into “AG” through high school, his father was two hours away.

Two hours too far, apparently, to support his son.

Gibson remembers looking up into the crowd for his Dad, unable to spot him anywhere.

“He never showed up to the games,” Gibson says. “It affected me. It showed me — now that I have my own kid — what not to do. At the end of the day, that’s all kids really want. They just want you to be there. It hurt. If he wasn’t there, it would’ve been cool. But him saying he was going to show up... and you’d be in the game, looking up there, and after the game, you’d be like, ‘Mom, where is Dad?’”

Mom would cry. Gibson would cry.

It all took a psychological toll.

Dad was an athlete himself. Growing up, he’d regale Gibson with tales of how good he was in baseball and how he “chose the wrong path” and still regrets it to this day. His absence back then still affects Gibson. He even makes a point to say he could’ve been a much better person and player if his Dad, simply, took the time to “pour into me.” It wasn’t until Antonio Gibson became a nationally known name that Dad started reaching out more. (“Typical story,” son says.)

Not that Dad has asked for anything. Rather, he tried to give his side to the story, his reasoning for missing all of those games in high school.

Gibson can’t hold a grudge. If Dad calls, he’ll answer. But that’s the extent of their relationship right now and he says he takes everything with a grain of salt.

Thinking back, there was one high school game Dad attended, but he left at halftime. One college game, too.

That was about it.

“Of course, I’ve got some negative feelings toward him,” Gibson says. “When he asks to come to games, I don’t mind. But at the same time, I won’t go out of my way to buy you a ticket. I won’t go out of my way to have you at a game. If you want to go to a game, you’ve got to show me that you want to. I’m not going out of my way to do it because you didn’t go out of your way to see me when I was younger.”

That darkness really came into focus this offseason when Gibson became a father himself.

And this experience has shaped who he is more than anyone realizes.

That turf toe didn't help. He didn't even work out in cleats until minicamp. But he's more so talking about his mental health — the exact moment he found out he was going to be a Dad. It all happened "pretty quick." Gibson admits he hadn't been with his girlfriend that long and the manic speed at which life was moving? With the urge to help family financially tugging at him? With expectations rising? It all felt way, way, wayyy too fast. He admits he had to ask himself serious questions about his relationship with his girlfriend, his new life, where everything was headed.

The months of March and April felt like a darkness. "Horrible," he admits.

"This offseason was stressful," Gibson says. "It was beating me down. She had an idea but she didn't really understand what I was going through. So, it was tough. It took me a minute to get my thoughts together and try to slow everything down."

We tend to forget pro athletes are like any of us. They, too, are stricken with anxiety and emotions like this hit harder than any linebacker.

After all, these were also the feet that were supposed to repay his Mom and sister for their sacrifice and he couldn't do what he did best: Cut. His superpower was temporarily MIA. After the 2020 season, doctors thought the fluid would go away. It did not. It lingered. He feared he wouldn't be the same weapon in 2021. An offseason procedure finally cleaned it up and Gibson was good to go.

Right around then is when he snapped out of his funk, too.

Gibson didn't need a heart-to-heart with anyone. He looked in the mirror. He didn't have a choice.

"I had to," Gibson says. "The baby was here. Camp was here. So, I was like, 'I've got to get right.'"

His daughter was born and it hit Gibson that football has always been his "safe haven." Football is what masked the pain of Dad's absence. No wonder he couldn't stop crying upon injuring his ankle in high school.

He needs the ball in his hands, needs to be that artist on the field.

For those three hours, nothing else matters.

"It clears your mind," Gibson says. "I feel like if you can practice and do all of this... everything else? There's nothing to worry about. Sometimes, it's a good thing. Sometimes, it's a bad thing. If you have a situation that really needs to be taken care of, you can say, 'I'll practice. I'm fine.' And you put it in the back of your head. And, later, it'll pop up."

And that's the thing. The colossal life change popping into his mind 24/7 now was welcomed. Gibson cannot get enough of his daughter. Even as he rehabilitated his toe in D.C. through the spring, Gibson made a point to fly back to Atlanta each Thursday through Sunday to be with her.

Here, his entire mood perks back up as the conversation shifts from his Dad to being a Dad.

Life as a father is clearly fueling everything we'll see on the field in 2021.

"When I go home, I don't try to do anything," he says. "It's just me and her."

Fine, he confesses that he wanted a boy at first. His girlfriend, too. Now? He wouldn't change a thing. His daughter's turning him into a total softie. At the time of this chat, she's only six weeks old so there's not too much the family can do together. They tried going to a strawberry farm but, he says with a laugh, "she didn't do anything but cry." No doubt, Gibson would rather talk about parenthood than anything on a field.

He asks all about this visitor's 21-month-old so he can know what to expect. When he hears about a certain no-neck pose, Gibson has to see a photo and, promptly, peels over.

Life as a Dad is the best. Gibson cannot wait to FaceTime his girl after this convo and is overcome with the desire to destroy anything that'd ever harm her.

"Seeing a fly around!" he says, pretending to swat a fly. "Getting it!"

His whole family will be with him in D.C. through the 2021 season and, yes, he'll change all of the diapers that he can. Even after a certain, uh, episode.

As Gibson starts to tell this story, he can't stop laughing. Initially, his daughter's diapers didn't stink. That "tar"-like substance was easy to handle. Now? He braces for impact. A week before this chat, Gibson correctly slid a clean diaper underneath the dirty one, wiped his daughter's bottom, strapped on the clean diaper and she instantly filled it up.

He moved her to blanket and... she pooped all over the blanket.

He moved once more and... you guessed it. More mess. Everywhere.

Gibson is in near-tears reliving that day. That's what his life is all about now — making memories.

"I can't wait to get her to a game," he says.

He's not stressing anymore, no.

He's ready to take over the league.

"AG"

For a moment, Antonio Gibson imagines himself back in his sanctuary.

The ball's in his hands. He sees a crease. He's thinking touchdown.

This is what life's like in his cleats.

"My eyes get big," he says. "I already have big eyes. But when I get the ball, I see so much. Sometimes, it can be a bad thing. As a receiver, I see so much and think I see a hole over there instead of just running straight. It's like, 'Oh! Let me go over there and try to make a play.' I see a lot and I'm able to...."

Gibson snaps his fingers.

"...react so quick to certain moves. Against the Cardinals, I kind of shocked myself. I juked like four or five people. It wasn't nothing crazy but it was quick reacting. Like, juke, cut, juke, jump cut! It was just quick reacting. It was just shocking. I don't know. It just happens!

"I shock myself sometimes. But it's always been like that. I just ride with it."

There's no AOL Dial Up processing in real time.

The jukes. The spins. The stiff-arms. Whatever he needs to do to escape is all innate, he explains. That's what football itself always helped him do: Escape.

"I'm not even realizing this until now," he says, "but that was a way to get away from everything — school, parents, anything that was going on outside of football. Like I said, I cried. The first three days. When you take that away, it's horrible."

Even though he's at peace now, that escapability, that creativity is ingrained. Forever. So, this season, he'll be that weapon we haven't quite seen before.

He'll be the singular force of nature who wills Washington past all the lawsuits, all the controversy, all the headaches right into legitimate contention. Gibson enjoys the love he's been getting from fans. He hears everyone saying that he "could be that guy," yet refuses to put himself on any pedestal because he knows that 2020 only provided a small taste of what's to come.

"It wasn't that special to me," Gibson says. "I'm just touching the water. This year's going to be something special."

He pauses.

"This year is going to be something special."

As in... Alvin Kamara? Christian McCaffrey? That stratosphere of special? There's no hesitation. "Definitely, definitely," Gibson says. He throws 2016 Le'Veon Bell in there, too. They have similar body types and Bell, too, could split out at receiver. With another full training camp of learning the running back position, Gibson knows his arrow will only point up. His position coach, Randy Jordan, has been teaching him how to be patient, press the line and force the defender to move before juking himself. Gibson is still new to this all, of course. He's learning how to read his blocks, stay on a blocker's outside hip and when to get north to take any yardage he can instead of going full Barry Sanders.

Still, Gibson believes the key is taking all of this coaching without completely rewiring those instincts.

He doesn't want to overthink this all to the point of becoming too... too...

"Robotic," he says. "I feel that's what a lot of running backs do. When they grow up, all they do is running back. They're stuck in that world of downhill running or make-a-cut-and-go. I feel that's what makes me different going from receiver to running back. I make the extra cut. I'm not scared to make the extra cut. I'm not scared to make somebody miss in the backfield, and then try to get north. Or get shifty. Try to make a play. That's what puts me over the edge of a lot of folks."

That's what makes Jordan such a good coach, too. He doesn't sanitize Gibson's creativity.

Take the end of a win vs. Cincinnati. On an outside zone play to the left, Gibson saw nothing but green to his right. He planted his foot, jetted across the field and says a defender barely tripped him up.

"If he didn't catch my leg, I was out of there."

Instead, Gibson lost five yards.

Nobody will shackle the playmaker within and you best believe he'll swing for the fences again. He knows all defensive coordinators in the NFL are doing everything in their power to eliminate the big play and that he is the sort of unique talent who can take their gameplan and effectively slide it through a paper-shredder with one juke.

"I'm always looking for that big play," Gibson says. "This is a big-play league. They don't happen too often. It's hard. I'm definitely trying to change that."

When it comes to film, OK, he's watching a bit more. Gibson has been firing up the McCaffrey and Kamara clips of late and loves how in-control Kamara is of his own body. The Saints back lulls all other players on the field to his School Zone speed. As Gibson puts it, "he's never 100 percent." He runs at a "jog." A "tempo pace." He is... "cruising." Which all allows Kamara to stop 'n go at any moment. By forcing you to play at his speed, every one of Kamara's cuts is that much more devastating.

Expect this from Gibson in 2021.

Further, he says his advantage over these two is that they've always been running backs. At receiver, he was going "toe to toe" with corners. He saw the game in a way they never have.

"Once it all comes full circle?" he says. "It's going to be something to deal with."

Norvell agrees. He believes the "full-field approach" that wide receiver demands gives Gibson an unlimited ceiling. Gibson knows how defenses are trying to attack — from the front to the back — and can play freely.

"He is the prototype of a game-changer," Norvell says. "He can line up all over the field. There's no limits to what he can accomplish. If he continues to grow and develop like I believe he will, he's going to be one of the greats in the National Football League."

Adds Williams: "He's the type of kid who truly enjoys the game. He would play it for free. He loves football that much."

Which is, precisely, what Washington has always needed.

A Johnny Cash-listening, "AG" necklace-wearing gamebreaker who's new to this all.

Gibson can feel a building sense of hope with this fan base.

He cannot wait to play with quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick, too. All people keep telling him is that Fitz is the best teammate he could have... and, yes, it's true that Fitz loves throwing the ball to his backs. Adjust your fantasy cheatsheet accordingly. Just as they wanted absolutely nobody knowing they coveted Gibson out of Memphis, Washington doesn't want a soul knowing how they'll employ him in Year 2. Coaches kept their best playmaker mostly on ice.

This sense of newness, of unpredictability is what this franchise needed. Badly.

It's what Gibson needed, too. A future wife. A daughter. He's forming his own family now and could not be happier.

Football? That's the fun part, a mystery to the man himself. Gibson heads outside to his sleek black car with the "HELL CAT" on the windshield and drives off to his second workout of the day. He can't wait to morph himself into a weapon you haven't seen before.

If you want to label him a savior, a face of the franchise, that's fine.

All Gibson wants to go by is "Dad."

And he's got a few more diapers to change, too.

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."

CB Christian Gonzalez



Christian Gonzalez was stuck on the JV team and almost quit football. Instead he became a top NFL draft prospect

By James Crepea

April 26, 2023

The Colony High School's football team awards helmet stickers for each phase of the game: a skull and crossbones for defensive plays, gold stars for offense and cougar paws for special teams.

When Christian Gonzalez was playing at Tommy Briggs Stadium in the north Dallas suburb, few opponents were willing to challenge the cornerback, yet his helmet was still adorned with an array of merit badges.

"We had to develop a whole other category for Christian because they never threw to his side," said Rudy Rangel, coach at The Colony. "I said every five routes that were run and your receiver didn't catch the ball, you get a sticker. He would go 60 plays and they'd throw the ball to his side one time.

"It would keep him engaged. The stats weren't there. You had to know that he eliminated a side of the field. There was one game, could have given him the offensive MVP, the defensive MVP and special teams."

In two seasons at The Colony, Gonzalez had 46 tackles, 17 pass breakups, three interceptions, two forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries. He earned acclaim and attention, yet was still somewhat under the radar as a four-star recruit.

The No. 326-ranked overall prospect and No. 46 player in the state of Texas in the class of 2020, Gonzalez grossly surpassed those marks during his three seasons in college, two at Colorado and one at Oregon.

The 6-foot-1, 197-pound Gonzalez had 50 tackles, four interceptions, seven pass breakups and a blocked field goal last season for the Ducks en route to first-team all-Pac-12 honors by the league's coaches.

He received a 92 overall draft score from NFL Next Gen Stats, highest among this year's cornerbacks and boosted by his 40-yard dash time of 4.38 seconds.

He'll become the fourth Oregon defensive back selected in the first round of the NFL draft since 1967 and the first since Alex Molden (No. 11 in 1996).

"Sky's the limit for Christian," Oregon coach Dan Lanning said. "Whatever team gets Christian, they're hitting a home run. He's one of the best corners I've ever been around and a better human."

But the red carpet and green room of the NFL draft, the handshake and hug with commissioner Roger Goodell — they were pipe dreams for Gonzalez just five years ago, when he almost walked away from football.

As a sophomore at Creekview High School, Gonzalez was relegated to the junior varsity team and played quarterback for a squad that went 1-9 while his varsity counterparts went 0-10. He felt his athleticism was going to waste and nearly gave up on football in favor of basketball.

But his parents, Temple and Hector, who played basketball at UTEP, and sisters Melissa and Samantha, both All-America track athletes at Texas and Miami, respectively, told him to stick with football.

He changed high schools to The Colony. Though transferring is not uncommon for a 16-year-old, it rarely proves such an athletic- and life-altering decision in retrospect.

Gonzalez and his friends from Creekview look back and see an extreme butterfly effect had he not chosen to transfer high schools.

"We talk like, if I never would've left, I probably wouldn't have gone to college because that was one of my things — I didn't want to be the kid to make my parents pay for college," Gonzalez said. "That was something that really pushed me. So I probably wouldn't have gone. I probably would've just worked and been at home still."

Ray Buckley had a top-five pick in the 2007 Carrollton Youth Football League draft. Anyone who's ever been to Texas, particularly the Dallas Metroplex, knows that even 5-year-old flag football is treated with the utmost seriousness there.

When the league held a minicamp for kids, Buckley was immediately blown away by the speed of Christian Gonzalez, whom he knew only by a jersey number at the time.

"I've never seen a kid at 5 that fast and brother, I'm almost 46," Buckley said. "I was telling my wife, my other coaches, I said, 'Man, I have got to have that kid. I don't care if I have anybody else in the draft; I got to have that kid.'"

Buckley played Gonzalez at nearly every position on the field over eight years of youth football.

"He was the only kid that, all you had to do was tell him and show him one time and he would pick that play up, offense or defense, it was like it was programmed," Buckley said. "We were running simple football, but he was so versatile he could play whatever you needed him to do on the football field. He could play all 22 spots."

Gonzalez played for Buckley until he got to seventh grade, and their families grew and stayed close even as Buckley and his family moved to the town of Celeste, about an hour away.

When Gonzalez was a freshman at Creekview, where his mother is a teacher, he didn't expect to play on varsity and was pleased with how his freshman season went while playing quarterback and receiver.

In the summer entering his sophomore year, he was a second-team receiver and confident he could climb the depth chart and make the varsity team.

"Closer to season, they based everything off of seniority and how much you could lift in the weight room," Gonzalez said. "I wasn't small, but I wasn't as big as I am now. But I didn't lift that much. They moved me down, all the way to JV — I ended up being a backup my sophomore year. That was kind of like, I knew I was better than that and it took a lot out of me because growing up it was, 'Oh wait 'til he gets to high school because he's going to show he can play and get offers and all of that.'"

This wasn't merely a humbling experience for Gonzalez. This was humiliating. His sisters were track stars at Creekview and college All-Americans.

"I don't think the word JUCO exists in their house," Buckley said. "I knew he was never going to stop until he had an opportunity to have a shot at his ultimate goal. Whether he made it there or not, he wanted a fair shot. I know when they put him on JV, that was depressing. Because he's always been that frontline athlete. Coaches who really knew, he's always been coachable, he's always been humble. It doesn't take you long to see what kind of an athlete that is."

"He did get shortchanged a little bit, but he stayed on the path."

Gonzalez said a member of the Creekview JV staff told him, "This is not where you're supposed to be," but he never got an explanation for why he wasn't on the varsity team from then-coach Jay Cline, who resigned following the 2020 season and is now the athletic director at North Lamar in Paris, Texas. Attempts to reach Cline for this story were unsuccessful.

"The only time I went to a game, and he came out crying, he said, 'I don't even play,'" said Hector Gonzalez, Christian's father. "I went to the coach — I never talk to the coaches or anything — I told the coach, 'Hey man, what's wrong?' He said he doesn't know the plays. They were trying to put him as a quarterback. He said he has to learn the plays. The only thing I said was 'Hey, man, he's an athlete. You have to find a way to put him on the field. He's better than anybody in there.' From that day, he made his mind that was going to be his last year at Creekview."

"I never went back and said anything to the coach," Hector Gonzalez added. "Everything happens for a reason. Maybe that was a good reason and he's in a better place and everything that happened is history."

The Colony's football staff was conducting routine summer workouts the morning Gonzalez walked into Rangel's office to say he was transferring to the school and would be joining the team.

"I'm thinking, this beautiful-looking kid, there's something that has to be wrong with him," Rangel said. "Why would he be a sophomore (on JV) at a school that's 0-10?"

Brandon Grady, then the defensive backs coach at The Colony, had fewer questions for Gonzalez. He just wanted to make sure the 16-year-old, who already stood 6-1, played on his side of the ball.

"I definitely tried to grab him at DB before the receiver coach saw him because I was working summer camp the morning that he came and the receiver coach, he wasn't," Grady said.

Scott Johnson, then the defensive coordinator for The Colony, asked Gonzalez to come with them to a local 7-on-7 tournament that afternoon.

"I'll go, but I don't know any of your plays," Gonzalez said.

"Christian, I don't want you to play offense, I want you to play defense," Johnson replied.

"I've never played defense," Gonzalez said.

"I'm going to teach you how to play corner if you just go over there," Johnson told him.

Then Johnson explained that playing man coverage is a lot like playing basketball.

"He went out there and looked like a duck in water, like he had been doing it his whole life, he had a couple of interceptions that day," Johnson said. "I told him I've coached a lot of really talented defensive backs and you've got everything colleges are looking for. I said if you just trust me, you can continue to play offense, but I want you to play defense for me. He said, 'Coach I just want to get on the field.' We started utilizing him as a corner and right off the bat, you could tell he was going to fit. He was going to be an exceptional corner."

Rangel was floored by Gonzalez's first day and subsequent 4.5-second 40-yard dash and 37-inch vertical jump. He was also flummoxed as to what possibly could have kept him off the field previously.

"We get to the first game of the season and my coaches are convinced he's the guy, and I am not convinced," Rangel said. "It just doesn't make any sense to me."

Gonzalez's junior season began and he showcased his speed by scoring as a Wildcat quarterback, punt returner and kickoff returner while also being a stalwart though raw defender.

He eliminated any remaining doubters on Oct. 19, 2018, against Lone Star and receiver Marvin Mims, the state record-holder for career receiving yards and receiving yards in a season.

Gonzalez helped limit Mims to seven catches for 84 yards and a touchdown in a 21-14 win for The Colony. Only two of Mims' catches came against Gonzalez, according to Rangel.

"I thought if a kid in high school can cover a guy like that and hold him to decent output but not anything crazy, I had a feeling he was going to be pretty special that night," Grady said. "The first three or four games of Christian's junior year we spent a lot of time talking about him trusting me and our other coaches when we told him how good he was. I think the third or fourth game of his junior year he realized, 'you know what, I am one of the best ones out here' and that was a wrap. Once he realized that, the sky was the limit for him."

As a junior, Gonzalez had 29 tackles, nine pass breakups, one interception, one forced fumble and one fumble recovery. He also brought in 22 receptions for 306 yards with two touchdowns and added three carries for 98 yards and score.

Division I coaches descended on The Colony that winter and scholarship offers followed immediately.

Then-Colorado coach Mel Tucker and receivers coach Darrin Chiaverini came in and asked Grady to cue up Gonzalez's film. They watched three plays, Grady recalled.

"You can pause it, coach, I don't need to see anymore," Tucker said. "He's got a full offer to us. He can commit right now if he wants."

Grady also remembers Tucker saying Gonzalez would be an NFL draft pick in three years if he kept doing what he was doing then.

Coaches from Alabama, Ohio State, Notre Dame, Miami, Purdue and others came to visit Gonzalez, who would go through on-field workouts at Johnson's direction. The feedback was always outstanding, even as Gonzalez's recruiting ranking stayed somewhat under the radar. Johnson attributed it to his lack of game film as a sophomore and Gonzalez being labeled as a safety by recruiting services because of his height, even though his skills projected as a corner.

"Everybody that walked off the practice field after watching him work out said he's the best DB in the country," Johnson said. "He is better than any kid that I've coached. I've been very blessed to have some very talented kids play for me, but he is the most talented kid that I've ever coached."

As the offers poured in for Gonzalez, his mindset shifted. Football had given him purpose again and the opportunities he yearned for were being presented. He appreciated what Rangel, Grady and Johnson did to get him to love the game again.

"(Rangel) saw the potential I had and he took the chance," Gonzalez said. "Gave me my confidence back."

Gonzalez committed to Purdue before his senior season and word was out in his high school league that fall, when Rangel had to get creative with awarding skull and crossbones helmet stickers with three Division I players in Gonzalez, Keith Miller and Myles Price, receivers who signed with Colorado and Texas Tech, respectively.

"His senior highlight video is mostly offense because everybody knew not to throw over there," Johnson said.

Once again, the matchup with Mims, who went on to play at Oklahoma, was an epic showdown. Gonzalez had two pass breakups and caught four passes for 147 yards and two touchdowns. Mims had six receptions for 134 yards and two scores in a 41-38 Lone Star win.

"That game I was on him almost every snap, following him around, playing both ways," Gonzalez said. "It was a lot of fun. Got a lot of mutual respect for each other. That really prepared me a lot for college going up against him, following him around, him making plays, me making plays, and going back and forth. It was a great thing. Texas football is huge, that's what we do down there. It's different down there."

One of Mims' touchdowns that night came on a pass Gonzalez deflected into the air. The wideout managed to haul it in while falling on his back just inside the end zone.

"I still say to this day, Christian Gonzalez is the best defensive back I've ever played," Mims said. "For us to go against each other, we were pretty good friends, it was memorable. He's just consistent, not even talking about his football. His football skills are obvious, you can watch film and see what kind of skills he has football-wise. Him as a person, you don't see it much, he's always smiling, good attitude, good energy, fun to be around, fun to play against."

As a senior, Gonzalez had 17 tackles with eight pass breakups, two interceptions, one forced fumble and one fumble recovery. On offense, he finished with 43 catches for 650 yards and 10 touchdowns, plus four carries for 89 yards and a score. He also had a kickoff return touchdown.

He flipped his commitment to Colorado in November and signed with the Buffaloes that winter.

Despite not arriving to college until August 2020 and the Pac-12 playing a pandemic-shortened season, Gonzalez managed to win a starting job immediately as a true freshman.

"We needed a CB2," said Oregon cornerbacks coach Demetrice Martin, who coached Gonzalez at Colorado in 2020-21. "They had a CB1 (Mekhi Blackmon), but we didn't have a CB2 and Gonzo was in the safeties room. I pleaded with the head coach (Karl Dorrell) to give him to me at corner. He did and then it took off from there."

Gonzalez had 25 tackles and five pass breakups in six games. He backed it up as a sophomore with 53 stops, including 5.5 for loss, along with five pass breakups.

Only USC's Drake London, who had nine catches for 130 yards and a touchdown against Colorado that season, can say he truly got the better of Gonzalez during his college career.

After Martin left Colorado for UO after the 2021 season, Gonzalez followed. It proved to be one of the most significant offseason personnel moves for the Ducks.

Basic and advanced statistics reveal aspects of how dominant Gonzalez was last season, and opposing quarterbacks and receivers in this year's draft all cited him as one of the best cornerbacks they faced in their careers, if not the best.

"I couldn't find a lot of flaws in his game at all," former BYU quarterback Jaren Hall said. "No weaknesses. Any side of the field he was on, you had to be aware of him."

UCLA's Dorian Thompson-Robinson threw in Gonzalez's direction only once in his first 24 pass attempts last season, and it was broken up and nearly intercepted.

"Obviously that Oregon game was pretty tough, losing that game," Thompson-Robinson said. "He was a big part of that."

Stanford receiver Michael Wilson had just two catches for 14 yards against Oregon last season, his fewest yards since 2019. Gonzalez didn't allow a completion to Wilson on three targets, though he was flagged for holding him on another play.

"I think he's one of those guys that, he's difficult to run a fade against and I was thrown a fade twice in that game," Wilson said. "Just because of his ability to stay square at the line of scrimmage and he's just so long and fast, it's hard to get vertical separation against him. He's a really good player. I have a lot of respect for his game."

On one play, Gonzalez identified the route the 6-foot-2 Cardinal receiver was running based on how Wilson placed his foot pre-snap. Wilson was targeted down the sideline, and Gonzalez broke up the pass.

"It definitely took time to really pick up the game, and I'm still learning so much now," Gonzalez said. "All the little things that you can see, when they line up a certain way you get certain routes. Once you understand where everything is at, things start to slow down. When you first start playing corner, especially coming out of high school, all you're thinking about is don't let your guy catch the ball. You're not thinking about, he's here, so the probability of him doing this versus this is a lot more likely or less likely. I think it comes with being more comfortable and confident and getting more reps at it.

"Everybody was asking if I had ball skills, and I went out and showed I've got the ball skills that I trust in. And I know I had that my whole life, but I had to go make the plays."

Premier cornerbacks relish being on an island in pass coverage, craving one-on-one situations where success and failure falls entirely on their ability to outplay a receiver.

Gonzalez is no different, though that's taken time for him to embrace.

"He now has that swagger that he didn't really have when I first got my hands on him," Johnson said. "He was real quiet and shy."

And now?

"He'll get out there and tell you you're not going to get a catch," Johnson said.

As Gonzalez prepares to take center stage at the NFL draft, he appreciates how the efforts of so many helped get him there.

"Those different situations he was in helped groom him," Martin said. "Playing offense, playing different sports, getting cut as a freshman or not starting and all that, that all helped who he is now."

Buckley has been a combination of coach, mentor and uncle to Gonzalez for the past 16 years and was the first person he called to invite to be with him at the draft.

A professional bounty hunter, Buckley said he was overwhelmed and will likely be crying like a baby Thursday night when Gonzalez receives the call from his future NFL general manager and head coach. He added that the Carrollton Youth Football League is discussing how to honor its former star.

"He had his mind made up as a 5-year-old kid that he wanted to play professional football," Buckley said. "To witness where it started from, the journey of it and how it finished, you can't ask for much more. He thinks that we impacted him, but at the same time as a league and as adults, that kid was great, he was a great kid to be around."

Grady will be watching the draft from Texas with his son, who was an infant when Gonzalez first got to The Colony.

Johnson is hosting a barbecue for most of the members of the 2018-19 coaching staff at The Colony. Several of them, including Johnson, have moved on to bigger jobs in part because of coaching Gonzalez, Miller and Price.

"He could have gone a different route and not even be playing football," Johnson said. "He could be working a 9-to-5 job right now. The fact that he trusted us enough to stay with it and learn a new spot says a lot about the kid. He put his trust in us and we did what we could for him, but ultimately it was him wanting to be successful."

Rangel will also be in Kansas City with Buckley, Gonzalez and his family. He recently told Gonzalez how much of an impact he's still making at The Colony.

A few weeks ago, there were 41 of 55 eighth grade boys at Lakeview Middle School signed up to play football. Then, after Rangel went to talk to the middle schoolers and share Gonzalez's story, the other 14 also signed up.

"I texted Gonzo, I said, 'Listen bro, you're still helping. You don't realize how much you're helping me. We got 14 kids because of you,'" Rangel said. "He's solidifying the football in this town, solidifying my coaches' careers and my

coaches' families and my family, and it's going to trickle now to all the head coaches I've got that left me from being a coordinator or assistant coordinator.

"You can look at the other end for what this is going to do or has done for the staff I've got. This is the butterfly effect on both sides. Somehow, some way, it was done right."



Christian Gonzalez makes his journey from The Colony to the NFL draft

By Keith Russell

April 26, 2023

THE COLONY (CBSNewsTexas.com) – Christian Gonzalez is said to be soft spoken, but ask anyone about his play in the field and the word that is used is tenacious.

When you look at his bloodlines, it's easy to see why he's one of the fastest players entering the draft and why his rise to stardom promises to be just as fast.

Many have never heard of Gonzalez, but they soon will.

The Oregon cornerback is poised to be the first North Texan this year to hear his name called by commissioner Roger Goodell in the first round of the NFL draft.

Rudy Rangel, head football coach at The Colony the last 18 years, says on day one coaching Gonzalez, he knew he was bound for greatness.

Rangel says, "To have Christian represent us, and for the up and coming future Cougars and just in general....across the country....a kid that felt he wanted to do more with his life and felt like there was more out there for him. He goes and does it."

While Gonzalez is now in position to inspire others, it was his family who inspired him. His father, Hector, was born in South America. He played college basketball at UTEP and professionally overseas.

Rangel explains, "His dad's an immigrant, he comes over with basketball. He meets his wife. He fights for his family and makes a better life for his family. Not just Christian....the entire family."

Gonzalez's two older sisters were both on the Colombian national track team. One sister competed in the 2020 Olympics, and his younger sister is a rising star in soccer.

Gonzalez had the same competitive spirit as a little kid, no matter who sport he played. That's why he's projected to be a star for years to come.

Rangel says, "You question Christian, you challenge Christian, it's game, set, match. Those are the things people will learn to love about the kid."

Going to Kansas City for the draft to support Gonzalez in his highest moment, Rangel is asked, "What are you going to be feeling when Roger Goodell says with the whatever pick it is....whatever team it is....selects Christian Gonzalez?"

He answered, "He represents The Colony for so long. He comes and works out all the time. He comes and talks to our kids. I had a middle school meeting and had 41 kids signed up and there were 55 kids in the room and I told the Christian story...and all 55 are playing football next year. The legacy continues. I'm gonna be super, super proud."

When asked if he thinks he will shed a tear at the draft, Rangel jokingly replies with, "I'm just going to say my allergies have been really, really bad lately. So if that kicks up and there's something that hits...pollen or something, you could see that from me."

Looking at the mock drafts, where the NFL experts predict which teams will take which players, Gonzales has been listed as high as eighth overall when it comes to being selected Thursday night.

Wherever he goes, his high school coach says he will be the face of that team and a shining light for that city. And we, in North Texas, can always claim him as our guy.



21 things to know about Patriots rookie Christian Gonzalez

By Khari Thompson

June 28, 2023

Patriots rookie cornerback Christian Gonzalez turned 21 on Wednesday, so here are 21 things to know about New England's most recent first-round pick.

1. He's the first defensive back to be selected in the first round by the Patriots since Devin McCourty.
2. He's the fourth Oregon player ever drafted by the Patriots and the first since Patrick Chung in 2009, per the school's athletics website.
3. He's likely going to be a perimeter cornerback in the NFL, Patriots coach Bill Belichick said earlier this month, but there are some situations where he could play inside or in the deeper part of the field, depending on the game plan.
4. Gonzalez is 6-foot-2-inches, 201-pounds, with a 4.38 40-yard dash time and a 41.5 inch vertical leap. "If you were building a player in Madden, you'd create them very similar to Christian, especially for the corner position," Oregon coach Dan Lanning said during an interview with NBC Sports Boston.
5. Gonzalez's sisters, Melissa and Samantha Gonzalez, were All-Americans during their college track and field careers. Melissa competed in the 2020 Olympics, representing Colombia.
6. His father, Hector Gonzalez, who is 6-feet-9-inches and played college basketball at UTEP, was born in Colombia before moving to the United States as a teenager.
7. Representing Colombia at the NFL level "means the world" to Gonzalez, he told reporters on draft night when he wore a suit with the Colombian flag's colors on the inside.
8. Gonzalez was a projected top-10 pick, but slid to the Patriots at No. 17. There was less than a 1 percent chance he was going to be available that late in the draft, according to ESPN. ESPN's Mike Reiss reported that questions about his physicality may have been a factor.
9. Gonzalez is the youngest player on the Patriots' roster. Rookie receiver Kayshon Boutte is also 21, but his birthday was last month.
10. Gonzalez almost quit football after his sophomore year in high school because his coaches thought he wasn't strong enough and put him on the JV team. He ended up transferring to another school instead.
11. He originally committed to play college football at Purdue, where his brother-in-law (Cardinals quarterback) David Blough played.
12. After decommitting from Purdue, Gonzalez signed with Colorado and played two seasons there.
13. Gonzalez followed his position coach, Demetrice Martin, to Oregon, where he finished his college career. "I don't even look at him as a coach," Gonzalez said at the time, according to Sports Illustrated. "He's more like my uncle."
14. Patriots offensive line coach Adrian Klemm was on the staff at Oregon while Gonzalez was there. Klemm described Gonzalez in April as a natural leader who didn't say much, but stood out because of the way he practiced.
15. Gonzalez started the first 12 games for Oregon last year, but opted out of the team's win over North Carolina in the San Diego County Credit Union Holiday Bowl.

16. Gonzalez wore No. 50 during OTAs and minicamp. The Patriots have given No. 50 to their first selection in the NFL Draft in recent years.

17. After one of the OTA sessions, Kyle Dugger told reporters that Gonzalez is light on his feet and moves fluidly. "It's pretty effortless just the way he does everything," said Dugger.

18. Gonzalez told reporters that he wants to "follow in the footsteps" of former Patriots cornerback Stephon Gilmore.

19. Gonzalez is the second-tallest cornerback on the Patriots' roster, behind fellow rookie Ameer Speed, who is listed at 6-feet-3-inches.

20. Gonzalez said he loves seafood. When asked about a pair of New England favorites, lobster rolls and clam chowder, Gonzalez said he'll "stick to the lobster."

21. When asked to sum himself up, Gonzalez said: "I'm just somebody that's extremely trustworthy. Somebody that's just loyal and keeps a pretty tight circle. Really all about ball. Ready to just learn. I just love to learn."

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.

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.

TE Austin Hooper

The Athletic

'Perfect practice makes perfect': Austin Hooper's rise to NFL's elite

By Jason Butt

During the summer, when he was back in his home state of California, Austin Hooper would rise early at 6:45 a.m. to ensure he could make it through Los Angeles traffic to Golden West Junior College for an 8 a.m. workout. At the small school waiting for him would be Matt Ryan, who happened to be in town looking to put in some extra offseason throwing.

It didn't matter what was previously on Hooper's schedule. If Ryan was nearby and wanted to throw, Hooper's prior plans were canceled. If there was any extra work Hooper could get with Ryan, he was going to ensure it happened so the two players would be in sync once the regular season rolled around.

"It's something you have to work on consistently over time," Hooper said. "That's what these past two offseasons were about. It's putting in the work. Instead of enjoying my vacation across the world, it's grind it out with Matt in SoCal at 8 in the morning during your offseason. Wake up at 6:45, drive an hour south."

But those trips — which usually came with Hooper staying at his brother's apartment near UCLA — to Huntington Beach, Calif., during the summer were worth it for Hooper, who is in the final year of his rookie contract. Through seven weeks, Hooper ranks 11th in the NFL in receiving with 526 yards and four touchdowns. His yardage total is second among tight ends — Kansas City's Travis Kelce leading the way with 541 — and his touchdown total is the best at the position. His 46 catches are also the most of any tight end and rank fifth overall in the NFL.

Hooper ramped up the offseason workouts with Ryan leading into the 2018 season. Those continued going into 2019. On the field, the chemistry between quarterback and tight end has been undeniable. And as a result, Hooper has found himself the target of many of Ryan's passes.

"We put in all that work," Hooper said. "It's nice to see it pay off."

Athletic family history

The genetics were put in place for Hooper to become a pretty good player. His father, Michael, played college football at San Diego State from 1983-88. His uncle Greg was a fullback at Stanford when John Elway was at the school. His other uncle, Chip, played professional tennis and reached No. 17 in the world at the peak of his career. His mother, Lillian, played high school basketball.

His brother, Justin, played baseball at UCLA and was drafted in the 14th round of the 2019 MLB Draft by the Kansas City Royals. His sister, Alexis, played college basketball at Reinhardt University, an NAIA program in Waleska, Ga.

Needless to say, there were a lot of summer trips to various tournaments and camps.

"Thank God I travel for work, and I have all the points and the miles," Michael said.

Austin didn't begin playing football until after the age of 10. Before he got into the sport, Michael told his son that if he wanted to pursue it, he was going to do it the "right way." When Austin said it was time to start playing football, the two immediately got serious about it. Austin said Michael would help train his technique with a big pad in the backyard.

Michael wouldn't take it easy on Austin either, considering the physical nature of the sport. Growing up with two athletic brothers, in his father's eyes, there was only one way for Austin to approach the game.

"An expression we use is, 'Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect,'" Michael said. "If you're going to do it, do it 110 percent and be the best."

As Austin started playing high school ball for De La Salle in Concord, Calif., Michael backed off and let the coaches take control. And it was at De La Salle where the attention to detail and time devoted to studying film truly began to take flight.

But at De La Salle, Austin was a star defensive end who could rush the passer. He didn't play much tight end and caught eight passes as a high school senior. He actually played some quarterback, too, on offense.

During his recruitment, Austin received 23 offers to be a pass-rusher. Among those were most of the Pac-12 programs and Notre Dame. At 6-foot-5 and 240 pounds, Austin fit the bill as a pass-rushing defensive end or outside linebacker as an incoming freshman.

Stanford and Oregon, however, recruited Hooper to be a tight end. And in the end, Stanford won out for one reason — academic prestige.

"I knew if football didn't work out I'd have a good shot at being successful in something else," Austin said. "That's why I chose to go there."

Said Michael: "He got recruited by everybody. Everybody wanted him either as a defensive end or stand-up linebacker. One of the things in our house, it was, 'Get the best education you possibly can and leverage whatever athletic ability you have to get that piece of paper.'"

Falcons safety Ricardo Allen was asked whether Hooper would have made a good NFL defensive end. Based on his attributes, Allen believes he would.

"He's athletic. Essentially, being a tight end you have to have some of the same characteristics," Allen said. "You have to fight big dudes. You have to have a special skill of being athletic, but also being strong and fast. He has that funky mix of it. His technique, he used to get in a three-point stance, and I think the only thing he'd have to work on is his get-off."

When looking at Hooper as a fourth-year pro in the NFL, it's remarkable to see that this is only his seventh full year at the position. But his upbringing, with two athletic parents and a private high school known for being a football powerhouse, helped establish a blueprint for any challenge that might present itself.

"It's little things where when your parents lived the athlete life, they'll teach you little tricks for more efficient ways to practice, more efficient ways to train," Hooper said. "A lot of these youth coaches don't know what they're talking about. I was very fortunate to have a dad who did it at the highest level. He actually was able to teach me things that are still applicable in my life today, that I learned as building blocks in my technique when I was 12 years old."

Contract year

Clearly, Hooper made the right decision by becoming a tight end at Stanford. Based on this season, Hooper has set himself up for a major payday, whether it is with the Falcons or elsewhere in free agency.

During the past 23 regular-season games, which includes the entire 2018 season, Hooper leads all tight ends by catching 81.8 percent of passes thrown his way. During that same stretch, Hooper ranks fourth among tight ends with 117 catches for 1,186 yards. Those ahead of him are Kelce (141 catches, 1,877 yards), George Kittle (122 yards, 1,753 yards) and Zach Ertz (151 catches, 1,567 yards).

Of course, much of the offenses at Kansas City, San Francisco and Philadelphia run through their tight ends. In Atlanta, Julio Jones commands the bulk of the targets in the passing game. Mohamed Sanu — prior to his recent trade — and Calvin Ridley also have been frequently targeted by Ryan. But even with the star power at receiver, Hooper has been able to put up some impressive numbers, especially in the ever-important contract year.

At only 24 years old, Hooper is among the best young tight ends in the NFL. With Packers tight end Jimmy Graham's contract — three years, \$30 million — the most expensive for tight ends in average annual value, Hooper stands to benefit as long as his output continues. To compare, Hooper has put up 166 catches for 1,712 yards and 11 touchdowns since the beginning of the 2017 season. Graham has 130 catches for 1,370 yards and 15 touchdowns during this span.

With a tight end market that also could see the likes of Kittle and Evan Engram getting extensions this offseason, Hooper's price tag could rise substantially if he hits free agency.

Ideally, the Falcons will be able to reach a new contract before the 2020 league year begins, which is something the club is still hopeful it can get done.

While the possibility of applying the franchise tag exists, that would only be good for one year and at a high cost. The franchise tag for a tight end in 2019 was worth \$10.4 million. In addition, while other teams have expressed interest in Hooper previously, the Falcons have yet to suggest they would be open to moving him elsewhere.

Considering the contracts recent tight ends have received, Hooper is likely to receive more than \$10 million per year. Behind Graham, the highest average annual value salaries for tight ends are Kelce (\$9.37 million), Jordan Reed (\$9.35 million), Kyle Rudolph (\$9.025 million) and Greg Olsen (\$8.55 million). Considering those numbers, Hooper has a great chance for a contract that surpasses many of his peers at the position.

Since his rookie year, Hooper has progressed — somewhat quietly due to the star power around him in Atlanta's offense — into one of the league's emerging tight ends. While Hooper makes a lot of plays as a checkdown option, offensive coordinator Dirk Koetter said he has been designing some plays with Hooper as the primary read.

"He's just in the right place at the right time," Koetter said. "Matt is hitting him a lot as a checkdown and he's also hitting him sometimes as a primary receiver. Hoop is getting himself open. He's got a good feel versus man, he's got a good feel versus zone. He's taking advantage of his opportunities."

'Thousands of reps'

About a year ago, the Hoopers were on vacation in the U.S. Virgin Islands when one of the siblings looked at their father and expressed how great this particular trip was.

The reason was that it was the first time since anyone could remember that this vacation had nothing to do with sports. The pro athlete sons had time off and no one had to worry about a game to catch.

"It was funny, but it was true," Michael said. "It's just how we grew up. We were always on the go. It's like any family that has athletic kids. You just want to give them every opportunity to succeed with whatever they wanted to do."

Austin has certainly made the most of everything presented his way since Atlanta selected him in the third round of the 2016 NFL Draft. And while Austin took some time off on that family vacation, many of his days each offseason are devoted to improving as a football player.

Michael said that when Austin is home during the offseason, he generally remains buried in his iPad, dissecting game film from the previous season.

"He's even explaining coverages to me and what tendencies are — if somebody opens their hips up a certain way, they gotta break their route off," Michael said. "People don't understand how intricate that game is and how if you

want to be the best, you have to work hard physically and you also need to work hard with understanding your opponent and understanding how the plays develop. He enjoys that.”

Austin has been a bright spot for a Falcons team that sits at 1-6. His rapport with Ryan is at the strongest they’ve enjoyed in their four years together. While Austin possesses all of the natural athleticism to be an NFL star, that’s not how or why he is having the kind of season he is enjoying.

The extra work with Ryan and the added hours of studying game film have gone a long way to moving Austin into the upper echelon of NFL tight ends.

“It’s not like I dropped three-tenths off my 40 in the offseason or gotten insanely stronger, or anything like that,” he said. “It’s just building a relationship with the guy who throws the football. It’s doing those thousands of reps. He knows I’ll be in a certain spot and he has confidence I’ll make a play for him.”

Akron Beacon Journal

'I'm never satisfied': Browns' Austin Hooper gains confidence training with Baker Mayfield

By Marla Ridenour

BEREA — For Browns prized free-agent tight end Austin Hooper, his 2020 appendectomy changed everything.

After spending four seasons with the Atlanta Falcons, Hooper seemed to have moved out of the transition phase in Cleveland. He caught 15 passes in three October games and totaled 22 receptions through the first six weeks. He began to display the form that made him a two-time Pro Bowler and earned him a four-year, \$42 million contract with \$23 million guaranteed. He proved to be highly underrated as a blocker.

Then came his Oct. 23 surgery.

“I felt like I was in a really good spot until my appendicitis,” Hooper said Saturday. “I feel I was playing the best ball of my career, and ... that kind of threw a monkey wrench in my flow of the offense and my flow of confidence.

“I came back after internal organ surgery. I'd be lying if I said I was fully confident in running across the middle again with stitches in my stomach.”

Hooper missed two games after the appendectomy. He'd been back in the lineup for four when he suffered a neck injury that sidelined him against Baltimore on Dec. 14.

Hooper ready to take on bigger role expected by Browns, Kevin Stefanski

Now that he's had an offseason to recuperate, Hooper is ready to take on what coach Kevin Stefanski said will be a bigger role in the Browns offense.

“It's been good to let that heal up over an offseason, get my neck together, make sure my vertebrae is all good to go so I can put my face in people,” Hooper said. “That's where your confidence gets, knowing your body is physically able to do everything you're asked.”

Hooper's admission about how the surgery affected him surprised tight ends coach Drew Petzing.

“I was impressed with him the entire year,” Petzing said Saturday. “I thought he played at a really high level and was a huge part of our success on offense.

“It's funny to hear him say that. I know he holds himself to a very high standard. Anytime you can get a player like that and get him out on the field for 17 games, you are going to be better off than if he was out. Really looking forward to that.”

Hooper, 26, did more in the offseason than just heal. He trained with quarterback Baker Mayfield and teammates at the House of Athlete in Florida and in Mayfield's hometown of Austin, Texas. He picked the brains of several of the league's best tight ends at a summit June 23-25 in Nashville called Tight End University.

"Every year my goal is to improve, and I feel like I'm never satisfied," Hooper said. "There are things in the offseason I made a point to address with myself and to get better. Spending more time with Baker definitely has helped me with my confidence more than anything and being in the same offense and knowing what to expect and what is expected of me."

Asked if confidence was the motivation for working with Mayfield, Hooper said, "For sure. You're as confident as your preparation is, right? So I feel if you prepare, you should be confident."

Hooper and teammate David Njoku took part in Tight End University, organized by George Kittle of the San Francisco 49ers, Travis Kelce of the Kansas City Chiefs and Greg Olsen, who retired from the NFL earlier this year.

"I just learned a lot. You see all these guys on film, but it's probably got to be the only time in NFL history when can you get 30, 40 tight ends all in one room talking about techniques," Hooper said.

"Everybody's body is different. Everyone's skill set is different. Everyone's technique is different. So being able to have a room where everyone can go up and share, just trading their ideas and techniques, it was awesome."

Hooper called the gathering "a first-class education unlike anything else."

"To hear Travis Kelce speak about how to manipulate the defense using their own rules against them," Hooper said. "Talking to George Kittle about his mentality in the run game. Darren Waller's choice routes. You can go on and on and on."

"Everyone brings something great to the game. So it was awesome to be able to get hours on hours with everyone talking about ball. And then after, it was a great time as well."

Petzing said he spoke to Hooper and Njoku when they returned, hoping to pick up something he could pass on.

"Anytime you get that many guys sharing ideas, sharing what they're doing, you're going to get some pieces of information that are not going to not only help them but maybe help me as a coach and say, 'I didn't think about it that way' or 'I didn't conceptualize it in that way,'" Petzing said.

Asked if he learned anything last season about Hooper that he didn't expect, Petzing mentioned Hooper's blocking. Hooper's numbers during his four years in Atlanta made him sound like just a pass-catcher as he totaled 214 receptions (105 for first downs), for 2,244 yards and 16 touchdowns. In 13 games last season, Hooper finished second on the Browns in receiving with 46 receptions for 435 yards and four scores.

"One of the things coming out of Atlanta with the stats he has, I didn't think he was as physical in the run game as we saw last season," Petzing said. "I think he did a really nice job of embracing that role and excelling in that role, and it was a big part of our success. That really surprised me and I was really impressed by it."

Stefanski also praised Hooper's effort as a blocker.

"In a lot of big moments where we were running the ball, he was at the point of attack. He was making big blocks," Stefanski said. "Think back to even Baker's run at the end of the Pittsburgh game to seal the game — Hoop was at the point of attack."

"He did a lot of nice things for us. He really understands in Year 2 how we plan to use him, and I do believe his role can grow."

As their relationships grow as well, Petzing learned that Hooper loves to travel.

"I think he went to Egypt this summer and had an amazing time. The pictures he had were just unbelievable," Petzing said. "I'm not as big a traveler as him, plus with an 8-month-old, we're pretty much stuck at home right now. But I'm all in on the pictures."

LB Anfernee Jennings

The Boston Globe

Patriots linebacker Anfernee Jennings is finding a way to help his hometown heal

By Christopher Price

July 5, 2023

Anfernee Jennings's hometown roots run deep.

The Dadeville, Ala., native, who received the key to the city in 2021 when it officially celebrated "Anfernee Jennings Day," is part of a small community that's still reeling after a shooting at a "Sweet 16" birthday party on April 15 that left four young people dead and 32 injured.

In an attempt to bring some positivity, the Patriots linebacker is hosting a youth football camp in his hometown. Jennings sees it as a small way to give back to a place that worked to support him as a high schooler.

"Initially, last year was the first year of me hosting the camp for my hometown and my community, and it was a success," said Jennings, who attended Dadeville High before playing for Nick Saban at Alabama. "This year, it hits different, with the tragedy that happened in my hometown with the shooting.

"For me to be able to have an opportunity to do something positive and be a light for my community at this time means the world to me."

The scars from the shooting still run deep, a fact of life that was not lost on Jennings. He was not present for the start of the Patriots' offseason workout program; instead, he was back in Alabama trying to do what he could to provide support.

"We're all just continuing to take it day by day," Jennings said. "My community is a strong one, with lots of hard-working people. I just want to do right by my community with something like this. We all want the best for our family and friends. Everybody is still grieving in their own way, which is something that's understandable when a tragic event like this happens. I just want to give people some hope and bring a positive light to my community.

"I just hope it's a safe and blessed day," he said of the camp, which will take place Friday night at Dadeville High, "and everybody has a good time and enjoys themselves."

As for Jennings's feelings about the 2023 Patriots, he remains optimistic. After spending all of 2021 on injured reserve, he saw action in 16 games last season, with three starts, as well as 36 percent of special teams snaps. He finished with 27 tackles, 4 quarterback hits, and 1.5 sacks.

The 26-year-old, who projects to be in a backup role behind Josh Uche and Matthew Judon, is heading into the final year of his contract. A stout presence on the edge, he knows 2023 is a key season.

"I'm extremely healthy, and really excited for the start of camp; this is my fourth year, and I'm very aware of that. My focus is just about what I can do to be better," Jennings said. "But in terms of personal goals, I don't have a lot of those. I just want us to get back to winning, and taking that next step into the postseason, and being the team we are capable of being.

"We're returning a lot of guys from last year [to the defense], but we're just in July and we have a long way to go to be the sort of team and sort of defense we ultimately want to be. I'm looking forward to seeing how it can all come together."

CB Marcus Jones

The Boston Globe

Patriots cornerback Marcus Jones is making hits on the football field and in the music studio

By Nicole Yang

NORWOOD — When a Patriots executive told music manager Kirjuan Freeman about cornerback Marcus Jones, Freeman immediately thought to himself, “Another athlete doing music. Great.”

Jones, however, ended up wowing Freeman with his finished tracks and knowledge of the song-making process.

“Lo and behold, we just hit it off,” Freeman said. “Not only was his music incredible, but he was a 100 percent. Like, literally. From a producer to a writer to an engineer to an artist, all phases of everything creatively, he embodied it.”

For Jones, 25, football remains the priority. The 2022 third-round draft pick is ready to return to the field after recovering from a torn labrum suffered in Week 2 last season. But music has been a passion — and something he is eyeing after his NFL days are over — since he started recording songs during his junior year in high school in Enterprise, Ala.

To hear Jones discuss how he builds a beat around his vocals, how he can mix and master, and how he pays attention to music trends, Freeman couldn’t help but be impressed.

“He was really in the know of what his sound was,” Freeman said.

Freeman, a 2012 graduate of Berklee College of Music in Boston, is well-versed in the business. He and fellow Berklee alum Keithen Foster started the band Elevation Theory in 2007, and they toured with Jordan Knight from “New Kids on the Block.” The duo has since launched the Covered by Music Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering future musicians and industry professionals through mentoring and education.

Jones does not have formal training. After messing around with his father Marc’s turntables, synthesizers, and mixing boards as a teenager, Jones attended what he calls “YouTube University,” where he learned how to use audio software such as Ableton and Pro Tools.

A formative part of the learning process, though, proved to be trial and error.

“At the end of the day, you could watch a lot of videos, but you have to learn how to make things click,” Jones said. “You have to end up hearing the music, finding different textures and sounds, making your own sound. You can watch a whole bunch of videos, but if you’re not hands-on, it’s not going to work.”

Jones never shared the first song he recorded, during his junior year of high school. He just wanted to get a feel for the process. He continued to develop his sound through college — his roommates would always hear him experimenting with concepts — and eventually released his first song while at the University of Houston.

Now, Jones is working to release an EP, most recently dropping a single called “Come Thru” on June 7. He plans to follow a waterfall release strategy, which means he’ll continue to add tracks individually until the project is complete.

“Of course it’s vulnerable, but I don’t see it from the sense of like, ‘Oh, my goodness, I’m scared of what people are going to say about it,’ ” Jones said. “Music is music. At the end of the day, one person may not end up liking it, but another person is going to like it.”

“Come Thru” and another one of Jones’s singles, “Make It Right,” have been played on the radio, with a dance remix of “Make It Right” reaching the ninth spot on Music Week’s commercial pop chart in the United Kingdom in October 2023. But Jones isn’t preoccupied with attaining commercial success.

After the NFL, Jones would love to explore the music industry further, with hopes of entering the sync placement world to have his songs used in TV shows, movies, commercials, and video games. He hired Freeman as his brand manager to assist him with other goals, too.

For now, the offseason is Jones’s opportunity to spend time in the studio and work on the ideas that bounce around in his head. He’ll pore over sound libraries or contact producers in search of a compelling sample. Sometimes he’ll move on after creating just a hook or a verse, before finishing the song months later. Sometimes a song stays incomplete.

The process is what excites Jones. His face lights up when discussing why he isolated a instrument off a sample, or why he pitched his vocals up or pumped up the beats per minute. He can break down every decision with ease.

"If you can be three people in one song, it helps out because the ears don't get fatigued," Jones said. "If you always have the same tone throughout a song, then people are going to be like, 'OK, I hear it,' but then they start zoning out."

Jones isn't beholden to a specific genre, saying his goal is to get people's heads "bopping" before they hear any words. He is toying with country, excited about the possibility of incorporating foot stomps into a track he's working on.

"People are scared to make mistakes, but at the end of the day you just never know what's going to end up hitting," he said.

Freeman has done his best to connect Jones with other music minds. He introduced him to Foster, a Grammy-nominated songwriter and producer for the R&B artist H.E.R. He brought him to a songwriting session with Rico Love, who is credited as a producer on Beyoncé's "I Am . . . Sasha Fierce" and Usher's "Raymond v. Raymond," among others.

"Rico went in and he just did the hook and said, 'All right, man, I need somebody to go in and cut the verse,' " Freeman recalled. "Marcus walked right in the booth — no pen, no paper, no phone — and just completely freestyled it and was cutting it in real time."

Freeman remembers the sound engineer looking at Jones, asking, "Who is this dude?"

Although music takes the backseat during football season, Jones won't stay out of the studio for long.

"Now that I've gotten to where I am now, I've always wanted to let kids know there's not just one thing you're good at," Jones said. "There's multiple things you can do."

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.

T Vederian Lowe



Despite hardships, Patriots' Vederian Lowe plays with purpose

By Sarah Doiron, Sam Knox

FOXBORO, Mass. (WPRI) — Every professional football player has a story to tell when it comes to their journey to the NFL.

That holds especially true for New England Patriots offensive tackle Vederian Lowe.

The Illinois native was a star on his high school football team and went on to play at the collegiate level.

He had no idea his life would take an unexpected turn during his sophomore year at the University of Illinois.

Lowe was 19 years old when he first met his now-wife Haylee. Within a few months, he learned he was going to be a father.

"I'm going to be honest, I was scared," Lowe recalled. "I did not expect it at all and it was not something I was mentally prepared for. I was completely unaware of life."

Lowe found his purpose the day his first son was born, adding that his life changed “with the flip of a switch.”

“That’s when I knew it was something bigger,” Lowe said. “I couldn’t be nonchalant anymore and just say, ‘It’s whatever, it’ll work itself out.’”

“Everybody wants to provide for their kids,” he continued. “I couldn’t just say that, I had to go make it happen.”

Lowe’s life would take another unexpected turn when his mother passed away unexpectedly later that same year. She never got to meet her grandson.

“I remember telling her ‘I can’t wait for you to meet my son,’” he said. “It was just very hard to deal with.”

Despite the tragic loss, Lowe refused to shut down.

“My mom always wanted me to graduate from college,” Lowe said. “She wanted me to get that degree.”

Lowe used his mother’s passing as fuel to move forward and make her proud. But he had another life-changing decision to make.

His 12-year-old brother Vydalis lived with his mother at the time of her passing, and was left behind to care for their grandmother.

“I didn’t think that was acceptable for a child that young to be doing,” Lowe said. “I really wanted to get him out of that situation.”

“I talked to my wife and we decided it was best [to take guardianship of him,]” he continued. “We asked him and he said, ‘Yeah, I would love that.’”

Lowe said he saw his brother flourish in ways he likely wouldn’t have if he’d stayed with their grandmother.

“It allowed him to truly be him,” Lowe explained. “It allowed him to find himself and not have to worry about everything that was going on.”

It also gave Lowe and his wife a new perspective on parenting.

“It really gave us clarity,” Lowe said. “It helped us figure out how we wanted to be as parents. We got to buckle down on our parenting style as young adults to make sure we were guiding him.”

“It’s something I wouldn’t take back at all,” he added. “I’m more mature than I was before.”

Lowe and his wife welcomed their second son into the world during their senior year. Now in his third year as an NFL player, Lowe continues to play with purpose.

“I’m not one of those guys that goes out there to just play or the money,” Lowe said. “I literally do it for the family that I created, that is my sole purpose of playing the game.”

“Everybody has their hardships,” he continued. “I think it really says a lot about how you react to it and how you come out of it.”



Vederian Lowe Sees Dream Come True at NFL Combine

By Gabby Hajduk

The last few months have been life-changing for Vederian Lowe. Back in December — a few weeks after Lowe played his final football game as an Illini — he was invited to the 2022 NFL Combine.

Lowe heard the news first from head coach Bret Bielema, then received the formal invitation a few days later. Becoming one of only 58 offensive linemen selected for this year's combine is an ode to Lowe's younger self, who never imagine getting this far.

"It's very special because I grew up watching the Combine," Lowe said. "Ever since like 2011, I've watched the NFL Combine and for me to even have the opportunity to be up here and to be able to compete (Friday) and showcase my abilities means everything. My family means everything and they'll only be two hours away and be able to see me in this fashion; it means the world to me."

On Jan. 1, Lowe left Champaign and headed to San Diego to train for the combine. While out there, Lowe also played in the East-West Shrine Bowl in Las Vegas on Feb. 3. This allowed Lowe to get a head start for the combine as he was able to talk and meet with NFL scouts and coaches, another once in a lifetime opportunity.

Competing and training out west was an incredible opportunity for the Illini graduate, it also meant Lowe had to leave behind his wife — Haylee, his two sons — King and Trey, and his teenage brother — Vydalis.

Throughout the two months Lowe was in California, he was only able to make it home for one night to see his family. After spending time with his boys, and surprising them with new stuffed animals, that second good bye got even harder.

But those goodbyes might have made the biggest difference in Lowe's training. If he had to be away from his family, he was going to work as hard as possible to make missing those moments worth it.

"He's like 'this is go time, this is the only time in my life I'll be able to have this opportunity, so I need to show myself and prove myself now,'" Haylee said. "There's no do-overs, so now is my time. Especially with him being away from his family, it wasn't a little opportunity, it was something that he needed to take very seriously because he was putting a lot at stake to go there. Leaving me and the boys and his brother and stuff at home, he was like this isn't some I'm going to take lightly if I have to do that."

While leaving home for an extended period of time Lowe, Haylee was able to visit California almost every other weekend, with the help of her mom as a reliable babysitter. This allowed Haylee to see her husband "in his element," while also giving Lowe a view of why this training was so important.

Since becoming a father, a husband and legal guardian, Lowe has dedicated every day to giving his family a great life. Those personal traits are things NFL teams have begun to show their appreciation for.

"All those things kind of just came to me, I didn't go to it," Lowe said. "The only think I went to was becoming a married man. That was something that I wanted to do. Me becoming a father very early wasn't planned. It wasn't something that I thought of doing at the age that was that. But it came to me and I made the most out of all things that's happened, you know, good or bad. Me getting guardianship of my brother, like I said, that was something that came to me and with the help of my wife, we are able to care for him, because of the unfortunate situation that he's been in. So, I've made the most out of everything that has happened to me in my life good or bad. And it's definitely helped me become the man that I am today. I think it's made me a well-polished man. I feel like it's really helped my character, having to grow up quicker. And I think that that's a good trait that teams will like when they talk to me."

Lowe's personal character has easily stuck out at the combine when meeting with teams, but his versatility on the field has also popped.

This past fall, PFF graded Lowe the No. 31 tackle in the nation and the No. 37 run blocking tackle in the nation. NFL analyst Lance Zierlein noted Lowe's athleticism, bend, pass punch and recovery as NFL-caliber traits.

On Friday, Lowe measured out at 6-foot-5, 314 pounds with a 35 3/8 inch arm length, highlighting his strong and durable size. But what Lowe really wants teams to take away from his combine outing is his ability to be a versatile offensive lineman.

"I definitely feel comfortable working from both sides. I started playing tackle at right tackle and converted over to left tackle when I got to college. So playing both tackles, I feel like I'm very capable of doing that and very capable of flipping sides whenever. Whatever a team is looking for that's what I'm ready to play."

"That's just something I've done with great coaching over the last few years, just established more tools from our toolbox," Lowe said. "I feel like that helps your game if you can do more things well. I think that just with the coaches I've had you know, I've had really great people around me, who have taught me great things and I'm very grateful."

Lowe has also made it a point to emphasize how reliable and coachable he is. In the 2021 season, Lowe broke Illinois' starts record and finished his career with 52 starts on the offensive line. Lowe believes holding that record highlights his consistency and durability while also showing how much experience he has gained through the years.

Another unique point in Lowe's game is his ability to adjust to any playbook. Going through multiple coaching changes while at Illinois, Lowe was able to learn a lot of different schemes and reads. While learning a whole new playbook before his final year with Illinois took him some extra time, Lowe said being under Bielema's downhill offense opened up a whole new part of his game.

"I felt like when I first got to college, it was so difficult for me to pick up on a playbook," Lowe said. "That was the first time I really had a coaching change in four years, but from Coach Smith to Coach Bielema, and the three different offensive coordinators I had, and then three different o-line coaches I had has definitely helped me pick up on different tendencies and stuff like that way quicker than I normally would have. And I'm glad for it. The experiences have taught me a lot. The experiences have given me a routine on how I can learn stuff. Coaches here always ask me, how would you learn something? And it's very easy for me to tell them, because I've done it multiple times before, so I feel like it's helped me a lot."

In general, spending the extra year at Illinois under Bielema and offensive line coach Bart Miller was crucial for Lowe's physical and mental development.

Haylee said her and Lowe are forever grateful for Bielema and the opportunities he gave Lowe. Between being a Big Ten Media Day selection, the speaker at the Big Ten Kickoff Luncheon and team captain, Lowe was taken under Bielema's wing from the start.

"It was the best thing possible for him," Haylee said. "We weren't sure in the moment of making the decision, because there's a lot of things where he could have gotten hurt, anything could have happened. He could have lowered his draft stock if he got hurt and him taking that leap, I think he took it a lot more seriously because he was like this is my last opportunity. I think he did the best for him, between Coach B coming in and everything that he was able to accomplish with getting the Big Ten media day opportunity and being the captain. Everything that he hadn't had the previous years, he just has gone above and beyond through this last year so I'm glad he stayed, I really am."

With Lowe finished at the combine, he is now back at home with his family where he will prepare for Illinois' Pro Day on Friday and the NFL Draft in April. Lowe will also be reunited with many of his teammates this week as he hasn't seen them for a few months either.

All of 2022 has been a dream come true for Lowe so far and he can only hope the best is still to come. While the ultimate goal is to hear his name called on draft day, Lowe still took time to soak in the NFL Combine experience.

To future Illini who hope to have that same opportunity, Lowe emphasizes the importance of staying true to oneself and never losing sight of how far work ethic can get you.

"Definitely to just keep grinding, keep working. I remember I never thought I would get this far," Lowe said. "When I first started playing, I never thought that I would get this far. I didn't put my mind to it as much. And I when I finally put my mind to it, this came to fruition, it became a reality. I would definitely let the guys know that with the work ethic and just working hard and continuing to be consistent day in and day out that your dreams can come true."



Vikings rookie left tackle Vederian Lowe has overcome a lot already — outside football

By Andrew Krammer

Vederian Lowe's wife, Haylee, was caring for their two children when his younger brother, Vydalis, got on the wrong city bus.

Lowe, the former Illini offensive tackle and Vikings sixth-round pick, was on campus at the University of Illinois preparing for fall camp. He'd just been granted full guardianship of Vydalis that summer, a couple years after their mother passed away. Now he had to ask his coaches to leave before team meetings to get Vydalis to his first day of freshman year at a new high school.

"That's the part where it's like, 'I'm a dad to my brother and got my own kids,' " Haylee Lowe said, "and no guy has ever had to worry about that at the same time of being in football practice."

But the driver on route 9A — Vydalis was supposed to be on route 9B — wouldn't let the 14-year-old student off the bus and insisted on eventually getting him to school. Lowe pinballed between home, where he tried to meet Vydalis, and campus with his good intentions.

"Going back to the stadium, I was sweating right before practice," Vederian Lowe said.

Lowe juggled more than the average college football player while tying the Illini program record with 52 starts — most at left tackle — over five seasons at Illinois. He says handling fatherhood, the unexpected loss of his mother, Veneka Cockrell, and taking in his younger brother didn't extinguish his NFL dreams, but instead galvanized his will to reach them.

"He's probably motivated beyond what the normal rookie coming in is," Illini head coach Bret Bielema said. "This young man is already feeding two children and his brother and has others counting on him."

'A rollercoaster of emotions'

Vederian and Vydalis are half-brothers through their mother, Veneka, who died unexpectedly in July 2019 because of an enlarged heart and liver failure. She raised them in Rockford, Ill., where Vederian — as a towering freshman — quickly became a standout offensive lineman at Auburn High School.

That was the dream his grandfather, Jerry Lowe, had since ushering Vederian to football camps as a 9-year-old tyke.

"He's my male figure, that's my role model," Vederian Lowe said. "He's the foundation of who I am as a man today. He started it off for me, really got me interested in football."

Lowe started two years at right guard and two years at right tackle in Rockford, becoming a three-star recruit who committed to Illinois during one of the school's summer camps for high school prospects.

He headed to Champaign, Ill., where he met Haylee — a fellow student — on social media. Long nights talking led to falling in love, and their first child, Kingston, before either could expect it.

"I had a rollercoaster of emotions," Vederian Lowe said. "I just didn't know how I was going to be able to do it. I had just turned 19 three or four months before I found out I was having a kid. I was a baby, man. But my wife, she sat me down — and that's why she's my soulmate and I love her to death — she was so confident in her words telling me I'd still be able to graduate, still be able to play football and that we'd raise this kid together."

They meshed lives and schedules. Haylee worked from home, caring for Kingston with the help of her mother and Vederian's grandfather while supporting the family financially. Vederian stepped in following daily communications classes and the physical toll of football.

"The one thing he loves more than football is being a dad," Haylee Lowe said. "He'd come home after a game and be like, welp, it's bath time. He wouldn't go celebrate or party. He didn't care about anything after practice or games other than that."

A foundation was formed to handle an eventful 2021. They married in February. Haylee gave birth to their second son, Trey, in May. Two months later, Vederian was granted full guardianship of Vydalis, who had already lived with them for about a year.

Bringing Vydalis into their family was crucial for Vederian. Their grandmother was living with their mother, Veneka, whose passing turned Vydalis into a young caregiver to their grandmother who had suffered strokes.

"We'll figure out how to do it, no questions asked," said Haylee, who turns 22 this month. "We're learning how to do it. We're very, very young and we've only had three years of parenting. That's the biggest struggle."

Vederian Lowe, his younger brother Vydalis (whom he now has guardianship of) and their mother Veneka Cockrell before her passing

Playing for more

Lowe's family furthered a reputation of strong character, which included being an Illini team captain and serving on former head coach Lovie Smith's leadership council — a group of trusted players whom Smith consulted on team matters.

The Vikings heard a lot about the 23-year-old Lowe's maturity before scouts met him for the first time at the East-West Shrine Game, a college all-star game held in February outside Las Vegas. Intrigue about Lowe's size — 6-5, 314 pounds — and durability was coupled with rave reviews about his character from coaches and trainers.

"He's got enough athletic ability to function in a zone scheme, but also has the size and power to play downhill and move people off the line of scrimmage," Vikings national scout Chisom Opara said. "He's [also] a guy with an impressive background."

"He knows what responsibility is all about," Opara added, "and he's going to hit the ground running and may not have some of the hiccups that some of the guys without that background may have."

General Manager Kwesi Adofo-Mensah, in his first draft atop the front office, saw and heard enough to take a late-round swing.

"You read the story and it's incredible," Adofo-Mensah said. "How does somebody overcome adversity on the field? Well, you can't always observe that. But I know that somebody who has overcome adversity in life, I'm willing to bet on that person."

When asked what makes his juggling act possible, Lowe says he owes it all to Haylee, whom he now wants to help pursue her passions just as she supported his. Making an NFL roster can be an uphill battle for any sixth-round draft pick, but Lowe's motivation comes from multiple sources.

He's also playing to provide stability for Vydalis, who changed schools three times in Rockford, attended a middle school and high school in Champaign, and will now be changing schools again in following his older brother to Minnesota.

"I want to get him into a rhythm with life. He's been bouncing around for so long," Lowe said. "I told my brother this is the last time you're going to have to move. I'm going to make sure this is the last time you're going to have to move."

OL Atonio Mafi



Atonio Mafi's story began in Tom Brady's hometown. Now he's writing the next chapter in Foxborough

By Khari Thompson

Atonio Mafi described getting drafted by the Patriots as a "full circle" moment.

The rookie offensive lineman is from San Mateo, California, which is also Tom Brady's hometown.

Mafi played high school football at Brady's alma mater, Junipero Serra. The school's football stadium is named after Brady and his family. The legendary quarterback's name was "everywhere" at the school, and he would occasionally wish the team luck via FaceTime before big games, Mafi said.

Although he lived more than 3,000 miles away at the time, Mafi grew up a Patriots fan because of Brady's connection to San Mateo.

"Obviously, the biggest thing was seeing a kid from San Mateo, where I'm from, winning that much," Mafi said. "It was great to see the Patriots win so much and win so many Super Bowls, but the biggest thing for us was seeing a kid from California doing this year after year, and even into his old age. That was the coolest thing."

Junipero Serra has a long list of famous sports alums, including Brady, legendary MLB slugger Barry Bonds, four-time Super Bowl champ Lynn Swann, and three-time Pro Bowl left tackle David Bakhtiari.

But, Mafi enjoyed other aspects of the school too, such as the music programs.

“My high school was an all guys Catholic school, so it was a different vibe,” Mafi said. “My school was really big for football, basketball, and other sports like that. But, like, the creator of “High School Musical” [Peter Barsocchini] went to our school too, so we had really good arts and theater. I was part of the choir too, I was part of men’s chorus when I was in high school. Our school was good in multiple facets.”

Mafi, 23, had yet to turn two-years-old when Brady won his first Super Bowl with the Patriots. New England was a full-on dynasty by the time Mafi was old enough to follow the game.

“By the time I was old enough to understand football and sit there and watch an entire game and understand what was going on, that was peak TB12,” Mafi said.

Brady’s final season with the Patriots came during Mafi’s sophomore year at UCLA. Mafi began his college career as a defensive lineman, but switched to offensive guard and eventually developed into a second-team All-Pac 12 selection at his new position. He tied UCLA’s school record for most games played [56].

The Patriots brought Mafi to Foxborough for a pre-draft visit, and he said the moment that stuck out the most was when he met coach Bill Belichick.

“It was just surreal meeting Bill Belichick for the first time,” Mafi said. “I couldn’t even remember what he was saying that first time. I was just really shell shocked. That’s what it was like.”

The Patriots drafted Mafi in the 5th round of the 2023 NFL Draft. He was one of three offensive linemen selected, along with center Jake Andrews and guard Sidy Sow.

“He’s awesome. I love Mafi to death,” Sow said. “All three of us came in, and it’s kind of scary being on a new team, but a guy like him has such an open heart from the beginning. He made it so easy to create a connection, I think for me, and for Jake. Going through this whole process and sharing this whole experience has been kind of cool.”

Mafi started in four of the Patriots’ first six games this season. His playing time dipped for a while during the middle of the season, but he’s gotten more snaps recently after Cole Strange was placed on injured reserve.

“All three rookies, with Mafi included, from their work ethic and that standpoint have done a great job coming in,” offensive lineman David Andrews said. “As a veteran you want to see guys come in, work hard, and try to do the right things. Obviously, they’re rookies and they’re trying to figure it out in a lot of different ways.”

“So, I appreciate all three of them,” Andrews added. “I came in with two other guys too as a rookie, so it’s nice to have a group that you’re going through it with. I came in with Tre Jackson and Shaq Mason, so I enjoyed having those guys. We could always hang out with each other, bounce things off of each other, and try to help each other.”

Mafi has come a long way from San Mateo. He said playing for the Patriots is something he doesn’t take for granted.

“Definitely surreal, definitely grateful for it every day,” Mafi said. “There’s so much history here, and I understand my role right now as a rookie. Just trying to do right by those who came before and show every day that I deserve to be here.”

LB Marte Mapu



Marte Mapu got this advice from legendary NFL uncle

By: Danny Jaillet

New England Patriots rookie linebacker Marte Mapu has football lineage, and his uncle is a former Patriot.

Mapu was drafted by New England with the 76th overall selection, and his uncle, Junior Seau, was there for his nephew's early development.

Seau played in the NFL from 1990-2009. He played for New England from 2006-2009 and was able to record 178 tackles in 38 games with the Patriots. He made 16 starts in total. Now, his nephew is carrying his advice, as he looks to embark on a Patriots career of his own.

Mapu tallied 76 tackles in his final season with Sacramento State, and he looks to be an important piece of the Patriots' linebacker group. Mapu's father, Av'e Mapu, told CBS Sacramento the advice Seau gave his son.

"I always remember when he asked the question and he goes to him 'what can I do to get better?'," said Av'e. "Junior just told him, 'hey, I know you're too young right now to know but for me, it's film study.'"

How Marte Mapu fits into the equation at the linebacker position remains a question. That being said, there is no doubt he got good advice to take to the next level.



Marte Mapu becomes highest drafted Hornet into NFL

By Jack Freeman and Isaac Streeter

With the 76th pick in the 2023 NFL Draft, The New England Patriots select Marte Mapu, Linebacker, Sacramento State.

Mapu had an impressive showing at the NFLPA Bowl which then led to an invite to the Senior Bowl where the safety-linebacker hybrid received a lot of attention for his play.

"This is my favorite player in the entire draft," NFL Network draft analyst Daniel Jeremiah said on the broadcast. "He's what the modern linebacker looks like in the NFL right now."

The former Hornet became the first player in the 2023 draft to be selected that was not invited to the NFL combine in February and the second player to be drafted from the FCS level.

Mapu dominated during his time at Sac State, with seven interceptions and 165 tackles in his career. He also won Big Sky defensive player of the year in 2022 as well as being named to eight All-American teams the same year.

Listed by Sac State as a nickelback, Mapu plays an unorthodox hybrid safety linebacker position. When Mapu heard his name called by the Patriots, it was as a linebacker.

After a pectoral injury in the Senior Bowl, Mapu did not work out at the Sac State Pro Day. Doesn't seem to have deterred teams from his talent, as Mapu continued to rise up on draft boards.

Mapu has become the first Sac State football player to be drafted into the NFL in nearly two decades and is the highest drafted player in school history. The previous highest selection was John Farley in 1984 when the Bengals selected him 92nd overall.

Sac State hasn't had a player selected since Marco Cavka was picked by the Jets 178th overall in 2004.

QB Drake Maye



How Drake Maye's family forged unflinching confidence in Patriots QB

By Chris Mason

HUNTERSVILLE, N.C. — Mark Maye chuckles after he drives past Bailey Middle School, where the boulder in front is painted in blue and yellow with Ted Lasso's "BELIEVE." When his son Drake was a student there, he didn't need any signs.

Belief has never been an issue for the New England Patriots' first-round pick.

On a similar ride through Huntersville over a decade ago, Mark remembered 9-year-old Drake sitting in the shotgun seat as he shuttled eldest brother Luke's AAU carpool. Luke was in high school and kids his age had started getting attention in the college recruiting process, so Drake asked the carload of teenagers where they'd gotten offers from.

Luke's teammates responded with a number of Division I schools, but mostly lower-tier ones. When they weren't blue bloods like North Carolina or Kentucky, Drake repeated "awwww, what!?" At the end of the roll call, the 9-year-old turned around in his seat.

"Man, y'all need to step your game up," Drake cracked.

Luke's teammates all wondered the same thing:

Who the heck does this kid think he is? Just wait until he's in our shoes.

While others were being courted by mid-majors, Luke had top-shelf suitors in pursuit. North Carolina's Roy Williams came to the Maye household to have dinner with the family and make his pitch. Rather than being awed by the legendary coach, Drake put his own spin on the evening.

"He said, 'Y'all watch. Coach Saban is going to be in our house at some point, and I'm gonna let y'all know that I told y'all when I was (this young). Coach Saban is going to be in our house soon,'" Luke recalled on a phone call from Japan.

Sure enough, Nick Saban wasn't just on the Mayes' front stoop a few years later, he was sneaking up the back staircase at Myers Park High School to get a glimpse of Drake playing basketball, too. Saban recruited him aggressively, and Drake initially committed to Alabama before flipping to North Carolina.

"For him to say that and make it reality was just the kind of confidence he had and the kind of person he really was," Luke said.

That swagger, even at 9, came from expecting to win. Growing up in the Maye household, competition was always king.

"We emphasized winning," Mark said. "We'd talk about, 'Second is the first loser, man. It's about winning.' There's such a difference. As the kids have gone along with their sports, the one-point losses, hey, the feeling with a one-point loss (compared to) a one-point win... sometimes you might not play good, but we emphasized win the game, then we'll work on trying to fix (anything that's wrong)."

A two-year starting quarterback at North Carolina, Mark was working as a graduate assistant when he met his future wife, then Aimee Sockwell, who had been a standout basketball player in her own right. Named Mecklenburg County Girls Player of the Year as a senior at West Charlotte High School, Aimee can be as competitive as the rest.

Mark knew he wanted a big family, and he and Aimee were blessed with four boys. Luke set the tone as a sports-crazed child, and Cole, Beau, and Drake all followed suit. For the Maye boys, winning was the only option, and that's played out over the course of their athletic careers.

There are a pair of National Championships in the family, as Luke won a ring playing hoops at North Carolina, while Cole nabbed one pitching at Florida. Beau's triumph over injury might be the most impressive feat of the bunch. With holes in his knee cartilage, he underwent nine surgeries and still walked on to the basketball team at UNC. And then there's Drake, who has accomplished so much that the Patriots are entrusting him with the future of their franchise.

"We don't like losing, as a family," Cole said on his back porch in Charlotte. "That's been one of our core values that our parents instilled in us."

Drake wasn't just the youngest, but always the smallest growing up. Even at 6-foot-4, he still is. Luke and Cole were years older, and Beau, who only had Drake beat by 14 months, was a massive child.

"In elementary school, Beau was like 'Elf,'" Mark laughs. "He was like the same height as his kindergarten teacher."

Growing up, the boys competed at anything. Anything. Football. Ping pong. Pickleball. Putt Putt Golf. Regular Golf. Corn hole. Cards. Board games. Video games. And especially basketball, with games that were laden with physicality. Beau had a pair of broken elbows from going down hard on the concrete of the Mayes' home court to prove it.

"That's part of growing up with four boys and three brothers, man. It's a war sometimes," Beau said.

On the court, Drake was always a scrapper. He'd foul — often, his siblings say — because he knew he could get away with it. Contentious games would lead to brothers going full days without speaking to each other. Even in simple driveway games, the stakes were always high.

When Drake and Beau were 10 and 11, their parents sent them to a basketball camp with a 3-on-3 tournament at nearby Davidson. The two of them teamed up with a third friend, Bobby Waite. Every group of three had to fundraise, and the team with the most money got to select their "coach" from the basketball team.

At the time, Davidson had a decent little shooter named Stephen Curry.

The Mayes raised the most money, were awarded the No. 1 overall pick, and their coaching choice was a no-brainer.

"Obviously we're going to pick Steph Curry," Beau said.

Per usual, Drake was the youngest player, and reluctantly, Beau admits he was still the best player on the floor. Beau describes his younger brother as "a whirling dervish" and "a Tasmanian Devil" in those games. With Curry behind their bench, the Maye boys won the entire tournament.

"I bet Steph probably wouldn't remember that," Beau said. "But we do."

Even the virtual competitions between the Maye boys got animated.

They loved video games then and still do now, which helps with Drake heading to New England and Luke currently playing professional basketball in Japan. Whether it was NBA 2K, Mario Kart, FIFA, or anything else, the boys kept track of their rankings growing up. Everybody in the house knew who the belt holder was and who the next challenger would be.

"It didn't need to be written down," Cole said. "They'd be begging for the guy who held the crown to play another game."

When the world stopped during COVID-19, the Maye competitions didn't. The boys began playing Madden on franchise mode and Drake had a knack for winning the eight-team league no matter where he drafted. Cole estimated his youngest brother "probably won 12 of the 14 seasons."

COVID-19 also introduced the boys to Pickleball. Two-on-two matches became commonplace, with raw power outweighing finesse.

"Everyone's at the net and everyone's spiking it and spiking it at each other," Cole said. "We're not holding back. At times, you wouldn't even care if you get the point or not but you're going to hit the ball as hard as you can at the guy across from you. Which, I don't know if it's the strongest strategy, but it's more of a statement made."

Pickleball is now a favorite of the Mayes, and Drake in particular is dialed in — both as a player and a trash talker. He's recently taken to trying to beat people one vs. two, and according to Beau, has dubbed himself Roger Federer, Carlos Alcaraz and most recently, "right-handed Ben Shelton" in mid-competition.

"He loves talking (expletive). He's the No. 1 (expletive) talker," Beau said. "He knows it gets obnoxious and he continues to do it. Man, it fires me up! I'm sitting here talking about it and it's making me mad."

Drake's rise to stardom really began to take off at Myers Park High School, where he transferred as a sophomore.

Gus Purcell Stadium sits atop a slight grassy hill, and at the base is a parking lot where fans can purchase first-class tailgating spots. Sold by the booster club, fans buy season passes and arrive early on Friday night with their flags flying.

When Scott Chadwick took over as football coach in 2014, the boosters were having trouble selling out the passes. They were still advertising at home games throughout the season, and there was a bunch of inventory left at the year's end.

Fast forward to Drake's junior year in 2019, where the program was on the rise and interest began to crescendo. The booster club announced the spots would be going on sale at 8 a.m. on June 1st. By 8:17 a.m., the entire parking lot was sold out. It took just 17 minutes.

"There were people that were afraid that they were not going to get in online that showed up at the booster club treasurer's front door at 8 a.m. that morning because they wanted to make sure they got theirs," Chadwick said.

Those tailgaters got more than their money's worth.

During Drake's final season — his senior fall was cancelled due to COVID-19 — he led Myers Park to a conference championship and was named North Carolina's Player of the Year. The big-armed quarterback threw 50 touchdowns to two interceptions, while setting a Myers Park record with 3,512 passing yards; Drake put up video game numbers to rival one of his Madden franchise winners.

In addition to starring at football, Drake continued to turn heads on the basketball court. He likely could have been a terrific three-sport athlete given his prowess at baseball — he was a strong shortstop and center fielder growing up — but the game was a little too slow for him unless he was pitching.

In the locker room for the basketball team, there was a video game console with an outdated version of NBA 2K. The team would play it constantly — before practice, after practice, whenever — and Drake never lost. He made sure his competitors knew that too.

The kids kept standings on the whiteboard, and according to coach Scott Taylor, the top of the board read DRAKE MAYE in giant letters followed by his undefeated mark. With each win, Drake would update it as boldly as he could.

And though supremely confident in his own abilities, on the court, there was no selfishness. If anything, Drake was too passive early on. Because football season would bleed into basketball season, Drake wouldn't arrive until the Mustangs were four or five games into the schedule, and at that point, he wouldn't want to upset the chemistry his teammates built. Eventually, that wore off, and the team was better for it.

"He knew when it was time to put his foot in the ground and go ahead and stake claim," Taylor said. "There were plenty of times where he would give you a look or look up from the huddle and nod and you knew that he recognized that it was time for his effort and impact to be felt."

When Drake was with his teammates, it wasn't how am I going to win? It was how are we going to win? Taylor used to try to stack the deck against him in practice scrimmages, and no matter who played alongside Drake, he found a way to elevate his team to victory.

"He's a connector," Taylor said. "He finds a way just to be able to make connections with everyone in (the locker room). It's really easy for him and genuine. I don't know if it's just because of where he's grown up, or what he's grown up around, or just who he is. But he brings people together."

Drake's two high school coaches at Myers Park have strikingly similar stories about the only time they ever saw him dismayed: It was when he felt that he let his upperclassmen down.

In his sophomore year playing football, Drake threw three interceptions in the first half of a game against Butler. It was their lone loss of the regular season and ultimately cost Myers Park a conference championship. In the state 4AA playoffs, they'd see Butler once again.

"That whole week and that night, he told the seniors, 'My bad last time we were here,'" Chadwick said. "It ain't happening this week... You're not going to finish (with a loss) this week. What happened last time ain't happening here this week. I've got you this week."

A man of his word, Drake threw three touchdown passes and wasn't picked off en route to a 33-8 blowout in the revenge game. Myers Park's seniors didn't go out with a second loss to Butler.

On the basketball court as a sophomore, Drake really arrived in a playoff game against Northwest Guilford. The football star scored 25 points, hit a 3-point dagger to essentially end things, and then literally ended the game with a steal and a dunk as time expired. He hung on the rim as the crowd erupted.

But that's not what resonated with Taylor. Two games later in the tournament, Drake scored 19 points against R.J. Reynolds, but fouled out in a loss that ended their season. Though he was only a sophomore, Drake was distraught.

"He just kept saying, 'Coach, I let my seniors down. My seniors are done,'" Taylor said. "He has another year to come back. He's got another big football season ahead of him. He has so much more ahead of him, and he was stuck in the fact that his buddies, his teammates, his seniors, their career had ended right there. I know he's never lost that."

Whether it's growing up with three brothers or simply how he's wired, Drake has shown a fierce loyalty to those around him. He's had the same girlfriend since the seventh grade — Ann Michael Hudson — and brought her on stage at his introductory photo shoot at Gillette Stadium, along with his brothers. Drake has also driven the same truck since he got his license, a white GMC Sierra, because he believed a quarterback should drive a pickup truck, Mark said. Though his rookie deal will pay him more than \$35 million, he's still rolling with his ride.

At Myers Park, there was one chant from opposing student sections that would really get under Drake's skin on the basketball court.

"Luke is bet-ter!"

By the time Drake was in high school, Luke was a star at North Carolina. He'd hit a buzzer-beater to send the Tar Heels to the Final Four and had his National Championship ring. Drake wasn't the only Maye that heard that chant — Beau shrugged it off — but he was the most motivated by it. Incredibly confident, Drake didn't want to just be Luke Maye's brother. He wanted to be Drake Maye.

"Drake's not really someone you want to piss off when he's in a competitive mood and he's out on the (court) trying to win," Cole said.

According to Taylor, Drake was even more driven than usual when barbs from the student sections started flying. He had a go-to shot — a mid-range fadeaway on the baseline — that he loved to drill in front of them. Then he'd turn to quiet the students down as he headed back up court.

"Growing up, especially going to Carolina, he was my brother, and he was my dad's son," Luke said. "He just kinda wanted to make his own name. I said, 'The only way you can make your own name is by performing.' He really did that. He really stepped up and had an incredible career.

"Now I'm more of Drake's brother. I think it's pretty cool."

Drake Maye brothers

The Maye Brothers attend a UNC basketball game Left to right: Luke, Beau, Drake, and Cole. (Courtesy photo Aimee Maye)Aimee Maye

When Drake arrived at Chapel Hill, his coaches were greeted by more of the same. A self-assured kid who was hellbent on being the best. Tar Heels coach Mack Brown has the broken ping pong paddles from losses to prove it.

At 68 years old, Clyde Christensen has enjoyed a front row seat to some of the best quarterback play football has to offer. A quarterbacks coach for Peyton Manning in Indianapolis and Tom Brady in Tampa Bay, Christensen served as an offensive analyst on Brown's staff while Drake was at North Carolina.

The first thing that jumped out to Christensen?

On the golf course, Drake wouldn't tell his brother Beau that a ball 4-and-a-half inches from the pin was good.

"We have a strict no gimme policy," Beau explained. "Every putt has to be putted out. Over the years we've had some very, very, very, VERY short putts be missed, so we always putt everything out. And we want an accurate score too. Whether you shoot 83 or 103, that number should be the actual number of strokes."

So Drake made Beau putt it out, and Christensen learned that day that nothing is given when competing with the Maye family.

"(Drake) just has a playfulness. Tom (Brady) had the same thing, a playfulness where they love to compete," Christensen said. "They love to win \$5 off you. They love to win a \$2 bet. Nobody loves winning a \$2 bet better than Tom Brady. This guy has the same kind of fun, 'Hey, I'll bet you that you can't hit the crossbar from here, Clyde.' Always, everything turns into a competition."

On the field, Drake's dedication to teammates stood out in addition to outstanding play.

His sophomore year is what rocketed him up draft boards — Drake threw for 4,321 yards and had 38 touchdowns to seven interceptions — but late in his junior year, his character was once again revealed. There were plenty of personnel changes on offense, from the coaching staff to the supporting cast, and it turned into a turbulent season.

Drake was still clearly going to be a Top 5 pick in the NFL Draft, and in the season finale against N.C. State, North Carolina was getting thumped, down 26-7 at halftime. The game didn't matter in the standings; the Tar Heels had no way to win their way into the ACC Championship game.

"It would have been really easy for him to just ride off into the sunset knowing where he is in the draft, and the guy just kept competing," offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey said. "I go see him at halftime, we're down, and he's like, 'Coach I like this (play), I like this (play), I like this (play), let's go back to this.' There was never any inkling that he wasn't going to compete all the way until the end."

There was no dramatic comeback. North Carolina fell to their rivals 39-20, but the quarterback's willingness to continue answering the bell left a lasting impression. For Drake, there's no such thing as a meaningless game.

"In fact, he tweaked his ankle a little bit and went back into the game," Lindsey added. "I thought he was going to be out. (Other staffers) were telling me he was probably out. Then we get the ball back and he runs on the field. Those are the kind of things that really stick out to me. Just about his drive and how important it is for him to be there for his teammates."

Drake Maye Introductory Press Conference

Foxborough, MA - April 26: New England Patriots QB Drake Maye at his introductory press conference at Gillette Stadium. (Photo by John Tlumacki/The Boston Globe via Getty Images) Boston Globe via Getty Images

With the name Drake Maye forged in North Carolina lore, there's a new challenge now as he heads to New England.

In 2023, the Patriots offense wasn't just bad. It was lowest scoring offense of any team in the NFL over the past decade. Sooner or later, New England will turn its hopes to the No. 3 overall pick to right the ship. Once again, Drake will be battling opponents more experienced than him, but he's been doing that since he started toddling in Huntersville.

New coach Jerod Mayo has already gotten a glimpse of his competitive side — the two squared off in the NHL video game during Drake's Top 30 visit — but there's plenty more that he will learn.

The linchpin in New England's rebuild, turning an NFL franchise around will be the most arduous task Drake has ever faced. But this is the kid who called his shot with Nick Saban. Who won a 3-on-3 tournament with Steph Curry. Who outshined his National Champion brother at North Carolina. Who sold out the whole darn tailgate in 17 minutes.

If there's anyone with the confidence to turn things around in Foxborough, it's Drake Maye, who has never lost the fire of being the little brother.

"It's funny that the really great players that I've been around just came from great families," Christensen mused. "Which, it may be random, it may not be. I don't know. But everyone from the Hasselbecks to the Bradys to the Mannings to the Lucks, they just were special families — and this kid has the same thing."



10 more Drake Maye anecdotes

By Chris Mason

A couple days in Drake Maye's old stomping grounds led to a very long story, but as always, there were a few things that wound up on the chopping block.

For the feature, I spoke to his dad, Mark, his three older brothers, Luke, Cole, and Beau, and an assortment of other people close to the Patriots quarterback. Whether it was a pointed question from an assistant general manager, an absurdly large breakfast spread, or Drake's go-to basketball move in NBA 2K, sometimes 3,500 words just isn't enough space.

So without further ado, here are 10 more anecdotes that I couldn't fit into Monday's story — How Drake Maye's family forged unflinching confidence in Patriots QB — which you probably should have read first:

Could Drake have played hoops at UNC?

Football coach Mack Brown said yes, and he would have been a quality sixth man. It's a polarizing question among Maye family members, as Drake was a fantastic high school hoops player, and the general consensus was that he probably could have played for the Tar Heels.

(National champion at UNC) Luke: "He would have to really work on a couple of things, but I definitely think he could have been on the team. I don't know if he would have gotten minutes. But he jokes about some guys that are out there that he thinks he could definitely guard or get a bucket on, which I think is hilarious."

Cole: "He could have played at UNC, to some degree. I don't know to what extent he would have been on the court... I think Drake could have played a role on that team. Any of the teams over the last two seasons... He still is a really good basketball player."

Mark: "Yeah, I think he definitely could have helped them. He's a good passer, scorer, he's got good size... Drake would love to try. He'd love to give it a shot."

Eddie Haskell?

Drake is very well-mannered. He addresses just about everyone as sir or ma'am. He's polite to the point that in the pre-draft process, an assistant general manager asked his high school coach Scott Chadwick whether he was "an Eddie Haskell," the charming, but trouble-causing neighbor from "Leave It To Beaver."

"That analogy could not be farther from the truth. He is not an Eddie Haskell," Chadwick said. "He's not a yes sir, no sir then a jerk behind the scenes. He is a fabulous kid."

Competition continues

Drake Maye may be an NFL first-round pick, but he still competes frequently with Luke, Cole, and Beau — and Luke still believes he's got his little brother beat in overall athleticism.

"I honestly think I'm the best all-around athlete in the family. All sports," Luke said. "Just kinda putting them all together, I think I perform the best. But Drake thinks he's right there with me."

Wanted: A chicken coop

When the boys were growing up, the daily breakfast at the Maye household consisted of 36 eggs and two pounds of bacon. Even with the massive spread, Luke was most likely to still be hungry afterward.

"The older I get, the worse I feel for my mom," Beau said. "I feel bad."

Related: The much longer Drake Maye profile

Fans of an ex-Patriots QB, but not the one you think

Growing up, Drake's father Mark had Carolina Panthers season tickets. It was a quick drive to the stadium from their hometown of Huntersville — 15 minutes without traffic, Mark estimates — and the boys were particularly invested in the Cam Newton era.

A funnier response

While "Luke is better!" chants from opposing student sections drove Drake crazy in high school, his brother Beau also got them, and was unfazed thanks to a very pragmatic approach.

"I'd be like, of course he's better. He's playing at Carolina. Obviously he's better," Beau said.

Into the fire

Drake started playing tackle football at 6 years old. He was younger than most kids at the Junior Eagles Football Association, but Mark coached so he could keep a close eye on him. They just couldn't keep Drake off the field.

"When you have older brothers and you're always at the games, it makes it more difficult to hold him out," Luke said. "I think he was like first grade in a second, third, fourth-grade league."

Thunder rolls

When playing NBA 2K growing up, Drake always wanted to play using the Oklahoma City Thunder, who were stacked with Kevin Durant, Russell Westbrook, and James Harden.

"Drake's team was the Thunder when they had KD, Russ, and Harden off the bench," Beau said. "He would do the classic move to take out Thabo Sefolosha and put in Harden at the 2 and run Russ, Harden, KD, Serge Ibaka, and Hasheem Thabeet or Kendrick Perkins. That team was (loaded) so I'm not sure how much it was him or the team, but he did win a lot."

A family scorekeeper

When the Maye boys were growing up, Aimee could often be found in the stands with a spiral-bound notebook in her hands, keeping stats during basketball games. It's something that she did to relax a bit, according to Mark.

"They really are the absolute best people," Drake's high school basketball coach Scott Taylor said. "The sweetest people. The most humble. (Drake's) humility is not in any part insincere or not genuine. That is exactly who he is. It's almost laughable how he laughs everything off. But it's every bit how they have all grown up."

Peyton Manning, Tom Brady, and Drake's dad

Long-time NFL quarterbacks coach Clyde Christensen is well known for coaching some of the greatest NFL signal callers of this era. Back in the 1980s, he coached Mark a little bit when he was in high school, too. Then a college assistant, Christensen was helping out at a Gus Purcell passing camp when Mark was one of the top quarterbacks there.

"He was a sponge," Christensen said. "'Just tell me how to get better. Whatever that is.' And that was even in high school. I think he's still the same way. He'll call or he'll come see (UNC offensive coordinator Chip) Lindsey and I and just, 'Hey, tell us what to expect. Tell us how to do this well. How do I support my son?' Just a great dad."

Mark was also recruited by Al Groh, father of Patriots executive Matt, who was then the head coach at Wake Forest. Ultimately, Mark opted to stick to his Carolina roots and play at UNC.



How Patriots QB Drake Maye's family shaped him to meet this moment

By Henry McKenna

Drake Maye sent a text to his brother, Luke, in Japan the other day. Drake is the newly minted New England Patriots quarterback after being the No. 3 overall pick in the 2024 NFL Draft. Luke is in Japan playing pro basketball. Big things are happening for both brothers.

But the text was about golf.

"Drake's talking about how he's getting a new driver for next time he plays," Luke said. "He needs it because I just beat him about two weeks ago."

Golf is the athletic Switzerland for the Maye brothers. Neutral ground.

Luke, 27, is a former North Carolina basketball national champion. Beau, 22, was a basketball walk-on for UNC. Cole, 25, won an NCAA baseball title at Florida. None of them ever played golf at the collegiate level. Cole is the most practiced player, the first one to get a custom set of clubs.

Football, basketball and baseball aren't really fair playing fields for the Maye brothers. Golf levels the competition — which is to say that golf fuels the competition. Most other sports are unsafe for these young men.

"I've watched them play two-on-two basketball, and it's a bloodbath," said Scott Chadwick, Drake Maye's high school coach.

Now, to be clear, the Maye family is as nice and polite as they come. They are "yes please, ma'am" and "no, thank you, sir" kind of guys. But they are also as competitive as they come. On the course, there are no gimmes. Drake will make his brothers putt everything out, even from four feet. It's 18 holes of trash talk, even when visitors join.

"I've missed a shot that cost us a hole," Chadwick said. "I wanted to apologize so badly to Luke because now Luke had to listen to Drake trash-talking."

There aren't many competitions that Drake would shy away from. In fact, only one comes to mind. And we'll get to that. But New England's new QB seems obsessed with winning.

"It doesn't matter if I'm racing you out the door, or if we're on the field competing. I think competing to win, that's what Patriots Nation is about," he said.

Patriots thrive in first NFL Draft without Bill Belichick

Just Tuesday, Maye was on Boston sports radio talking about rookie minicamp, where he'll see fellow rookie quarterback Joe Milton, New England's sixth-round pick. And while the 6-foot-4, 223-pound Maye had one of the strongest arms in the draft, Milton might have the strongest. So Maye fielded a question about whether he'd get into a distance competition with Milton.

"I ain't gonna turn it down," Maye said.

Of course not.

Drake's father, Mark, is a former UNC starting quarterback and NFL backup. Drake's mother, Aimee, was an excellent high school basketball player.

"She's probably the best athlete in our family," Luke said. "She doesn't play [in the competitions] sometimes because she knows she'd be in a bad mood if she loses. But she's been incredible. She's super supportive of all of us. And I just don't think she gets enough credit."

Everyone in the Maye family has some sort of superlative. Drake had been fighting for something other than "youngest." Being a top-three NFL pick isn't too shabby.

That said, the Maye family values team success over individual success. Two of Drake's brothers have championship rings.

"I'm gonna slightly hold my championship still above him," Luke said with a chuckle.

There's plenty of time for Drake to chase a ring, and everyone around him is expecting big things. Super things.

"He is a guy who can win a Super Bowl," UNC coach Mack Brown said this week. "Drake has really been groomed for this. I mean his whole family his whole life expects this. And the two brothers throw the rings in his face all the time. I've seen enough interviews where they say, 'Yeah, look here big boy. I've got this.'"

Brown added: "I did tell him after the selection, 'Neither one of them were first-round picks, so you've got a little something on them right now.'"

[McKenna: Why Patriots QB Drake Maye couldn't be more different than Mac Jones]

Drake's friends and family see the insane competitiveness everywhere, even in Ping-Pong. As a freshman at UNC, Maye challenged the team's starting QB, Sam Howell. When Howell beat Maye, the younger QB wouldn't accept defeat. It went from a best-of-one to a best-of-three to a best-of-five to a best-of-seven.

A few years later, Coach Brown walked into the players' lounge after hearing a commotion. There was a Ping-Pong paddle, shattered into pieces.

"The tight end beat me. Can you imagine?" Maye asked his coach.

"Well then, get better at Ping-Pong," Brown replied.

It's like that on the football field, too.

Sometimes, that competitiveness might be to his detriment. Last October, heading into UNC's game against Virginia, Brown tried to get Maye to take a few practices off. His response? "I can't miss practice. ... I gotta get better." The Tar Heels took their first loss of the year to Virginia. In the regular-season finale against 22nd-ranked NC State, Maye suffered an ankle injury in the first half. By halftime, UNC was down 26-7. Maye wasn't playing in the bowl game. He could have easily bowed out and called it a career.

"I thought he was gonna be out [with the ankle]. They were telling me he's probably out," UNC offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey said. "It would have been really easy for him to kind of just ride off into the sunset. ... I go see him at halftime. We're down and he's [reviewing the first-half plays]. 'Coach, I like this. I like this. I like this. Let's go back to this.'"

"He just never had any inkling that he wasn't gonna compete all the way to the end."

But then there are those special moments. Two stick out for his father, along with Brown, Lindsey and UNC Senior Advisor Clyde Christensen. The first is Maye's left-handed pass, akin to something Brett Favre or Patrick Mahomes might do.

In a game last September at Pitt, Maye was scrambling to his left with Panthers defenders closing in. It seemed like he planned on running for whatever he could get. But as a defender got a hand on Maye, the QB looked up and saw receiver Kobe Paysour put up a hand. He was wide open. So Maye lifted the ball in his left hand and chucked it up for Paysour. Touchdown.

That gives you a taste of Maye's flair for the dramatic — and for his creativity. But his coaches wanted to make clear how badly he wants to win and how calm, composed and confident he gets in gotta-have-it situations. So the second moment that stands out to them came during UNC's 47-45, double-overtime win over Duke last November.

On North Carolina's two-point try in double overtime, Maye's first option was a screen on the boundary. He didn't like what he saw. Then he had a one-on-one out of the slot. Again, he didn't like what he saw. So he decided to tuck and run.

"As many options as we had, none of that looked great to me from upstairs," Lindsey said. "He just decided to go run the draw after he looked this way. And then [the pocket] collapses and the guy that was one-on-one kind of just popped free. [Maye] just raised up and popped it to him. In a big moment, he never panicked and won the game."

OK, but what about the time Maye walked away from a competition? Well, it's a long story that starts back in 2019, when Maye was a recruit committed to Alabama.

Everyone thought he'd land at UNC like his dad and his brother. But during the recruitment process, Drake and Chadwick told scouts that the quarterback was not going to Carolina. Maye wanted it known that he was going to consider all his options — and he had great options. His top offers came from Alabama, Clemson and Ohio State. (He was the only QB in his prospect class to get offers from all three.) He made his decision to play for Nick Saban.

After Maye committed to the Crimson Tide, however, Alabama managed to flip Bryce Young's commitment from USC. He was going to the Crimson Tide — with Maye.

"[Then-Alabama OC Steve] Sarkisian had a long history with Bryce Young's family," Chadwick said. "So in Drake's mind [he thought], 'I'm not gonna get an opportunity there as long as Bryce Young is there.'"

Given the Sarkisian-Young connection, those close to Maye also wondered whether it would have been a real competition. Plus, according to Chadwick, Alabama had broken a promise to Maye that it wouldn't pursue another QB in his class.

All the while, UNC was jockeying for Maye, even after he'd committed to Bama. Former Carolina offensive coordinator Phil Longo — just coincidentally, surely — showed up at every Tar Heels basketball game that Maye attended to watch his big brother Luke. The arrival of Brown in 2019, too, seemed like a stellar addition at the right moment for UNC. It all changed Maye's mind.

Maye walked into Chadwick's office and told him about his change of heart.

"I'm not calling Coach Saban," Chadwick told Maye.

So Drake called Saban and told him that he was de-committing from Alabama and going to UNC. Maye skipped the competition with Young. Instead, Maye would head to UNC, where he'd take on Howell. If he didn't win the job, Maye figured he could at least see the field after Howell left for the NFL.

Was this shift an indicator of some underlying character issue? Doubtful.

"I would adopt him," Brown said. "He's that perfect of a kid."

In the end, even Saban understood Maye's decision to decommit.

"I should be mad at him," Saban said during the ESPN broadcast on draft night. "I get it, and it's a North Carolina family. He had a great career and he did a great job for the state and I have a lot of respect for this guy. This guy is wired right."

Given what happened to Maye at UNC in his final college season, it's fun to imagine him at Alabama. The Crimson Tide boasts an impressive supporting cast, with some of the top offensive linemen and receivers in the draft every year. That was not the case for the 2023 Tar Heels, whose offensive line allowed 37 sacks. Those protection issues compounded the footwork and decision-making problems Maye had in 2022, when he threw for 38 touchdowns with just seven picks. And so his film is probably better in his first season as a starter for UNC.

"He knows that he's got to tighten up his footwork and get himself aligned correctly and all the things that go into ... just dropping from under center," Christensen said.

That's what Maye is working on now. He's in North Carolina with Christensen and Lindsey sharpening his footwork and protections.

"That's a major, major, major difference in college and the pros. How do I handle the protections? Because all of a sudden, it falls on you," said Christensen, who has 27 years of NFL coaching experience.

Maye has done some work with protections, but nothing at the level that he'll have to do in the NFL. Improving his footwork and protections should help prepare him for the smooth and steady transition he'll need to win the starting job for the Patriots.

New England signed veteran quarterback Jacoby Brissett in free agency. The team wants Brissett, Maye, Bailey Zappe and Milton to compete for the QB1 spot. Brissett is set to make \$8 million for 2024, while Maye will make \$9 million annually over his four-year deal. Maye has all the talent in the world, while Brissett is competent but not flashy.

New Patriots coach Jerod Mayo informed Maye in front of a few coaches that he would not automatically be the Day 1 starter. He'll have to earn the job. But given Maye's immense talent, his draft position and his salary, it would be hard to keep him off the field on Sunday. He'll get out there in 2024 — and likely in Week 1.

Will Patriots sit Drake Maye in favor of Jacoby Brissett?

[McKenna: Would Patriots really sit No. 3 overall pick Drake Maye to start the season?]

The main attribute that separates Maye beyond his mindset is his arm talent. But arm talent is a tricky thing. It's mostly based on the eye test. It's not like weight or height or even speed and agility, where you can measure and quantify a player's physical gifts.

"I always get mad when people start throwing around the term 'arm talent,'" Christensen said. "I'm not 100 percent sure exactly what that means. For me, what I care about is: Have you seen him make every throw? Can he throw the ball accurately? Does he have enough arm to throw the downfield stuff? Does he have enough touch to drop balls over top of tight coverage? Does he have an anticipation with his arm?"

When watching Maye's film, the answer to every one of Christensen's questions is: Yes.

Maye has shown he can elevate an offense around him. That's what drew Patriots de-facto GM Eliot Wolf to the prospect. Maye will certainly need to do that with New England, which had one of the least-talented offensive units in the NFL last year. And while the organization did some roster reshuffling this offseason, it wasn't the overhaul many expected given how much cap space the Patriots had going into free agency. They still don't really have a WR1 — nor do they have a left tackle. (Is it veteran Chukwuma Okorafor or rookie Caedan Wallace — who played on the right in college — or someone not yet on the team?)

So many of the lessons Maye learned at UNC will be applicable if he takes over this season. No matter if he struggles or instantly succeeds, he's probably going to be a popular man in New England's locker room. He takes care of his own. When NIL money started pouring in at Carolina, Maye negotiated a sponsorship offer into a bigger deal involving his offensive linemen. When he got an offer for free seafood, he asked the company if it could include his receivers and their families.

Christensen, who worked with Tom Brady and Peyton Manning as an NFL coach, sees Maye's thoughtfulness and leadership as overlapping qualities with those legends.

"I think he has a lot of the same traits that give you a chance to be great," Christensen said. "He processes information extremely well — a lot like Peyton. He has a humbleness and humility like Tom that players played for. He has that kind of humility that just attracts teammates. He's going to be a great teammate."

Maye knows when to show love for his guys. He knows when to encourage them to be better. And like Brady, he knows when and how to fire them up when they're not playing well enough to get a W.

"I don't think that's a small characteristic to share with Tom," Christensen said.

Maye is the future in New England. And the Patriots hope that future shares many characteristics with their past, especially their past with Brady.



How the Patriots decided QB Drake Maye was their future

By Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Dressed in an off-white suit with a Carolina blue tie, Drake Maye walked into Gillette Stadium for the first time on Friday, still wearing a dark blue Patriots hat from the night before at the 2024 NFL draft in Detroit.

Owner Robert Kraft and team president Jonathan Kraft flanked him on each side, as Maye held up a blue Patriots jersey -- his name on the back, and the No. 1 underneath it, signifying his status as the team's first-round draft pick.

The Krafts have carried out this tradition for 31 straight years with their top draft picks, but there was something about this year that felt different; perhaps because Maye is the highest-ever selection in their tenure, No. 3 overall.

Kraft welcomed a group of approximately 60 media members, noting that he had seen the Boston Herald earlier that morning and how the words on the front of the newspaper caught his eye: Maye Day!

The words resonated and seemed appropriate -- his franchise has been in distress in recent years. Since quarterback Tom Brady left in free agency in 2020, the Patriots are 29-38 and have made the playoffs once, losing in the wild-card round. Coach Bill Belichick's 24 seasons as head coach and de facto general manager came to an end in January.

Now, with Jerod Mayo as coach, director of scouting Eliot Wolf given final personnel authority and Maye at quarterback -- a new era begins. The trio represent hope for a brighter future.

"It's pretty exciting," Kraft said.

It had been months (and years, for that matter) in the making.

The Patriots' last quarterback Mac Jones took the same photo as Maye as the No. 15 pick in the 2021 draft. After a promising rookie season where he looked like a capable successor to Brady, Jones was traded to the Jacksonville Jaguars in March.

The offense was stagnant in 2023 -- scoring half as many points (236) than in Jones' first season in 2021 (462). He was replaced four times in favor of 2022 fourth-round pick Bailey Zappe and threw 12 total interceptions in the 11 games he played.

Many figured the Patriots would prioritize a quarterback in the draft, but there were still questions. Would they trade down from No. 3, gather more assets for a depleted offense, and do it later? Did they like Michigan's J.J. McCarthy as much as Maye? Who would Washington take at No. 2?

By 8:35 p.m. ET on Thursday, they made the official "Maye Day" call.

Drafting Drake Maye with the No. 3 overall pick makes him the highest-drafted player in Robert Kraft's tenure as owner of the Patriots. Scott Taetsch-USA TODAY Sports

IN THE WEEKS leading up to the NFL draft, team sources acknowledged legacies would be tied to what they decided at quarterback. They were operating with the mindset that without a top quarterback, their regime wouldn't have a chance.

Mayo, a former linebacker who played with Brady from 2008-2014, had an up-close view of how Brady's impact resonated throughout the organization. As an assistant coach since 2019, Mayo has also seen first-hand how challenging it has been to fill Brady's void -- first with Cam Newton (2020) and then with Jones (2021-2024). Some of Belichick's decision-making with the hiring of offensive coaches, and personnel, contributed to the pain.

In March, Kraft said: "One way or another, I'd like to see us get a top-rate, young quarterback."

By the time their scouting process was complete for the 2024 draft, Mayo said the Patriots most liked three quarterbacks -- USC's Caleb Williams, LSU's Jayden Daniels and Maye. Thus, a trade package out of No. 3 would have had to blow them away to consider moving down to the next QB options.

A source said the New York Giants had offered the No. 6 overall pick and their 2025 first-round pick, while the Vikings were ultimately willing to part with No. 11 and No. 23, along with a 2025 first-rounder, in exchange for the third pick and two mid-round selections from New England.

But clearly neither of those proposals met the criteria for the "bag" that Mayo said the Patriots would have needed to be OK with trading the pick, and explains why the Patriots called Maye immediately when they were on the clock at No. 3.

"There were different points throughout the process where there were [offers]. All along, we knew we were in a unique opportunity to get a quarterback that we liked," Wolf said.

A key stretch for the Patriots and Maye was a 24-hour span between March 27-28.

That's when nine members of the organization -- coaches and scouts -- traveled to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, as Maye prepared to go through drills at his pro day on March 28. He performed well, yet it was the time around his on-field work that was equally, if not more, important in the Patriots' evaluation.

"They all sat down and interviewed Drake separately," North Carolina coach Mack Brown recalled. "I wasn't involved in those interviews -- I don't think that's my place; I think kids need to be able to sit down with the coach and share whatever they need to share. [Drake] had said it went really well."

The Patriots' contingent included Wolf, Mayo, offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt, quarterbacks coach T.C. McCartney, senior assistant Ben McAdoo, director of player personnel Matt Groh, senior personnel advisor Patrick Stewart, senior personnel executive Alonzo Highsmith and national scout Matt Evans.

"We started to feel more comfortable with him as we spent more time with him and visited with him at North Carolina," Wolf acknowledged. "Really just getting a chance to know him, see what he's about, see what his family is about and getting him on the board and seeing his high football intellect."

As part of the visit, Mayo also met privately with Brown, which Mayo said "really helped me get the full picture."

At that point, Mayo had already been intrigued after initially meeting Maye at the NFL combine in late February. Mayo called it a "fantastic interview," in part because of the composure the 21-year-old Maye showed.

"A lot of teams put up all the good plays, but Eliot and his group put tape together that had a lot of bad plays. He took a lot of that blame on himself when sometimes it wasn't his fault. A very accountable man," Mayo said.

While Maye's response registered favorably that day, Mayo had already come to appreciate his toughness on the field through film evaluation.

"The thing that most impressed me about him is that he would get smashed and just get right back up," he said. "I'm not saying he's Tom Brady, but just that mentality. Same thing with Joe Burrow. Those guys just keep getting back up and continuing to play at a high level and that was like the 'aha!' moment for me."

Maye said later he was equally impressed with Mayo.

"He's such a player's coach. I can see how all the guys attract to him."

The third notable meeting between the Patriots and Maye came April 5 at Gillette Stadium. That provided Van Pelt, among others, an extended opportunity to connect with Maye.

Van Pelt and Maye watched old tape of Aaron Rodgers from the Packers, when Van Pelt had been on the Green Bay coaching staff. Van Pelt detailed to Maye the "outside zone scheme" he plans to run in New England, and some of the play-action elements that can complement it, using Rodgers as an example.

As Maye envisioned what it would be like to play in Van Pelt's offense, the coaches also were assessing how Maye's footwork and fundamentals might look in the scheme, as that was an area Maye sometimes struggled in 2023. With Patriots coaches gaining more comfort, it strengthened Maye's position on the team's board as part of a collaborative process.

"Meeting with Coach Van Pelt, Coach McAdoo, Coach McCartney and talking through some of the development that he needed, some of the things they thought they could tighten up or fix in some cases, in the end we felt comfortable," Wolf said.

"Drake is a relentless worker from all indications that we have, and he's going to be able to overcome some of the things in the areas that he needs to improve."

WOLF HAD KNOWN for weeks how things would unfold Thursday, so all that was left was ensuring there was no surprise in the order of Williams No. 1 to the Bears and Daniels No. 2 to the Commanders -- or a big trade offer at the last minute.

Things went according to plan, and when it was their turn at No. 3, Wolf -- along with Mayo and Robert Kraft -- called and told Maye he was going to be a Patriot. The pick was followed by a round of applause in the draft room.

"The more exposure we had with Drake, the more comfortable we felt," Mayo said. "Honestly, not to talk about other players, but those top three guys -- we were comfortable with all three. It just happened to be Drake."

"We had time to think through the process. We went through various scenarios with the coaches and scouts. The organization was happy with Drake at 3."

Wolf also noted how the 6-foot-4, 223-pound Maye elevated his teammates at North Carolina over the last two seasons, which is a top trait he looks for in quarterbacks. Maye started 26 games over the last two seasons and was 618-of-952 for 8,018 yards, with 63 touchdowns and 16 interceptions.

As for how quickly he might be in position to do so in New England, Mayo is leaving all possibilities open, pointing out the team signed veteran Jacoby Brissett to a one-year, \$8 million deal in March. He views Brissett as a capable starter and mentor.

"I go back to Bill [Belichick's philosophy]; I don't think many rookies are ready to just jump in and play," Mayo said. "At the end of the day, our philosophy is the best players will play. Jacoby understands. He's very smart, has great leadership skills, and hopefully Drake can learn something from him as well. We will compete all spring, during training camp, and the best player will start."

Wolf added that part of supporting Maye is putting better players around him. Along those lines, the Patriots selected Washington receiver Ja'Lynn Polk in the second round (No. 37) and Central Florida receiver Javon Baker in the fourth round (No. 110), and also drafted two offensive linemen, Penn State offensive tackle Caedan Wallace (third round, No. 68) and Texas A&M guard Layden Robinson (fourth round, No. 103).

"A guy like Drake has all the natural ability that you want. He can make all the throws," Mayo said. "Really it's about getting to the playbook; it's going to be a different scheme. We're going to be a game-plan offense and will tailor our game-plan to whoever the quarterback is. We'll see how that pans out."

The uncertainty surrounding who will suit up in Week 1 doesn't faze Maye.

"I'll prepare and be ready to be the starter, but at the same time, as a young guy coming in there, it's not given to you. You've got to earn it. My job is to go in there and earn guys' respect, help whoever is the starter, if I'm not, be the best player they can. And help this team win."



Competitiveness Complements Character: Story Of Patriots' Drake Maye

By Sean T. McGuire

Drake Maye has been known to thread the needle in more ways than one.

Scott Chadwick, Maye's football coach at Myers Park High School in Charlotte, knows that as well as anyone. Maye is the type of guy you want your daughter to marry, he says. Yet, somehow, the New England Patriots rookie quarterback handles himself on the football field like an assassin in an action movie.

"That's Drake," Chadwick said.

NESN.com spoke with Chadwick, Scott Taylor, Maye's high school basketball coach at Myers Park, as well as members of the North Carolina Tar Heels staff, including head football coach Mack Brown, offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey and senior advisor Clyde Christensen, about New England's next franchise quarterback.

They all shared similar sentiments as Chadwick. They love his leadership, competitive nature, and coachability — all the things that drive Maye's opponents nuts.

Chadwick can still recall one of the first times he heard about Maye. The Myers Park Mustangs were set to face nearby Hough High in a 2017 North Carolina High School Athletic Association state quarterfinals matchup. Maye was Hough's second-string quarterback behind a junior signal-caller.

"A lot of coaches in the area told me, 'Hey, whatever you do, don't knock the junior out because the freshman they have is better,'" Chadwick said. "They said, 'You want to play against that kid and not the freshman they've got.'"

The Maye family was viewed as North Carolina royalty, similar to the Mannings in New Orleans and the Gronkowskis in Buffalo. Drake is the youngest of the four Maye boys, behind Luke, Cole and Beau, and he followed in their footsteps.

"He came with a lot of hype, no question," Chadwick said.

New England Patriots quarterback Drake Maye and family
Eric Canha/USA TODAY Sports Images

Chadwick's first chance to work with Maye actually came following the QB's freshman season. The coach ran a quarterback academy with former NFL signal-caller and current Minnesota Vikings assistant Josh McCown where Maye was a pupil. It didn't take long for Chadwick to see Maye's hype was legitimate.

Chadwick quickly formed a relationship with the Maye family. When it became clear Hough intended to start the rising senior for another season, Chadwick's relationship with the Mayes made Myers Park an ideal landing spot. Drake and his father, Mark, moved to the Myers Park side of Charlotte ahead of his sophomore year.

Chadwick and the Mustangs staff made Maye earn the starting job as a sophomore transfer, especially since they had their own rising senior on the depth chart. But it was clear Maye would take over. He finally did in late July when Myers Park went away for camp.

Maye played two high school seasons under Chadwick, his sophomore and junior campaigns. His senior season, a season where Myers Park had two nationally televised ESPN games on its schedule, was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was a disappointing lost opportunity for the coach-QB duo. Chadwick had a front-row seat when Maye threw 50 touchdowns and just three interceptions during his junior year. Maye completed 72.4% of his passes while Myers Park solidified itself as the top program in the state.

Chadwick saw Maye as an unrivaled competitor behind center. As a sophomore, Maye struggled in their only regular-season loss, throwing three of his five picks in defeat against Butler. Given a chance at revenge in the playoffs, Maye promised his teammates it wouldn't happen again. He threw four touchdowns in a 33-8 playoff win the night after Thanksgiving.

Then, a year later, it was Maye who encouraged Chadwick to schedule Hough, giving him a shot at his former team. Chadwick obliged, and Myers Park filled an opening in its non-conference schedule with a Hough team that ranked top 10 in the state. Maye went off for seven touchdowns, throwing for six and running in another before leaving with a 68-7 Myers Park lead. The Mustangs, who averaged averaged 50 points that season, won 68-21.

That will to compete extended beyond the gridiron. Maye took no mercy on his high school basketball teammates in "NBA 2K" on Xbox, never losing and making sure his name and record were reflected on the team board, Taylor said.

Taylor also reflected on the times Myers Park went on the road and Drake heard chants like 'Stick to football!' and 'Luke is better!' — a reference to Drake's oldest brother, Luke, a national champion and hero at North Carolina after his game-winning bucket lifted the Tar Heels over the Kentucky Wildcats and to the Final Four in March 2017. Drake, the 6-foot-5 sophomore forward, would typically respond by converting an early bucket and shushing the crowd. Taylor also chuckled when he mentioned the time Maye heard chatter from a player on an opposing team. Maye responded by listing off that player's offer sheet, which was filled with Division II schools and programs that didn't hold a candle to the ones Maye heard from.

"Competition is fun to him," Taylor said. "I think that's when I see him smile the brightest."

I think that's when I see him smile the brightest.

Scott Taylor, Drake Maye's high school basketball coach

One moment that stands out most to Taylor, though, was during Maye's sophomore season. Myers Park traveled to Northwest Guilford for a playoff game. When the Mustangs held a two-possession lead in the final minute, Taylor figured he would call a timeout to run a good play. Before he could, however, Maye grabbed a rebound, ran down the court in transition and pulled up for a 3-pointer. Maye then stole the ball on Northwest Guilford's next possession, dunked it and hung on the rim as the buzzer sounded.

"For me, that's the one I'll probably always remember," Taylor said.

Taylor said Maye considered playing college basketball and had interest from a handful of ACC schools, including Virginia, Clemson and Notre Dame. Brown, the Tar Heels football coach, said Maye could have been North Carolina's sixth man.

The legendary college football coach was happy to have Maye on his own squad, even if the QB's fiery nature cost the program a ping-pong paddle or two. Maye's competitiveness was on display in some signature Carolina wins against Duke his sophomore and junior seasons — Maye led the Tar Heels on game-winning drives in those contests.

Maye's fire doesn't just burn on the biggest stage. Brown recalled a time he walked into the Tar Heels' players lounge to a broken ping-pong paddle. The visibly distraught Maye stood there after he went up against North Carolina tight end John Copenhaver.

'The tight end beat me!' Maye told Brown. "The tight end beat me! Can you imagine?!"

Lindsey recalled the midweek accuracy contests he held between Maye and the Tar Heels quarterbacks. Lindsey planned to cancel that target practice one time to concentrate on individual drills. Maye, though, pushed back.

"That was a big part of the week for him," Lindsey said.

Christensen, meanwhile, worked with Maye during the 2023 season and ahead of the NFL draft. However, he's known the Maye family for a long time given his relationship with Drake's dad, Mark. Tagging along for a family golf trip, Christensen got even more insight into what makes Maye tick.

"Probably one of my fondest stories would be one time I golfed with him and his brother," Christensen said. "His brother had a four-and-a-half incher, and Drake made him putt it out. 'Don't pick that up, you got to putt that out!' And it was probably under six inches.

"He just has a playfulness, he loves to compete," Christensen said.

That maniacal desire to compete might be why many find it hard to believe in the 'aw shucks' demeanor that comes with Maye's southern drawl.

But those who know him know that's how Maye threads the needle.

"He's got a unique character and ability to have a humility that carries with him, while also having a competitive nature," Taylor said. "I hope it's appreciated and seen. Because he is tenacious in how he works and how he approaches it, but there's a true sense of gratitude and humility towards everybody around him.

"That is not fabricated in any way. That is truly him, and it's unique. It's really unique."

The 72-year-old Brown, a veteran football coach of 46 years, said he wished Maye was part of his family. Brown told the Patriots he wouldn't want to have anyone else.

"I would adopt him," Brown said. "He's that perfect of a kid. It sounds kind of corny, but it's true."

I would adopt him. He's that perfect of a kid.

North Carolina Tar Heels head coach Mack Brown

Many credited Drake's parents, Mark and Aimee, both college athletes themselves, for instilling the right values in the four Maye boys. They have a healthy relationship with competition and can maintain a level of respect, humbleness and humility.

Taylor recalled when Maye joined the basketball team his sophomore and junior seasons. It came when the Mustangs were three or four games into the season, a product of the football team's extended playoff runs. Maye, Taylor said, didn't want to disrupt what Myers Park had going, and didn't want to overshadow the hoopers who spent the offseason on the hardwood.

"He was willing to do whatever it meant, come off the bench, take a little bit of a lesser role offensively, almost so as not to upset the guys that had been putting in the time and effort," Taylor said. "He was genuine with it."

Maye instead did the overlooked work. He'd make the extra pass, set screens and get rebounds for his teammates. He did the work of a role player despite having star talent. That was until his Mustangs teammates and coaches encouraged him to start playing to his full potential.

Lindsey, who took the offensive coordinator job at North Carolina after Maye's standout sophomore season, said one of the first things that stood out to him was Maye's humility. Entering his pivotal junior campaign, Maye told Lindsey he wanted to be coached and critiqued. It was a sentiment that doesn't always come from someone named the ACC Player of the Year the season prior.

"Sometimes you don't find that with these big-time players," Lindsey said.

Maye's sincerity has always stood out to Chadwick, too. Instead of rambling about his life-changing achievement and excitement, Maye in their first call after the Patriots drafted him, spent the first 10 minutes of their conversation asking his former coach about his current team's offseason.

During the pre-draft process, Chadwick was contacted by an NFL team. The team, which Chadwick didn't reveal, asked if Maye was similar to the Eddie Haskell character in "Leave It To Beaver." He pushed back.

"That is so far from the truth," Chadwick relayed. "He is completely one of the finest kids — I call him a kid — but he's one of the finest kids I've ever been around."

Christensen said he learned more about Maye's character when he watched him communicate with his North Carolina teammates. Christensen praised Maye for how he married positive reinforcement with constructive criticism. Christensen, who served as Tom Brady's quarterback coach in Tampa Bay before joining the Tar Heels staff, even said it was one of the traits Maye has in common with Brady.

"I don't think that's a small characteristic to share with Tom," Christensen said.

Those who know him know it's just another example of Maye threading the needle.



For Drake Maye, being a star athlete runs in the family

By Matt Geagan

FOXBORO -- It was clear from a young age that new Patriots quarterback Drake Maye was going to become an athlete. Growing up the youngest of four brothers, each of whom have enjoyed success in their respective sports, the youngest Maye didn't really have a choice.

The Maye boys -- Luke, Cole, Beau, and Drake -- grew up a competitive bunch in Cornelius, North Carolina. They all pushed each other, both literally and figuratively, and have all enjoyed some level of success either on the football field, the basketball court, or the baseball diamond.

They each followed an athletic path set out by their parents. Like Drake, his father Mark Maye played quarterback at UNC, also starting two seasons for the Tar Heels. He was captain of the team in 1987 and had a brief stint with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the NFL before injuries ended his career. Mama Maye, Aimee, also had a background in athletics, playing basketball at West Charlotte High School.

So you can see how the family ended up with all four boys playing -- and dominating -- sports.

Basketball was pretty popular in the Maye family, and that's easy to understand for boys growing up in North Carolina. Luke, the oldest at 27, was a star on the Tar Heels from 2015-2019, helping lead UNC to a national championship in 2017. Luke shined when in the spotlight, and had his own One Shining Moment when he drained a game-winning jumper for the Tar Heels in the Elite 8 en route to that title.

Luke was first-team All-ACC in 2018 and second-team in 2019, and his four-year career at UNC earned him a contract from the Milwaukee Bucks after he went undrafted. He spent some time in the G League, but has bounced around internationally the last four years. He currently plays in Japan, but had it written into his contract that he could attend the 2024 NFL Draft to support Drake.

What a big brother. And Maye has two others to lean on.

While the other members of the Maye family went with football or basketball, Cole, 25, took his talents to the diamond. And he didn't stay in North Carolina, either. He pitched for the Florida Gators, and like brother Luke, also won a championship in 2017. He also pitched for the Charlottesville TomSox in the Valley League in Virginia in 2017.

Beau, 22, followed in Luke's footsteps to Chapel Hill and joined the basketball team as a walk-on for the 2022-23 season. However, he didn't return for the 2023-24 campaign. Injuries likely contributed to that, as Beau underwent knee surgery nine times during high school.

And then there is Drake, who played baseball, basketball, and football growing up. He developed into a pretty solid quarterback, winning both ACC Player of the Year and ACC Offensive Player of the Year in 2022, and he looks the part of an NFL player at 6-foot-4 and 230 lbs.

While they have all enjoyed their own success, the Maye brothers have always there for each other. Each of them were on hand in Detroit on Thursday night when Drake was drafted by New England.

How did the Maye family celebrate such a momentous occasion? They reportedly rented out The Detroit Athletic Club so they could shoot hoops. It's unclear if any spirited and highly competitive games of H-O-R-S-E broke out, and if Mama Maye was the last one standing, as she was most of the time when the Maye boys were younger.

And a big part of having older brothers is they're going to call you out on some things. Or just call you some things that only older brothers can get away with. That was the case when the brothers roasted him as part of Thursday night's fun.

A little harsh? Maybe. But would you expect anything less from older brothers?

They also taped a much more heartfelt congratulations for Drake, who referred to his trio of brothers as "three of my best friends" on Thursday night.

It's clear that there is a whole lot of love between the four. Maye's three brothers were all with him at Gillette Stadium on Friday when he was formally introduced by the Patriots.

The Maye brothers don't carry the same rambunctious nature of Rob Gronkowski and his brothers, who brought their antics to Foxboro during Gronkowski's career with the Patriots. But we should see plenty of the Maye boys at the home of the Patriots, while younger brother Drake tries to carry the family name into the NFL.

The Charlotte Observer

Before NFL spotlight, Drake Maye was a Charlotte high school basketball 'assassin'

By Alex Zietlow

For Scott Chadwick, it was an early January game at Porter Ridge. For Jeb Lloyd, it was a holiday tournament game against Concord First Assembly. For Scott Taylor, it was a second-round playoff game at Northwest Guilford — the one that ended with star sophomore Drake Maye finishing off a dunk as the final buzzer sounded, the crowd watching in wonder as he swung into a new realm. "It was one of those moments where it's like, 'He's here,'" said Taylor, Maye's Myers Park High School boys' basketball head coach.

Of course, Charlotte didn't need to be reminded of his arrival.

Today, Maye, 21, is a projected Top 4 pick in the NFL Draft, a quarterback who scouts and front-office personnel say has top-flight measurables and fearlessness, who can engender offenses that just a season ago were bereft of life. A year ago, he was a Heisman Trophy hopeful at North Carolina, carrying on the mantle of great Tar Heel quarterbacking started by his predecessor and close friend Sam Howell.

But five years ago, he wasn't only a gunslinger leading the Myers Park Mustangs to a Top 10 national ranking. He wasn't only a quarterback with offers from West Virginia and Tennessee, Clemson and Georgia, Alabama and UNC. He was also a high school basketball star, known for his passing and shooting and rebounding and for playing his best when the spotlight was the brightest.

On the field, in other words, he was a giant. On the court, he was an “assassin,” old teammates and coaches from his Myers Park days (2018-20) say.

“You just don’t think much about him, and then he just rips your heart out,” said Scott Chadwick, the Myers Park football coach who also watched his fair share of Maye’s basketball games. “And he does it with a smile on his face.”

Myers Park’s Drake Maye steals the ball from Independence’s Tachai Miller during a game at Independence High School in Charlotte, NC on Friday, January 17, 2020. Jeb Lloyd knows that “assassin” version of Maye well.

Lloyd was a junior on the Myers Park boys’ basketball team when Maye was a sophomore. He knew of Maye when he was a two-sport athlete as a freshman at Hough High School but first met him after Maye transferred to Myers Park for his sophomore year.

That 2018-19 season, the Mustangs made it to the 4A football state semifinals before falling to the eventual state champions (Chambers). So by the time Maye was available to join the Myers Park basketball team, practice had been going on for more than a month and the team was six or so games into the season. At first, his teammates remember Maye as a bit deferential. And understandably so. He was intent on trying to fit in with the team, to make the extra pass, to let the guys who’d been there all season lead.

Soon, though, he asserted himself. “I think Coach Taylor had to tell him to be more aggressive offensively,” Lloyd said. “It took him three or four games, but then it became very clear he would be the best player on the court for us. And we had a really good team, too.”

Lloyd compared Maye’s feel for the game as natural, ethereal. He said his instinctual rebounding reminded him of Dennis Rodman. (“He would have 15 rebounds and I swear he didn’t box one person out,” he joked.) His passing was artful, sly, ahead of his teammates. He’d catch the ball in the middle of a zone, survey the court and hit people in their hands and in their nose — those cutters unaware they were open until Maye passed them the ball. (“It could be coming at any time, I’ll find you,” Maye would say. “Just keep your hands ready.”)

As a sophomore, Maye led the team in points per game (13.6) and rebounds (8.4) and was second in assists (2.7), according to MaxPreps. As a junior those averages bumped a bit: 16.1 points, 11.3 rebounds, 2.7 assists — and even added a block a game.

A big reason why the game seemed to come so easily to Maye was because he grew up around basketball greatness. Drake was the youngest — and, at now 6-foot-4, 223 pounds, somehow the smallest — of four brothers. The eldest is Luke, the Tar Heels basketball forward who hit the legendary game-winning shot against Kentucky that sent UNC into the Final Four and onto 2017 national championship glory. Cole, the second-oldest, was a national champion pitcher at Florida. Beau was a high school standout as well and a walk-on to UNC’s basketball team.

They grew up competing against each other. That meant in the classroom and at the breakfast table and over games of H-O-R-S-E. Their father, Mark, who was considered one of the top college quarterback prospects the state of North Carolina had ever seen before injuries intervened, was heavily invested in their lives. Aimee Maye, a star basketball player at West Charlotte (who could’ve played college basketball but chose not to), was, too.

It wouldn’t be uncommon for Luke to show up to Drake’s games. He’d sometimes bring his Tar Heels basketball roommate and now promising NBA talent, Cam Johnson, along with him. When Beau would watch Drake in high school, he’d sit on the Myers Park side, even if the Mustangs were playing his Hough alma mater. Aimee was almost always up in the gym’s stands during Drake’s games, cheering the team on but also scribbling notes in a notebook she’d later pass on to her youngest son.

“They love basketball in the family and just know how it’s played,” Lloyd said. “It’s just cool to watch him take his passing and vision from the football field and show it on the basketball court, and I think vice versa.”

DRAKE MAYE’S BASKETBALL TALENT TRANSLATED TO FOOTBALL

When asked if he ever thought he was coaching an NFL quarterback in real time — if he ever thought Drake was going to be playing on Sundays back when he was a 16- and 17-year-old kid — Chadwick shrugged.

"Honestly, I don't think there was a moment from the time I started working with him when I didn't think that," said Chadwick, who's now the head coach at Clayton High School. "From the time I started working with him, it took me five minutes to be like, 'Woah, this kid's different.'"

Knowing the athletic family he came from contributed to that, surely. So did his natural gifts. But the fact that Chadwick saw such potential in Maye in multiple venues, in multiple sports, made that abundantly clear, too.

Chadwick said that over the past three months, as front-office personnel and scouts and reporters have reached out to him to understand what makes Drake Maye tick, there's one story he keeps coming back to — and it's a basketball story.

"It was a Friday night at Porter Ridge, and at this point, I'm not sure of our record at the time, but I think we were barely just right around .500," Chadwick began. The team was down nine entering the fourth quarter, "and you could kind of just see him sitting there on the bench" determined, focused, a bit perturbed as he looked at the scoreboard. He ended up with 12 points and nine rebounds in the quarter to close out the win. "It was like he said, 'OK, it's time for me to go be a basketball player now.' You could just see that competitiveness, that drive in him. It just kind of took over."

As in: "I'm done. I'm taking over now."

That mentality has certainly bled onto the football field. So have other characteristics. His vision as a passer on the basketball court aligns with his vision as a quarterback, one who finds Josh Downs and Tez Walker as much as the third-string tight end.

He also has an ambition for flair — and a toughness that lets him get away with it. Duwe Farris, a senior at Myers Park when Maye was a sophomore who would go on to play for the North Carolina basketball team, remembers how inclined Maye was to try to leap over opposing tacklers on the football field as if he was trying to dunk over them like he did so many times in high school.

"In high school, he would always try to jump over people, and he did because he was so much bigger," Farris said. He laughed. "So there are all these great plays where it looks like he is just dunking the football over somebody on a QB run."

"But then in college, his coaches were like, 'You cannot do that.' It took him a while, I think, to get it out of his system."

Farris also remembers Maye for being a great teammate off the court, off the field. When North Carolina awarded Farris a scholarship ahead of this year — he was previously a walk-on — Maye was the first person to call him and offer his congratulations. Maye reached out on Farris' senior night, too.

That, too, is part of who Drake Maye is as a teammate. It all contributes to the NFL player he might one day become.

"Drake gives everyone this belief around him that something can be done," Taylor, the previous Myers Park basketball coach, said. "I genuinely believe — whether he knows it or not, or even would attest to it or recognize it — that he kind of changes that. It's just a presence in the locker room."

Taylor added that, with Maye, "we all thought we had a shot wherever we went."

He was speaking to the basketball triumphs behind Maye, yes. But the same could be said about the football ones still in front of him.

QB Joe Milton

The Athletic

For tantalizing NFL Draft prospect Joe Milton, third time could be the charm

By Nick Baumgardner

On the shores of Lake Okeechobee, down in “The Muck,” they run toward fire to keep from getting burned. This is where Joe Milton was born. Where he learned how to see through the smoke.

The legend of the Pahokee rabbit chasers deep in the Florida Everglades is well-documented. Young football hopefuls — and anybody else with spare time — spend parts of the fall and winter in sugar cane fields that have been set ablaze ahead of harvest. There, they sprint through the thick, hot mud after terrified rabbits, which dart out of the fields in search of freedom.

The boys who live for football are running for the same thing.

Kids who can catch 20 to 30 rabbits in a day — like Milton’s older cousins, former NFL receivers Anquan and D.J. Boldin — typically play skill positions. The rest tend to wind up on the line. But the commonality that links so many from Muck City is simple: When it comes to football, no dream is too big.

Milton never broke any rabbit-catching records. Nobody cared, though, primarily because Milton was bigger and stronger than most of his peers. But also because, if you stood close enough, you could hear it when he threw a football.

“Nobody in the world looks like you,” a coach once told Milton. “You look like a goddamn action figure.”

Inside Joe Milton’s day with SEC media — arm obsession, Vols talk and “Pawwwlll”

The 2024 NFL Draft features the deepest quarterback class we’ve seen in years, highlighted by stars Caleb Williams and Drake Maye. And though he’s certainly taken the long way, it also features Milton — a 6-foot-5, 235-pound, sixth-year Tennessee QB by way of Michigan, by way of Orlando, by way of Muck City, with a right arm made of diamonds and dynamite.

Oh, and he’s made exactly nine starts in five years as a college football player. He’s lost his job twice, started over and refused to go away. He’s a guy who can throw a football (at least) 80 yards, before doing a backflip for good measure.

He could be the most interesting prospect in the 2024 draft class.

Joe Milton learned football in Orlando, at the desk of then-Olympia High School coach Kyle Hayes.

The oldest of seven children, Milton was born when his mother, DeShea Bouie, was still in high school. His identity as a big brother is perhaps his defining personality trait, and his tight bond with his mother anchors his life. If you want to find her at any Tennessee game, close your eyes and listen for the mom screaming, “Go Joe-Joe!” with unabashed glee over and over.

Milton enrolled at Olympia as a freshman, after his family moved from Pahokee to Orlando — partly in search of better exposure for Joe’s arm, partly to get away from hurricanes in the Everglades. In those days, Milton knew how to throw ... and not much else about playing quarterback at a high level.

However, there was one natural gift he took with him from Pahokee: From the second Hayes inserted Milton at QB, he noticed how unbothered the kid was by a pass rush — or any other kind of pressure. Milton showed great quickness at his massive size and truly stood without fear in the pocket. But Hayes also says he never saw Milton lose his temper on a football field, no matter how rough things got.

Milton could, in a football sense, see through the smoke.

“He was always a listener, and that was always one of my favorite attributes. Right away,” Hayes says. “Now, he didn’t always do what you said. But he did listen.”

Hayes and Milton lived near each other. Milton took to staying with his coach after practice, sometimes as late as 10 p.m., doing homework, watching film, and talking about life before hitching a ride home.

Trust is earned. It’s also a process. Donovan Dooley, a private QB coach who has worked with Milton since Milton’s time at Michigan, echoed Hayes’ sentiments. Milton, he confirms, is a great listener and, to a degree, has always

been coachable. He took notes, studied film, asked questions. But he also challenged coaches. He heard their instruction, even if he might have considered it optional.

He could be insistent on the hard path, too. In the most challenging moments on the field, Milton trusted his arm — which meant, really, that he relied on his own instinct over his training. The results? Deep-shot attempts on critical downs that weren't necessary, no matter how close Milton came to landing them.

"Way too many foul balls," Dooley says.

Milton had Division I interest before landing with Hayes at Olympia and was recruited nationally throughout his prep career. The best fit he found was with Pep Hamilton, then part of Jim Harbaugh's offensive staff at Michigan.

Hamilton fell in love with Milton immediately, comparing him to Steve McNair. (Hamilton was a freshman quarterback on the 1993 Howard team that beat McNair's Alcorn State team in a regular-season game.) Milton, in turn, completely trusted Hamilton. The coach talked to his QB about life and other topics in ways Hayes often had. Milton's cousins, the Boldins, had worked with Harbaugh in the NFL, too, and vouched for him to Milton and his mother.

On paper, the fit looked exactly how it should have.

Then, two things happened: 1) Michigan fired Hamilton after Milton's freshman season; 2) The Covid-19 pandemic hit.

Everything was microwaved during that shortened, strange 2020 season, including the QB competition Milton won over Dylan McCaffrey. There was no normal training camp, because nothing was normal, and Harbaugh had fired Hamilton in favor of Josh Gattis the previous year. Milton simply was not ready to run Michigan's new offense — certainly not backed by a young depth chart, with an unproven coordinator, during a pandemic.

He also suffered a serious thumb injury during the opening series of the second game that year (a 27-24 upset loss to Michigan State), an injury that later required surgery. The rest of the season featured an awful lot of those "foul balls."

Things spiraled and never recovered. Midway through its fifth game of 2020 (a win at Rutgers), Michigan replaced Milton with Cade McNamara, and that was a wrap.

Outside observers were surprised and skeptical when Milton passed McCaffrey in the first place. However, had you polled Michigan's players at the time, you would have gotten a totally different response. Milton's teammates adored him. When that year started, Milton stood as easily the locker room's most respected QB.

Inside a football building, Milton is magnetic. He shows up early, stays late, supports everyone and usually can be found smiling. Teammates and coaches describe him as a player who is totally and genuinely in love with being part of a football team and everything that comes with it.

Milton enrolled at Michigan in January 2018 as a kid from Florida who knew no one. Four months later, on Michigan's offseason team trip to France, he and (older) teammate Nico Collins held court — with players of all ages — in their Parisian hotel-issued bath robes during a swanky lunch.

Milton can hold a conversation with anyone. He can get along with anyone.

His combination of effort, energy and a willingness to root for his teammates has kept him in the conversation for every job he's chased, even the ones he wasn't ready to win. During his freshman year at Michigan, for example, when Harbaugh brought in QB Shea Patterson and appealed for Patterson's immediate eligibility, coaches spent most of spring telling reporters in quiet moments that they were blown away by nearly everything Milton was doing.

His arm talent overwhelmed people, which generally did nothing but ramp up the voice inside Milton's young head that his on-field instincts were correct — and that dedication to the process remained optional.

"He was still learning how to live the quarterback position," Dooley recalls of Milton's time at Michigan, "versus just playing it."

The same thing happened when Milton transferred to Tennessee. He beat out Hendon Hooker — a more seasoned passer at the time — and was named the team's starter ahead of 2021. However, water leveled and Hooker eventually won the job back, bumping Milton to the bench. That flip also pushed Milton into one of the longest looks in the mirror he's ever taken.

His flashes have always been brilliant, enough to blind coaches from areas of his game that were lagging. In training camp, his arm would look like the ultimate mistake-eraser. Then, games would start, defenses would adjust and Milton would revert to old habits.

Milton knew football. He just didn't always understand it.

"By then it was, 'If you don't go out there and (dedicate yourself fully to football) and get this s--- done, then shame on you,'" Dooley told him at the time. "Shame on you. Either you're going to be making first downs or rebounds, but your ass is playing in somebody's professional league."

According to just about everyone in his circle, Milton has answered the bell every day since.

For his college career, Joe Milton has 2,540 yards passing and 17 touchdowns. (Eakin Howard / Getty Images) Milton's biggest issue as a college passer has been two-pronged: Inconsistent accuracy and not a deep enough understanding of how a defense reacts to what an offense is doing.

Early in his career, Milton played the quarterback position with force. His tape from those days features mechanical breakdowns and almost zero anticipatory ability. All of that remained through the initial stages of his time at Tennessee, and it often worked against him — and in the worst possible moments. In football, a fastball doesn't always get you out of a jam. Milton's arm could look like a \$500,000 sports car without brakes.

Eventually, Dooley squared it to him with a simple metaphor.

"We treated it like an airplane," Dooley says of offseason throwing sessions with Milton designed to help improve the QB's anticipatory passing. "The only way an airplane can take off is if the nose is up. The nose of the football has to be up. If it's down, it's going to die.

"After that, it's about trust — throwing the ball to a dark hole that doesn't seem like it exists, and trusting that process."

In football, the concept of "throwing with touch" is more or less equal to being able to anticipate and process. It's learned through time on task and intense, relentless repetition. For Milton, trusting that the process would be worth it was a hurdle — one, by all accounts, that he cleared. Perhaps no one deserves more credit than Tennessee coach Josh Heupel.

A better fit between player and program didn't exist when Heupel, who'd doggedly recruited Milton out of high school as Missouri's offensive coordinator, landed the former Michigan QB from the transfer portal in 2021. Heupel's "Deep Choice" offense is literally designed to make life easier on big-armed quarterbacks, because it takes the entire width (and, in Milton's case, length) of the field and fills it with speed to widen throwing windows.

If it clicks for a quarterback, the game slows down. Hooker reached that point first. He took over after Milton suffered an injury in Week 2 of the 2021 season and never looked back.

Milton's first two games that year looked a lot like his play at Michigan. By the time he got extended snaps again, in fourth-quarter duty of a November 2021 game against a loaded Georgia team (that had not yet pulled its top unit), he looked different. Less rushed. His third throw of that game was a beautiful 53-yard go ball to Cedric Tillman. Three minutes later, he hit Tillman with a laser on a 12-yard slant for a touchdown.

If you take Milton's reps in a season-opening blowout win against Ball State last season and compare them to his 2021 start against similar competition in Bowling Green, you'll see the difference. In glimpses last year, he started throwing the ball with more touch, more consistently, regardless of competition.

He was living the position rather than playing it. And his fastball lost none of its zip.

Milton's reputation as an elite teammate also held — grew, even — after he lost his job to Hooker. Search high and low for people who have been on teams with Milton, and it'll take you a long time to find someone who doesn't like him.

"One thing about Joe," Hooker told The Athletic recently, "he's going to approach the team and talk to everyone exactly how he'd want to be talked to. Whether something's off or it's on. No matter what."

The hardest thing in any sport is unconditionally rooting for and helping a competitor. At Tennessee, Milton proved to be a master in this area.

Hooker and Milton first met on a basketball court in Knoxville ahead of the 2021 season. They knew nothing about each other, except for the fact they were in each other's way in a looming quarterback battle. For an hour, they went at it as hard as they could — two alphas trying to prove something to the pack.

A week later, Hooker and Milton were friends. By fall camp, they were basically best friends.

Joe Milton (left) and Hendon Hooker celebrating Tennessee's Orange Bowl win. (Eric Espada / Getty Images) After grinding for more than a year, giving himself to the game and backing Hooker (who emerged as a Heisman candidate last season), opportunity knocked for Milton again when Hooker suffered a season-ending knee injury in November. It was a brutal situation for Tennessee and Hooker, but also for Milton, who — despite seeing a door open for him personally — had become very close with the Vols starter.

Hooker, however, repaid the support. He told Milton to let it rip, then became his biggest cheerleader. For the first time in a long time, Milton found himself overloaded with trust in a football environment.

Tennessee won his first start, 56-0 against Vanderbilt. But it was Milton's Orange Bowl performance against Clemson — a sparkling 19 of 28 for 251 yards and three touchdowns against a defense with legit NFL talent — that officially revived the NFL world's interest in him.

"We talked it out after he got hurt (in 2021)," Hooker says. "We had an understanding of: 'OK. We'll just go back-to-back.'"

The 2023 college football season will be the third big opportunity of Joe Milton's young football life. Most players are lucky to find one.

There's still much to prove for the rocket-armed righty, including that he can replicate last season's Orange Bowl performance over an entire season. There are no certainties either, except this: Milton has earned every one of his chances.

Now, once and for all, we'll see if the action figure with the big dreams can make it happen.

The Athletic

Tennessee's Hendon Hooker, Joe Milton have cooked up a college football anomaly

By Joe Rexrode

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — The quarterback room is one of football's most-discussed places, and the quarterback room with the starter and backup who "truly support each other" and "don't really look at it like a competition" is boring and oversold.

The quarterback room with a starter and backup who are actually close enough in ability and program tenure to be competitors is becoming a college football relic. It's hard to put together a proper one anymore.

"It's almost impossible," Tennessee coach Josh Heupel told The Athletic, but he has one, and that might be one of the most exciting and undersold aspects of his program entering Year 2 — with an eye on Year 3.

Let's start there. Hendon Hooker will be gone in 2023, after a two-year run at starting quarterback that could statistically rival any in the history of Tennessee football. The guy who initially beat him out for the job, the guy who has become his best friend, will be left to compete with the most celebrated UT quarterback recruit since Peyton Manning — five-star California product Nico Iamaleava — and presumably with Tayven Jackson entering his second season.

And this is where the internal and external views of Joe Milton depart sharply from each other.

The staff believes it has two top-flight QBs in Hendon Hooker and Joe Milton. (Tennessee Athletics) Outside the program, he's the guy who airtailed a month's worth of deep shots in one loss to Pitt, the guy who didn't even throw the ball on the last play after relieving an injured Hooker late against Ole Miss, the guy whose failings at

Michigan translated to his brief tenure as a starter at Tennessee. A good guy to have back in the program, sure, because Hooker runs the ball with abandon and you just never know. But not a guy who's going to be a serious threat again to take the controls of Heupel's warp-speed offense.

Inside the program?

"A leader on this team," receiver Cedric Tillman said.

"He's locked in and his time is coming," safety Trevon Flowers said.

"He knows his time is coming," running back Jabari Small said, and that time would have to be next season, and Hooker has a vision of it.

"Like, Joe can really be the best college football player in the nation," Hooker said.

Outside the program: A mistake of 2021. Inside the program: A Heisman in 2023.

"I think where Joe had to take a long, hard look in the mirror after last season was saying, 'Man, I can walk away again and chase another opportunity, or I can put my head down and go to work,'" Tennessee offensive coordinator Alex Golesh told The Athletic. "Joe's incredibly smart, incredibly talented. Supremely talented. Like, as talented a quarterback as I've ever seen. It didn't go his way at the beginning of last season. So you try to find a solution to it, and trust me, we have. And a lot of it comes down to mental toughness and confidence in your ability."

Milton appears to have plenty of both to go with a 6-foot-5, 245-pound frame and an arm that, if Monday's initial preseason practice is any indication, has been trained extensively to find touch and loft. He will be a 23-year-old in his third season in this offense a year from now, and all of these things should be remembered by those who expect a true freshman to come in and assume instant control.

For now, Milton is simply a better backup plan than most teams have. Watching Hooker and Milton (along with Jackson and transfer newcomers Navy Shuler and Gaston Moore) trade off reps makes it easier to understand how Milton won the job a year ago. The ball explodes out of his hand and is consistently on time, on target. He's a mountain that moves. The 6-4, 218-pound Hooker simply can't do some of the things Milton can do.

What Hooker can do is harness and put to full use his talents on game day. That's why this isn't a competition. That's why Heisman talk could find Hooker this fall, if the Vols can sweep their swing games and approach 10 wins.

That's how Hooker threw for 2,945 yards with 31 touchdowns and three interceptions for a 7-6 team in Heupel's debut season, setting program records for passer efficiency rating (181.4) and completion percentage (68.0). He rushed for 616 yards and five touchdowns, too, and he was playing through some level of pain the rest of the way after a leg injury knocked him out of that Oct. 16 loss to Ole Miss. He didn't start until the third week, after relieving Milton in the loss to Pittsburgh in the second week.

Milton tore ankle ligaments on a long run that day. Afterward, Hooker was the one who spent time with him. They got dinner together after leaving Neyland Stadium. A friendly, competitive relationship became something more that day. Even as they traded places on the depth chart.

"It's a unique relationship," Heupel said. "And it's been really good for our football team to see somebody at that position that wants to continue to grow and is willing to work through that process, to stay the course."

Tennessee doesn't just have a good quarterback room this season, it has a quarterback apartment. Hooker and Milton recently moved in together, which also meant a pairing of Milton's pit bull and Hooker's golden doodle puppy.

"I'm waiting for mine to get a little bigger," Hooker said.

They vacationed together in the offseason in Miami. They call each other's mothers "Mom." When they weren't in the same place in the offseason, Hooker said, they talked on the phone every day. Hooker is the starter, the star, the guy Milton feels responsible to push and get the best out of each day. Milton is the guy biding his time, staying ready, while Hooker urges him to keep refining those skills and getting ready for another shot at the job.

Milton's also the chef. The quarterbacks had a large group of teammates over for the Fourth of July, with Milton preparing about 50 pieces of fried chicken, dirty rice and his mother's macaroni recipe. Hooker chipped in with his father's baked beans, but it's usually Milton preparing meals.

"I can make some bad spaghetti, man," said Milton, and while he won't divulge his entire sauce recipe, he did say he likes to add sugar and pepperoni — with loads of the cheese on one side of the pan for his portion, and no cheese for the dairy-avoiding Hooker.

This after long days together in the weight room, the film room, now on the practice field.

"I don't think blood could make us any closer," Hooker said.

"It's all about having your friend's back," Milton said. "Not letting him go through it by himself. That's what we live by. We push each other to be the greatest."

And they have set the standard for leadership in the program in the process. It's not common for a reserve to be a leader. It's also not common anymore for a reserve who could start at many other programs to stay a reserve — especially at the quarterback position.

College athletes can finally make money off their abilities and hard work while in school, and they have more freedom to move from one program to another than they've ever had. That doesn't mean they don't value perseverance.

"You don't see that," Flowers said of Milton's decision to stay at UT, which Milton said was never in question. "It's amazing. It shows his character. Shows what type of person he is. Shows how dedicated he is. He's not gonna give up easily on anything, and you can just tell he's hungry. He's ready to work. He's not worried about what might happen. He's not worried about what the outsiders are saying."

If things go well for the Vols this fall, they won't be talking much about Milton. They'll be talking about Hooker, finding another level of play. Staying healthy behind an offensive line in search of a left tackle. Handing to Small and throwing to Tillman, Jalin Hyatt and others. Making the Vols the closest thing the SEC East can manage as a challenger to Georgia. Cementing his two-year tenure as the best at the position in Knoxville since Manning manned it.

The work continues to make all that possible. Quarterbacks coach Joey Halzle has tweaked his mechanics a bit to get more consistent with the starting point of his throws. Hooker and Golesh are more like collaborators now in terms of planning and the plays Golesh will call on Saturdays. Halzle told reporters Hooker is getting better at manipulating defenses before the snap — doing so with such success on one rep Tuesday that he "turned around, smiled at me and then kept going," Halzle said.

Halzle wanted more of those smiles a year ago, when Hooker was in from Virginia Tech, Milton was in from Michigan and Harrison Bailey and Brian Maurer were holdovers in a very different-looking Tennessee quarterback room as preseason camp got going.

"I noticed that being serious every single moment of his life didn't work for him," Halzle said of Hooker. "I watched him when he was messing around playing basketball, he'd get a big smile on his face, and nobody could guard him. I told him last year in the summer, 'I want you to play football like you play basketball.' Because when he plays basketball, he knows he's the best player on the court."

It looks like he's figured that out on the football field. This quarterback room is his. This team, too. He said he isn't bothered by the lack of preseason hype he's getting. He has no spicy declarations — unless you get him talking about his best friend and Tennessee's next quarterback room.

"Joe's mind for football and IQ are extremely high. His athleticism is out of this world — he's 6-6, 240 and he can do back flips," Hooker said. "Amazing. The ceiling is not really a thing."

T Chukwuma Okorafor



Okorafor is living the American dream

By Dale Lolley

When the Steelers agreed to a three-year contract extension with right tackle Chuks Okorafor in the offseason, some expressed surprise Okorafor was still just 24 years old at the time.

After all, how could a player who had been with the Steelers the previous four seasons, including the last two as the starter at right tackle, be younger than some of the players entering the league in this year's NFL Draft?

But Okorafor has always been a little ahead of his time.

To see that, you only need to go back and look at his history playing football.

In 2013, the new coaching staff at Western Michigan had a junior day on campus.

One of the young visitors hadn't been playing football all that long, but he caught the eye of assistant coach Bill Kenney.

After all, there weren't many 6-foot-5, 270-pound 15 year olds walking around Kalamazoo, Mich.

Welcome to campus, Chukwuma Okorafor.

But Kenney, who had previously been a longtime assistant coach at Penn State, saw something special. And he couldn't wait to tell the rest of the staff.

"We saw him at a junior day in April," said then-Western Michigan offensive line coach Brian Callahan. "That was the first time we saw him in person. Bill Kenney, who is still at Western, he kind of gravitated to him immediately. As a full staff, we put on the full press. We offered him early."

Okorafor, who had been playing football for just two years after moving to the Detroit area with his family from the Republic of Botswana via South Africa via his native Nigeria, accepted almost immediately. He was just looking for a place to call home.

And with an older brother already attending Western Michigan, just a couple of hours down I-94 from where the Okorafor family had settled in 2010 in the Detroit suburb of Southland, Mich., offered that – as well as an education.

And education was extremely important in the Okorafor family.

"They were a Nigerian family. Mom and dad were very well-educated. They had lived throughout the world," said Callahan, now the offensive line coach at the University of Minnesota under former Western Michigan coach P.J. Fleck.

"During the home visit with his mom and dad, his father is a pharmacist, he basically said, 'I don't care about football, but Chuks does. I care about his education.' We reassured him that would be a very important part of his experience at Western Michigan."

Bigger schools came calling later in the process, but Okorafor was true to his word once he decided he was going to attend Western Michigan to play football and, more importantly, continue his studies.

"Western Michigan was like my second or third offer," Okorafor recalled. "I felt like once I chose them, I couldn't go back on my word. I got a bunch of bigger schools that kind of came in late. But I felt like I was their second or third choice. That didn't really sit too well with me."

It was bad news for Iowa, Florida, Oklahoma and the others that came late to the party. Okorafor was staying close to home.

His word was his bond.

To understand what a remarkable thing it was for Okorafor to reach that point in his career, understand that he didn't start playing football until he was a sophomore in high school. And even then, he was a kicker and punter – paying homage to the soccer he played in his younger days – in his first season at Southfield after being talked into going out for the team by a high school coach.

"I was in class and the coach was like, 'Hey, you want to come and try out?' I had no clue what football was. I was like, 'Cool, let me go try out.'" Okorafor recalled.

Well, that might not be completely true.

"I knew what football was, but I didn't know anything about it," he said. "It kind of just happened."

How big was the now 6-foot-6, 320-pound Okorafor at that time?

"Probably like 6-4, 270, 280 pounds," Okorafor said with a smile.

Big enough that the Southfield coaching staff began working overtime on the side with him to teach the youngster how to play offensive line.

Even after playing on the offensive line for two seasons at Southfield, Okorafor was understandably raw. But he had a thirst for knowledge and a will to get better.

"He showed up, he was very young for his class, he turned 17 in fall camp of his freshman year," Callahan said of Okorafor, whose birthday is in early August. "Obviously, he was raw to the game. But he wasn't afraid to ask questions. Coaching somebody with that ability, but not really having a background in the game like most of us that grew up, there were certain things he just didn't know.

"I would ask the group, 'Does everybody know what a draw is?' Chuks would raise his hand, 'No coach, what does that mean?' I would say, 'We're going to fake like we're throwing the ball and we're going to hand it off to the running back.' Those kind of little things would come up from time to time."

But Okorafor was a quick learner.

He appeared in all 12 games for the Broncos as a true freshman. The next season, he moved into the starting lineup at right tackle, moving future Carolina Panthers offensive tackle Taylor Moton to right guard.

The next season, when Willie Beavers, Western Michigan's left tackle, was selected in the fourth round of the draft by the Minnesota Vikings, Okorafor replaced him and Moton shifted back to right tackle.

It was in those days that Okorafor and Steelers linebacker Robert Spillane often banged heads in one-on-one and team drills.

"Chuks is a joy to be around. He works his butt off at practice on a day-to-day basis," said Spillane, part of the 2015 recruiting class with Okorafor. "We used to battle a lot more frequently at Western Michigan. He never backs down. I love that out of a competitor. He's a fun person to be around. He's fun to hang out around.

"Even at that point, you could see the athleticism in him. You knew he was going to be something really special. You could see his feet were light. He had a strong punch, long arms and a love for a game. I knew very early on he was going to be a special player for years to come."

Okorafor's athletic ability was going to allow him to be as good as he wanted to be. But to catch up to those around him, who had been around the game so much longer, he had to put in extra time.

It didn't hurt that Okorafor is extremely intelligent, a word everyone who knows him uses to describe him.

"That might be his best attribute," said Steelers first-year offensive line coach Pat Meyer, who has gotten to know Okorafor this season. "He is powerful and bendy, but his best attribute might be his mind. It's not just being smart, but he's a very intelligent kid. He gets it. He does study, but he doesn't have to study like some guys. Some guys have to have repetition, repetition, repetition. As a tackle, he's probably as good as I've been around in terms of his intelligence. You say, 'Hey, do this.' And he's good figuring it out."

Maybe that's because his childhood saw his family move around so much that Okorafor had to figure out how to adjust to different situations. As a youngster, Okorafor didn't understand why the family moved so often. He only knew he had to keep making new friends.

Now, 20 years later, he gets it.

"Looking back, I understand my parents were just trying to give us a better life," Okorafor said. "I can't complain about that. But it was for sure difficult to make new friends. You finally get used to living somewhere and then you move after a year. It was difficult. But everything happened well for me."

Largely because he used the talents with which he was blessed.

Okorafor was named first-team All-MAC as a junior in 2016, just five years after he started playing offensive tackle. The next season, his final one at Western Michigan, he was named a first-team All-America player by multiple publications. He was one of six semifinalists for the Outland Trophy.

When the Power-5 schools started recruiting him, there were promises of playing in the NFL. But when Okorafor started getting those kind of accolades later in his college career, he began to believe he had a future playing professional football.

"Every coach was like, 'If you come here, we'll make sure you make it to the NFL.' I didn't know if it was true or if they were lying to me," Okorafor said. "I was like, 'Cool, whatever.' After my third year (in college), I was like, 'OK, now there's actually a chance.' I didn't know how high I would go or how long I would be in the league."

But he knew he would give it everything he has.

Callahan knew early he had something special on his hands.

"We didn't have any doubt. We knew he would be that if he was what we thought he was personality-wise and work ethic-wise," Callahan said. "Obviously, that came to fruition. He's an extremely hard worker. He learned and developed. He did the work. We helped lead the path for him as a program. I'm very proud of what he's doing now."

That work ethic is something that has jumped out to Meyer as he's gotten to know Okorafor.

Okorafor took young left tackle Dan Moore Jr. under his wing in 2021 as the fourth-round draft pick learned the ins and outs of playing in the NFL as a rookie. It was something Okorafor, a third-round pick of the Steelers in 2018, didn't have to be as concerned with. He joined a veteran offensive line room led by the likes of Maurkice Pouncey, Ramon Foster, Alejandro Villanueva and David DeCastro.

But Okorafor understood how difficult it could be for a young player in the NFL, having joined the Steelers at just 20 years old.

Even if he had a little more experience under his belt, he and Moore both still have plenty to learn.

Okorafor and Moore stay after practice every day spending an extra half an hour or so going over whatever it is they need to work on that day.

"Chuks kind of took me under his wing and we started doing reps after practice," Moore said. "I think that's trickled down to this year. A few of the other guys have joined us. It's intensified a little bit, but that's OK."

Meyer has certainly noticed his two offensive tackles putting in that time.

"We practice hard and we demand a lot of reps from them in a row," Meyer said of the duo, who have both played every offensive snap this season. "That's part of being in condition. But they stay after practice every workday we're out here. They work on their craft and working different hand combinations or run-game stuff."

"They're doing that every day. It's a tribute to them. They're dedicated players. You have to have that to be successful. You can do the minimum. You have to do the extra for the average to become a good player, the good player to become a great player. That's what they have to do. They're working at it."

And Okorafor has taken it upon himself to try to make sure the Steelers offensive line comes together off the field, as well.

"He has taken on a leadership role just by the way he carries himself. He tries to group the o-line," Moore said. "We do stuff every week and he's usually the leader of that. I think he's definitely stepped into a leadership role."

That's not something that's necessarily a natural thing for Okorafor. He's not an outspoken person. He's quiet by nature, perhaps because so often during his childhood, he was the new kid in town.

But on this team, with five seasons under his belt in Pittsburgh, he's the veteran.

"I see him being more vocal. I know he's more on the quiet side by nature," said Meyer. "But he does express himself, which from what I gather might not have been the case in the past. He has taken on a more vocal role."

And he's taken it upon himself to make sure the offensive line, which included two new starters in guard James Daniels and center Mason Cole, has spent time together this season off the field.

Pouncey used to have weekly get togethers on Thursday night for the offensive linemen to watch film and have dinner together. Okorafor has done that with this year's line.

"I think we all learn from our elders and that comes with being the elder in the group," Meyer said. "I know they do get together. That's a good thing. It's good to have that camaraderie. They do something every Thursday together. They'll hang out, go to dinner, do something, just for camaraderie, to get closer, to get to know each other.

"Every year is a different group and there are young guys. They're all still young. Chuks has played a lot of football, but he's still a young kid. He's 25 years old. He played two years of high school and three years of college football at Western. He's young. He's still growing and still learning."

And getting better.



Okorafor was born in Nigeria, wholly built in U.S.A.

By Tom Reed

SOUTHFIELD, Mich. — Tim Conley's first look at Chukwuma Okorafor came in the school gymnasium while the super-sized sophomore was playing ping pong.

Needless to say, the Southfield High football coach had not left his classroom in the middle of the day to see whether the new transfer student had the makings to be the next Forrest Gump of table tennis.

For years, fellow teachers had been alerting Conley to the sight of large kids roaming the halls of the suburban Detroit school, wondering if they could help impact his football team. The coach often walked away from such meetings disappointed. Big did not necessarily mean athletic. Even those students who looked the part sometimes had no interest in playing.

The Nigerian-born Okorafor was different in many ways. At age 14, he stood 6-foot-3 and weighed 230 pounds with room to grow. Just watching the youngster move around the ping-pong table, returning volleys, Conley could see the fluidity of motion, the supple hips. And, yes, Okorafor was keen on sports. In fact, he had played football for a Detroit city school the previous fall, serving as the team's . . . wait for it . . . punter.

"Chuks (pronounced Chooks) had grown up playing soccer in Africa," Conley said. "All he knew was how to kick the ball."

The football coach couldn't wait to get Okorafor on the bench press and take him outdoors to throw a shot put. But there was a catch.

Conley's future right tackle couldn't take part in any extra-curricular activities until his mother saw his first report card in six weeks. This was non-negotiable.

Was the teenager a bad student? Was he academically ineligible?

No. It was just the opposite. Emilia and Nwammiri Okorafor had not moved from Nigeria to South Africa to Botswana to the United States in a seven-year span just so their four kids could excel in sports. To mom and dad, America represented an opportunity to get a quality education. Both parents were in the medical field and their oldest son was already in college.

"My mom and dad cared way more about schooling than football," Okorafor said. "It was all about academics."

This is a story about the education of Chuks Okorafor, the 23-year-old starting right tackle for the Steelers. It's a tale rich with irony. While the process remains ongoing, the most pivotal two years of his athletic development came in his final two seasons at Southfield High.

Academics might have been the family's focus, but mom and dad could not have placed their son in a better environment to overcome his shyness and transform into a draft-eligible football player — one who's added to the proud legacy of Nigerians thriving in the NFL.

All Okorafor had to do was trust in his coaches and learn the difference between blocking and holding.

GROWING PAINS

Reggie Wynns sits at a picnic table outside the football stadium and chuckles about the memory of Okorafor's first high school practice at his old school, Mumford High, in Detroit.

"Chuks told me about the first time he put on the equipment," said the assistant coach, who's become an invaluable resource to the Okorafor family. "He had his shoulder pads on backwards and his thigh pads where his knee pads belonged."

Unlike his new teammates, Okorafor had not grown up around the game. The first time he watched the sport was a year after arriving in the United States in 2010. The Steelers were playing the Packers in Super Bowl XLV.

Although the family had relatives in other parts of the country, the Okorafors moved to Detroit because his dad had friends living in the region.

In an effort to assimilate, the youngster tried out for football over the initial objections of his mother.

"After my sophomore year, my mom didn't want me playing anymore," Okorafor said. "She thought it was too violent. Someone from our church talked her into letting me play again. It was my mom just being a mom. She wanted me to be safe."

His good friend Calvin Graves recalls Okorafor barely speaking during his first semester at Southfield, which has been renamed Southfield A&T High. Okorafor quickly adapted to his second language, but fellow students had difficulty navigating his thick accent. The new kid, as Graves remembers, mostly communicated with a series of grunts and head nods.

When it came to expressing his dissatisfaction with being switched to the offensive line, however, Okorafor could not have been more clear.

"He grew about two or three inches in the last few months of his sophomore year — it was ridiculous," Conley said. "He's like, 'Coach, I just want to punt and kick.' I'm like, 'No, you are going to play tackle.' He's like, 'Coach, I can play tight end' and I'm like, 'Chuks, we don't have a tight end in our offense.'"

"Turns out, he didn't want to be an offensive lineman because he was afraid of getting big and fat."

Once they taught him the proper stance, the coaching staff marveled at Okorafor's agility. Years of playing soccer had blessed him with good footwork. He was still learning technique, but the lineman already moved with the grace of the team's college-bound left tackle.

Okorafor became an immediate starter. As he gained weight and an understanding of the game, Southfield's new right tackle was beginning to manhandle defenders. He missed his share of blocks, which was to be expected, but what bothered coaches was his failure to grasp the concept of holding. Okorafor had a penchant for grabbing defenders and throwing them to ground.

Flags and obscenities flew.

"Coach would be like, 'You can't do that, Chuks' and he would be like, 'Why can't I?'" Graves said laughing. "He was so strong. He would knock guys' helmets off and shove them to the ground and look at them like, 'Do something about it.'"

Wynns, who serves as the team's video coordinator for recruiting, made a tape of former Southfield offensive linemen who played at the collegiate level. They sat together in the office and watched how good blockers rely on leverage and technique.

"A lot of the kids had been playing since they were 5- or 6-years-old," Okorafor said. "For me, coming out of nowhere, I was trying to learn the whole game. Not holding was my biggest thing to learn about."

IRON SHARPENS IRON

Conley was walking through the weight room one day when he spied Okorafor visiting with his brother, Ezinwanne. Judging by the size difference, the coach pegged Ezinwanne for an eighth grader.

Another Okorafor in the Southfield pipeline, Conley thought. The vision brought a smile to the coach's face.

That's when his right tackle broke the bad news.

"I said, 'We've got to get your brother out for football,'" Conley recalled. "He looked at me and said, 'No, Coach, he's in college.'"

Nobody in the family can explain where Okorafor gets his size, which the Steelers list as 6-foot-6, 320 pounds. His father is the next biggest member of the clan at 6-foot-1.

"I honestly don't know how it happened," Okorafor said. "My mom is only 5-7."

There's no question size played a role in Okorafor's journey from west Africa to the east side of the Steelers' offensive line. But it was the daily grind Okorafor endured on the practice field that truly prepared him for college and pro football.

In 2013, you would have been hard pressed to find better competition than at Southfield High. Malik McDowell was a five-star recruit headed to Michigan State. Lawrence Marshall was a four-star recruit destined for Michigan. Both were imposing defensive linemen eager to challenge a blocker's manhood.

Any sign of weakness or retreat could have sent Okorafor back to gym class and the ping pong table.

"Those were the kind of battles you normally see at a college practice," said Graves, who played at Grand Valley State. "Those were big boys getting after it every day."

Wynns remembers Okorafor becoming so enraged at McDowell that he choked the 6-foot-6, 300-pounder — a future second-round pick of the Seahawks.

Okorafor seldom met competition as fierce on game nights. Wynns said the mettle-testing practices hardened Okorafor's resolve. Such mental toughness would be key once he arrived in Pittsburgh. Okorafor didn't become a Steelers' starter until this season. He also had to battle back from shoulder surgery after his rookie year.

"Chuks wouldn't be who he is today without Malik McDowell and Lawrence Marshall — I guarantee you," Wynns said. "There were college coaches who would come here and just watch practice to see them go after each other. It was unreal."

MAN IN DEMAND

"I've never seen you, Chuks, but oh my God you've got an offer from me today."

Those were the words of Ohio State football coach Urban Meyer, as told by Wynns, when Okorafor walked into the Southfield coaches' office during a Buckeyes' recruiting visit. Meyer was primarily interested in speaking with McDowell, but another OSU assistant coach asked to meet with Okorafor.

It had been less than two years since the offensive lineman had learned to put a hand in the dirt and fire off the ball for the first time. Life was changing rapidly. His head coach routinely was returning phone calls from major-college recruiters on his way home from practice to discuss Okorafor's progress. His team had more than 20 players accept scholarships, full and partial, during his senior year.

Among the most unforgettable moments in the recruiting process for the coaches was seeing former seven-time Pro Bowl tackle Lomas Brown talking to Okorafor after a game during his senior year. Brown, who played 18 NFL seasons, was working with a rival high school.

He was so impressed with Okorafor that he asked Wynns to see a highlight tape the assistant coach had uploaded to the internet. One call from Brown to his alma mater, the University of Florida, produced a scholarship offer three days later.

Okorafor is a bit sheepish when discussing the meeting with the longtime Lions' offensive lineman.

"I didn't know Lomas Brown, no offense to him," Okorafor said. "I had no clue who he was."

Maybe that's because his family was relocating from Nigeria to South Africa when Brown retired in 2003.

In the family's quest for a better life, as it shuttled around the African continent, the concept of scholarships was completely foreign. Higher education was a core value of Emilia and Nwammiri, and here were colleges lining up to offer their youngest son no-cost schooling.

Okorafor recalls clutching his first scholarship letter — it came from San Diego State following his junior season — and just staring dumbstruck at the paper.

"I didn't think it was real even though I had it in front of me," he said. "I didn't know you could go to school for free because of a game."

Wynns walked the family through the overwhelming process of picking a college. Despite serious interest from Power Five programs, Okorafor chose Western Michigan because of its proximity to home, his comfort level with the program and the presence of his brother, Ezinwanne, who was an upperclassman there. WMU was one of the first schools to heavily recruit Okorafor as a junior.

Some outsiders could not believe he settled for a Mid-American Conference school when more high-profile offers poured in during his senior year. But two values that dominate his life are honoring his family and keeping his word.

(Okorafor asked to delay an interview with DK Pittsburgh Sports for a week out of respect to his mother, who was grieving the Sept. 29 death of her brother.)

"The first day I went to Western, it felt like home," Okorafor said. "I'm a loyal person. If I say I'm going to do something, I am going to do it. I don't like going back on my word, and I'm not someone who's going to chase a logo."

Playing football at Southfield helped Okorafor emerge from his shell. He's still not much of a talker, but his popularity within the school and the football community grew dramatically in two years.

Okorafor was named to a prep All-Star game that pitted Michigan versus Ohio, and Conley could not believe how quickly his new teammates gravitated to him. Every good block, according to Conley, drew chants of "Chooooks!" from the sidelines.

"What I like about football is how it brings guys together," Okorafor said. "It's about a bunch of different guys coming from different places, whether it's the same country or different country, and having the same goals and mindset."

"It's crazy what football can do for you. I'm not just talking about myself. But seeing where people come from and where it can take you and your family is amazing."

STRAIGHT OUTTA LAGOS

Becoming a third-round draft pick in 2018 exceeded Okorafor's wildest expectations. Attending his first training camp at Latrobe with a fellow Nigerian took the experience to another level.

Steelers linebacker and special teams contributor Ola Adeniyi is one of Okorafor's best friends. They met in college when Adeniyi played for MAC rival Toledo.

"I've known Ola for five or six years," Okorafor said. "It's just nice having someone around who knows where you are from. We will get together and eat food from our home."

When Okorafor was learning the game's fundamentals in Detroit, he had no idea about the lineage of Nigerian born players in the NFL. There are at least 30 fellow countrymen who have played in the league with former Chiefs running back Christian Okoye being its most famous. That sum doesn't include countless more first generation Nigerian-Americans.

Okorafor has met the likes of Browns defensive tackle Larry Ogunjobi, who he will face again next Sunday. Browns tight end David Njoku is so proud of the heritage that he greets fellow Nigerians on the field with a handshake he says originates from the old country.

"I always like to find out what it took for guys to get here," Okorafor said of the Nigerian contingent. "There's something special about it."

His parents returned home last December, but due to football commitments Okorafor could not make the trip. He plans to go back at some point.

The right tackle spent his offseason training to compete for a starting job. His first two games in that role have delivered strong reviews. Okorafor was excellent in the Steelers' 28-21 win over the Texans in which he helped neutralize three-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year J.J. Watt.

Ben Roethlisberger has the league's fourth-highest percentage of clean-pocket dropbacks, according to Pro Football Focus, a testament to the work of his offensive line.

Okorafor returns to Southfield whenever possible. Coaches said he's visited with current players, and spent time lifting with them in the weight room.

Graves added that fame has not changed his friend, and that life's simple pleasures remain his most cherished.

"If you want to get Chuks something he would really like, you would get him a custom-made ping-pong paddle," Graves said. "I can still see him in the gym playing. Everybody else is playing basketball, running on the track, lifting weights, and there's Chuks playing ping pong."

Last year, Okorafor and the rest of his family became United States citizens, he said. The lineman has been in America so long that the magnitude of the event was a bit anticlimactic.

Okorafor doesn't take his freshly-minted citizenship for granted, however. He knows how vital those first few years at Southfield were to his assimilation into the culture and what the mentorship of Conley and Wynns meant to his growth as a man.

"America has changed my life," he said. "It's given me so much. There's nothing I could say bad about it."



FEATURE: NFL Scouts Taking Notice of Okorafor

By Paul Morgan

KALAMAZOO, Mich.- During last year's amazing 13-1 Western Michigan football season, personnel from virtually all the National Football League teams came to Kalamazoo to watch senior right tackle Taylor Moton practice and also watch him on film.

But there was one thing a lot of them said.

"Who's that guy on the left?"

That guy on the left, 6-foot, 6-inch, 330-pound senior Chukwuma Okorafor, is set to be a first round draft choice in the 2018 NFL Draft next April, according to many mock drafts. Moton was a second round draft choice by the Carolina Panthers and has played in all seven games, protecting quarterback Cam Newton.

This season, Okorafor is the player virtually all the NFL teams have come to see in person and on film.

"We've had more NFL teams come through here and it's like nothing I've ever seen," Broncos head coach Tim Lester said. "The NFL loves him."

His meandering background just adds to how far he has come. He was born in Africa and lived in several African countries before coming to the United States just before his freshman year in high school. He played soccer throughout his African youth and didn't take up football until coming here.

"When I first came over here, I was just playing football with my friends and I didn't start playing on the team (Southfield) until my sophomore year," Okorafor said. "I moved to tackle in my junior year."

Added Lester: "The amazing thing is that on Aug. 8, during fall camp, he turned 20 years old. When he came to Western, he was only 16. It's intriguing as to what he can do at the next level because he doesn't have a ton of football years under his belt."

Okorafor, along with offensive linemates junior Zach Novoselsky (junior right tackle, 6-5, 300), guards Mike Caliendo (freshman, 6-5, 300) and Luke Juriga (sophomore, 6-4, 295), center John Keenoy (junior, 6-3, 300) and tight end Donnie Ernsberger (senior, 6-3, 255), are opening some very large holes. Western Michigan is second in the Mid-American Conference in rushing per game at 235.6.

Senior running back Jarvion Franklin is third in the MAC, rushing for an average of 80.2 yards. Junior Jamauri Bogan is sixth at 67.0 yards per game. In last Saturday's 20-17 victory over Eastern Michigan, Franklin became the career rushing leader at Western Michigan. He now has 4,281 yards.

The Broncos (5-3 overall, 3-1 in the MAC West) host Central Michigan (4-4, 2-2 MAC West) in an 8 p.m. game on Wednesday which will be aired nationally on ESPN2.

"We got lucky, Jamauri and I," Franklin said. "Running behind him is a tremendous blessing."

Franklin doesn't really watch what Okorafor specifically does on the line, "But I know when it's tough, I can count on him to win his one-on-one matchup. I can always find two yards behind him."

Franklin, Bogan and running back Leo Ekwoke are roommates with Okorafor, and on days when they decide to have a barbeque with some other friends, what they can't find is leftovers.

"Sometimes when we grill, it's like eight steaks, 20 brats and some chicken and Chukes has several plates and they are all full," Franklin said with a smile. "He's a growing guy."

He has grown a lot from when he was in high school.

"I was probably 6-3 or 6-4 and 280 pounds in high school," Okorafor said. "I couldn't tell you where I get my height because my dad is 6-foot, my mom is 5-7 and my brother is around 6-0."

He had close to 40 scholarship offers as a senior.

"I chose Western Michigan because I felt at home and I didn't want to go anywhere else," Okorafor said. "When I first started playing as a sophomore in high school, I thought I might go to Kalamazoo College and just play for fun."

According to Lester, the tackle is having a lot of fun.

"Chukes always has a smile on his face," Lester said. "He's getting more football smart every time he plays and there's nothing he can't do."

Lester talks about a time in the season-opening game against USC where Okorafor was told to alter the way he dropped back. The senior made the change on the next play and it worked to perfection.

Okorafor feels his soccer background has helped him with his footwork, which is a huge asset, according to Lester.

"He can accelerate really well and the guys from the NFL can see how good he runs," the coach said. "Because he moves so well, at worst case, they have a guard.

"They are looking at him as a tackle, and if he's not quick enough for the left, he definitely can play the right."

Okorafor still has some soccer mentality, though.

"He still thinks he's a soccer player," Lester said with a chuckle. "I've given him a couple of chances to kick a football and it's not pretty. That 330 pounds haven't helped his leg swing."

Which means there are a lot of goaltenders very happy they don't have a 330-pounder running at them.



Okorafor fell in love with football

By Teresa Varley

For most players selected in the 2018 NFL Draft, one of the first things you hear them talk about is it being a dream come true, something they thought about as kids playing football in the backyard.

For third round pick Chukwuma Okorafor, who quickly said, 'Call me Chuks,' he didn't even know about football when he was a kid.

Okorafor was born in Nigeria, and was raised for part of his life in Botswana, where the main sport was soccer. That's all he knew. That's all he watched. That's all he played.

His family immigrated to the United States in 2010, settling in the Detroit area. It was a chance for a better life for them, a better job for his father, and a shot at the American Dream.

"I just had to adjust to different stuff," said Okorafor. "I would say it was more the culture, but I don't think of it as a huge difference."

What he had to adjust to most, was a different sport. People were encouraging him to play football. It was a sport all the kids played, one that brought people together with a common love. And his first introduction to it, was watching the Steelers play the Green Bay Packers in Super Bowl XLV.

"I knew nothing about football before that," said Okorafor. "Nothing at all."

Being new at the sport, playing tackle was about the furthest thing from his mind. Nope, he became a punter, utilizing the skills he knew from soccer to make the adjustment. But before he knew it, his body outgrew that of the average punter, and he was asked to play tackle his junior year of high school. He had already mastered a new country and a new sport, why not a new position.

"It was something different, just being able to know the plays and the technique and stuff," said Okorafor. "It was something that took me a couple months, or a year or two to just kind of get used to."

Fichtner's thoughts on draft picks

"Once I tried football out, I've just loved it since."

The move to tackle was probably as important a move for him as his family coming to the United States. He was offered scholarships to several schools, deciding on Western Michigan and knowing it was an amazing opportunity at a free education, not even realizing at first it could mean so much more.

Okorafor started three seasons at tackle, one at right and the last two at left. He was a first-team All-American selection by FWAA and Phil Steele, and a second-team All-American by Sports Illustrated. He was also one of six semifinalists for the prestigious Outland Trophy, given to the nation's best offensive lineman. Not bad at all for a newcomer not just to the position, but to the sport in general.

And now, he is an NFL player, something he never could have imagined as a kid.

"Being able to hear my name called was something special," said Okorafor. "When I got the call from Coach (Mike) Tomlin, it was something that almost felt fake. I watched the draft for a few years, then to hear my phone ring was something special.

"Then to hear from the fans. I saw how nice the fans are. I got all kinds of messages on Twitter, on Instagram just saying congrats and stuff, so that was pretty sweet.

"I am very excited to be here and just do what I have to do."

That all started this weekend with the team's rookie minicamp at the UPMC Rooney Sports Complex. Okorafor and his fellow rookies will soon have the opportunity to work with the full squad when OTAs begin later this month.

"Coming in, being somewhat young, I'm only 20-years old, and being able to learn from the two tackles they have who have been in the league for a while," said Okorafor. "So just being able to listen and learn from them definitely counts."

And while he doesn't have a preference as to whether he plays left or right tackle, he said he does feel more comfortable on the left side just because of experience.

"I played it the past couple years, but it doesn't really matter to me," said Okorafor. "Being able to prove I could play right tackle and also play left tackle that kind of was a plus. It's time to just learn. It's me just putting my head down and getting to work."

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."



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

By Ryan Hannable
Nov 18, 2020

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's a "big" story.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But, the Patriots were not like many other teams.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Each week, Onwenu seems to make at least one tweet-worthy pancake block and very rarely misses on his assignments.

Although just 10 games into his NFL career, the future seems bright.

"He's the type of guy that if he keeps playing the way he is, he's absolutely a guy that is going to play several years and if he's texting coaches at 10:30 at night to try and find out details and he's out competing at a high level, I think great things are going to happen for him because he's making an impact so fast," Drevno said. "I think a lot of those guys, if you start out strong, you're going to have a great career. He has a want-to and a desire."

Every NFL player has a story, it just so happens Onwenu's is bigger than most.

The Providence Journal

LARGE-SCALE SUCCESS: At 6-foot-3 and 350 pounds, rookie Michael Onwenu is quickly earning a place on the Patriots offensive line

By Mark Daniels

Oct 17, 2020

Michael Onwenu stepped on the scale and immediately Thomas Wilcher was surprised.

Onwenu was a 15-year-old freshman at Cass Technical High School in Detroit at the time. The teenager looked like a man already with legs like oak trees to go with a wingspan of 82 inches. When the scale read just over 330 pounds, however, his high school coach realized how big he truly was.

"That's how he got the name 'Big Mike,' " Wilcher said. "We couldn't believe that he weighed that much."

That kicked off a central theme in Onwenu's life. He holds his weight well, but his weight was a blessing and a curse. Throughout high school, he was ridiculously strong. He was able to bench press well over 200 pounds as a freshman. As he continued to grow, he developed into a legitimate Division I prospect. That scale read 370 pounds by the time he was a senior.

People always asked the same questions.

Is he too big? Is he unhealthy? Is he working hard enough?

That bothered Onwenu. That's why Wilcher, who ran track and played football for Michigan, tried to get his pupil not only comfortable in his own body, but also focused on ways he could improve his eating habits. Once he did those things, Wilcher knew the sky was the limit.

"He's created a better outlook towards life," Wilcher said, adding that Onwenu got past people focusing on his weight. "He's come to identify that's who he is and he knows how to look good, how to look healthy, and how to be supportive of himself. And that's the most important thing right there. He's a very strong character now because of who he is and what he has learned about himself."

A big part of Onwenu's journey involves that scale. Instead of the number holding him back, Onwenu has consistently used it to prove people wrong. That's what's happening in New England with the Patriots.

Family values

Stephen and Roseline Onwenu were born in Nigeria and came to the United States to make a better life. Roseline is a business owner, operating Detroit's Sterose International Boutique, a clothing store that specializes in head geles (a piece of fabric wrapped by hand around the head to form an often flamboyant head wrap.) Stephen is a hard-working corrections officer in the city.

They raised their son Michael to be a hard-working and a serious student. That's what Tim Drevno noticed when he started to recruit Onwenu for Michigan. The teenager's size was obvious, but the Wolverines offensive line coach saw more than just that.

"They're a really tight knit family that loved each other. It's one of those things — you can see why he blossomed," Drevno said. "(On the field), he moved really well. He had really good initial quickness in terms of foot speed and agility for a big guy for 370-plus pounds. Some people make his weight a big issue like, 'Oh, gosh, he's too heavy.' If he's able to move and move with functional movement things, it was good enough for me."

When Onwenu entered Michigan in 2016, no one wanted him to play at 370 pounds. At first, the goal was to get him under 365. Coaches saw unbelievable strength and athleticism for a guy this size, but trainers wanted him to be at a healthier weight.

Drevno explained that the trainers would never ask Onwenu to be 330 pounds and added that "would be strictly impossible." It was more about getting him to an ideal size to take advantage of his strength without losing any of it.

"He's a big guy. He's got really good lower body girth. Hard to move. And the D lineman at Michigan used to tell me he used to have a death grip," Drevno said. "If he got his hands on you, you're done.... He's that strong. He could probably just condition and be just fine because he's got that brute strength."

Fine-tuning his body

Ed Warinner became the Michigan offensive line coach when Onwenu was a junior. When he looked over the roster and saw Big Mike's height and weight, he thought the same thing many people did.

Was this healthy? Is he working hard enough?

Those worries went away thanks to a DEXA scan machine that measures body composition. At Michigan, along with body fat percentage, they also measure bone density.

"The assumption is that being that big, you have to be carrying a lot of fat ... and his (readings) were as good as anybody on the O-line," Warinner said. "It's his bone density, his thickness, his muscle mass, that's what's incredible on him. It's not that he weighs 360 or whatever because he has 30 pounds extra fat that he could lose."

"He's just a big, thick human being. People presume things, I being one of them. 'Oh, God, you can't play at that weight.' But we have some really science-oriented people on our nutrition and weight staff and so they did a lot of studies on him and we got him down."

Onwenu had natural talent, but Warinner wanted to see him attack practice as hard as he attacked the games. The staff also wanted him to get his weight below 360 pounds. Following his junior year, Onwenu put it upon himself to make dietary changes. When he returned to Michigan as a senior, he hit 350 pounds — dropping 20 pounds from his high school senior year.

In that 2019 season Warinner saw a player that could take on any defensive lineman one-on-one. He saw an NFL offensive lineman.

"For him, he became a really good player here when he started to practice at a high level, when he took practice really seriously and worked his [butt] off," Warinner said. "And when he started doing that, then it manifests itself in the games with better play. He took his diet and weight and conditioning to a new level."

Getting noticed

People tend to forget about the scale when Onwenu steps on the field.

A sixth-round pick, Onwenu has turned into the biggest surprise for the Patriots. He's started all four games and even more impressive, he's played four different positions — right tackle, left guard, right guard and jumbo tight end. This is after he played only guard in college.

In his last start, at right guard, Onwenu didn't allow a single pressure on the quarterback. Following that game against the Super Bowl-champion Chiefs, Pro Football Focus had Onwenu as the highest-graded rookie in the NFL. His 92.2 mark is also the highest ever given to a rookie through the first four weeks of the regular season, dating back to 2006.

How did the NFL miss on Michael Onwenu? How did he last until the sixth round, pick 182?

It turns out the rookie couldn't escape questions about his weight. Add in COVID-19 and most teams didn't get to see him in person. It hurt his draft stock.

"He probably slipped because of the measurable and maybe some people got scared of his weight," Drevno said. "But I think that the Patriots did a heck of a job. ... They started to figure out what the kid's wiring is. 'Does he process quick on his feet? Does he panic? Can he stay with the focus on the task at hand? Is he mature? Can he retain information? Can he not be a repeat offender?' Those are the things that you see in him. I knew he was an NFL guy when I got him out of high school and when I coached him."

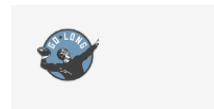
At the NFL Combine, Onwenu weighed 344 pounds, which was remarkable considering he entered college at 370. Despite the drop in weight, he was the heaviest interior offensive lineman at the combine. For the workouts, he opted to participate only in the bench press. He didn't know he wouldn't get a chance to participate in Michigan's Pro Day due to the pandemic. He was able to visit the Patriots and Miami before the pandemic canceled the rest of his visits.

"No one ever got to put their hands on him," Warinner said. "So there was really no data and as you know, the NFL is big on all these numbers. ... All I know is he's a really good player. And sometimes, certain places and people use those numbers more than the film. If people would have worked him out, they would have [seen] what I saw every day for two years."

That number on a scale might have followed him to the NFL, but his results speak louder. Michael Onwenu is a big man. He always has been. He's also a talented football player.

That's the focus now.

WR KJ Osborn



You can count on K.J. Osborn

By Tyler Dunne

EAGAN, Minn. — Tattooed on his left hand is the daily reminder. Two simple words that will be impossible to miss throughout his day-to-day life.

The sun's scorching rays at TCO Performance Center shine a beam of light directly onto the ink after one recent practice.

Be You.

K.J. Osborn had this message etched permanently the day before training camp. When he wakes up in the morning, when he's lifting weights, when he's strapping on his gloves to catch passes for the Minnesota Vikings, he'll gaze down at it and refocus. This 26-year-old from Ypsilanti, Mich., knows exactly who he is, too. A "hard-working man" who's inspired to lead peers, family, younger and older teammates alike.

"All about serving and showing love," Osborn says. "No matter who the person is."

Visibly, he's unique. From the sparkling nose ring to the dreadlocks to the neatly shaved lines in his left eyebrow, the wide receiver has distinct style. Then again, many receivers do. What makes Osborn truly unique is this urge to serve deep in his gut. Mom always raised him to live with "a God-like conscience" and Osborn took that to heart. If he was ever in dire need of help, Osborn knows he'd want help. So, whenever he sees someone else hurting? In any way? Osborn's natural instinct is to do something about it.

Spiritually. Emotionally. Or, quite literally, physically.

Osborn refers to himself as a "helping hand." It's the understatement of the summer.

This tattoo will also be a reminder of the offseason that forever changed his life.

The night of March 5, Osborn was in the back of an Uber in Austin, Texas — head down, zoned out — when his driver saw an accident and started yelling. Underneath a bridge, another car had crashed into a pillar. It was on fire. There was a man inside. K.J. — being K.J. — helped save that man's life. A few months later, he headed to Africa on a church mission and saw miracles performed right before his eyes. A blind child was given the ability to see. A woman who could barely walk with a bad back could suddenly stand up straight.

He is not exaggerating. The experience, he repeats several times, was "life-changing."

Now, it's back to football where he's rapidly becoming one of the NFL's finest go-to weapons in crunch time.

In 2021, Osborn supplied the walk-off touchdown in overtime vs. Carolina. He also hauled in 64- and 62-yard bombs for scores. In 2022, he was the receiver who jumpstarted the greatest comeback in NFL history with 157 yards on 10 receptions vs. the Colts. Down 33-0, he shocked the Vikings to life. Unsurprisingly, Osborn was a busy man through

training camp. The firepower surrounding quarterback Kirk Cousins is one of the most ignored storylines this season. Justin Jefferson, the No. 1 pick in your fantasy league, is already a superstar. He'll be historically rich soon. Tight end T.J. Hockenson signed the richest tight end contract in NFL history on Thursday. Rookie Jordan Addison was the story of camp, getting open at a jarring rate. Osborn, facing 1-on-1 coverage, will feast this contract year because Osborn is the player so often blinking into Cousins' periphery with less than 2 minutes left. The player who executes the master plan Kevin O'Connell laid out last summer.

We'll say it again: Those one-score wins here in the Twin Cities are no joke.

K.J. Osborn — a man who savors pressure — is the tangible proof and, now, he enters this 2023 NFL season fresh off a personal awakening.

It all started that near-fatal night in Austin, Texas.

Sadly, this impulse is dead inside most Zoomers. Faced with a horrifying scene — fisticuffs on a sidewalk, bullying in school, a burning car off an expressway — the natural instinct is to go viral. To pull out the cell phone, hit record, bare witness through a lens of vanity. The urge is not to do exactly what Osborn did in Austin.

Of course... he feared the worst. The airbag was out and he didn't see a body. Whoever was inside this burning vehicle, he initially thought, must've flown out of the car.

The Uber driver called 911 and Osborn sprinted toward the scene before reality hit. That car full of gasoline could blow up at any moment. Two other bystanders stopped to help and, soon, all four realized that there was a driver inside. Not only that. The driver was alive. By the sight of this man's eyes, he was in a total "daze," but he wasn't quitting. The man — who turned out to be 34-year-old MTV personality Nelson Thomas — was, in fact, inching... inching... inching his way out of an opening on the passenger side. Only later did Osborn learn that Thomas woke up when he felt the fire on his legs.

At one point, the Uber driver went right down to see Thomas up close. (Fearlessness K.J. won't forget.)

There's no way to prepare for this fight-or-flight sensation, Osborn explains, "until you're in it." He never faced anything remotely close to this in his entire life. At first, he was stricken with an understandable sense of flight. His mind raced to his family. "What if," Osborn remembers asking himself, "I try to save this man... and the car blows up? I went out being who I was, but it's The End."

"Those moments were clicking by," recalls Osborn, snapping his fingers. "As I'm looking at this car, I'm thinking about who I am."

Precious seconds ticked. It was decision time for all four.

Wait for firefighters to arrive. Or take action.

The four weren't sure how close they should get to the car. One person would close in, and back up. Another person would close in, and back up again. This pulsating, "Should we go?" vacillation lasted about 1 minute and 30 seconds. Justifiably, they feared an explosion would kill them all, too. Thomas kept pushing, was able to lean his upper body over enough to stick his head out of the door, and it was time.

Two words rang loudest in Osborn's head: Be You.

He refused to watch a man die before his eyes.

"I wouldn't have been able to live just standing there," Osborn says, "if the car did go into flames and blew up and there was time we could've done something."

Two people originally tried pulling him out, but couldn't. Osborn assisted. Osborn loaded Thomas over his shoulder and carried him 15 yards away from the flames as blood drenched his shirt. The process of actually pulling Thomas from that burning car was remarkably efficient. Lasted all of 5 to 10 seconds.

Firefighters arrived shortly after. Medics, too.

They informed the group that they saved Thomas' life.

All a blur that felt like a movie scene.

When Osborn returned home that night, he texted a couple friends and told himself that he had one hell of a story to share with family tomorrow. He thought he'd be able to pass right out and sleep in total exhaustion. He was wrong. Laying in bed, his adrenaline was still pumping. The next day, he shared a "Right Place Right Time" tweet that included a picture with the three others who sprung to action.

K.J. Osborn on X

The next 48 hours were a blur. On NFLN, Osborn noted that he was pursuing his masters in criminal justice. He wants to save more lives in the FBI or United States Secret Service one day. On set, Green Bay Packers running back Aaron Jones, a saint in his own right, admitted he probably would not have risked his own life in the same situation.

Thomas soon shared pictures of his own with his 276K+ followers on Instagram. The injuries sustained were grisly, but he survived:

Before leaving Austin, Osborn visited Thomas in the hospital and has kept in touch with the star of "The Challenge." Without divulging details, he says he also has a surprise planned. As the events of that night took America by storm, Osborn's mailboxes were soon flooded with well wishes. He couldn't keep up with his IG inbox. What stood out most were the pictures drawn by kids portraying Osborn as a superhero.

Nonstop, Osborn was showered with two specific compliments: "You're a hero" and "You're an angel." The latter gives him goosebumps.

To him, there are no lucky coincidences.

Osborn believes he was meant to be in that Uber precisely at that moment.

"We were Nelson's angels that night," he says. "God really used me to be a real-life angel. There wasn't anybody else on that expressway besides me, Nelson, Abdul, Rita and Arthur. There was five of us. That was it on that highway. If we weren't there, who knows? I don't think Nelson would be here."

Nobody else would've been around to call for help. Thomas would've died in that burning car. A cold reality Osborn admits give him "tingles inside." Arthur, the man standing behind K.J. in the picture, had just moved to America three years prior. His actions were heroic, too. He smashed a back window at one point.

For Osborn, the life choice has always been to fight. Never to flee. That's how he was raised.

The more he thinks about it, the more he knows why he was placed in harm's way that night. He starts with Mom, the "backbone" of his family working two jobs to pay her way through dental hygiene school. There was hardly any money in the bank account. Valerie ran her own cleaning business, working most often at the Fischer Honda car dealership in Ypsilanti. Through sixth, seventh and eighth grade — after school, after sports games — K.J. would head directly to the dealership to help her out with his sister. Mom couldn't help but cry while sweeping the floors.

Many nights, she worked until 2 a.m. The kids would pass out on the couch in the customer lounge.

Once she was done cleaning, it was off to Denny's to study for her board exams. The situation, she later recalled, was "do or die." The hardest thing she ever did in her life — and it all paid off. Today, Valerie is a dental hygienist and travels to every single one of her son's games. Home and away.

"She persevered. She taught me and my sister that hard work," says Osborn, who adds that Dad, remarried, has been in his life. He was a long-distance truck driver. They're tight, too. "You've got to grind for what you want. You've got to work for it. It's no secret. ... Any time me and my sister go through any type of adversity? We've been through tough times."

Football always mirrored life. Heck, Osborn was a backup on his youth football team at eight years old. A two-star recruit out of high school. A receiver — on to the University of Buffalo in the MAC — who needed to redshirt all of 2015 before playing a down. Even then, it took two injuries at receiver and two at punt returner to get his shot. After three seasons with the Bulls, he headed to Miami (Fla.) and caught 50 balls for 547 yards on a 6-7 Hurricanes team.

The previous Vikings regime, however, saw something. Perhaps it was Osborn's game-winning touchdown against Pitt in the final minute. They took a chance on the 5-foot-11, 203-pounder in the fifth round and, after barely playing

as a rookie in 2020, Osborn announced himself to the football world. In Game No. 1 that 2021 season, vs. Cincinnati, Cousins went to Osborn on a fourth and 4 with 37 seconds left to extend a drive that forced overtime. One month later, he had the OT winner against Carolina. ("Immediately," he adds. "Kirk was coming to me in those 2-minute situations.") The following season was more of the same (60 catches for 650 yards with five scores), which means more of those Midwesterners shouting "Skol!" know who he is.

Yet, Osborn has one fear. He never wants to become anybody different than that overlooked 2-star, that kid grabbing Z's at the dealership.. How he eats. How he trains. How he's often the last player on the practice field, catching balls at the JUGS machine. In his mind, none of this can ever change.

Because when the pressure's highest, he's strikingly calm. He's prepared.

Vikings wide receivers coach Keenan McCardell was not surprised to hear Osborn launched himself into action that night in Austin.

"That's something he would do," McCardell says. "He's not going to run away from big situations. He's going to step up to the moment in a big situation like he's done on the field. ... It's a dire-need moment for a guy. Life or death. He stepped up and pulled him out of the car. Just like on the field. It's a dire need for us to have a catch to win the game? He makes it in Carolina."

Right around this time, in March, is also when McCardell issued Osborn a biting challenge.

Adam Thielen was released and Thielen also happened to be Minnesota's homegrown son, a 10-year vet, the franchise's fourth all-time leading receiver behind Cris Carter, Randy Moss and Anthony Carter. As the unforgettable fairy tale goes, Thielen was preparing for his own dental-related career. He accepted a job to sell dental equipment before the Vikings offered him a tryout. McCardell made a point to put as much pressure on Osborn as he could when the organization turned the page on this chapter. Told Osborn that those were big shoes to fill.

After initially asking him, "Can you do it?" McCardell corrected himself. He realized asking a question was the wrong tact. He needed to make a statement.

He told Osborn, "You're going to do it."

"Step up," he said six months ago. "Fill those shoes and make them even bigger."

Speaking one week before the Vikings' season begins, the perfectionist McCardell is thrilled with Osborn's response. He sees a human being with a completely new outlook on life, and it's not all a result of saving someone's life.

A trip to Africa is also to thank.

Rather than disappear to the Caribbean for one last hurrah or go full hermit with his family, Osborn spent much of the precious lull between OTAs and the start of training camp in Zimbabwe and South Africa as part of a church mission with his mentor/pastor Tim Timberlake of Celebration Church. An extra nudge helped. His best friend since sixth grade, former UB teammate, current Seattle Seahawks tight end and "accountability partner" in life, Tyler Mabry, invited him. Up close, Osborn saw people deal with "real problems." Not trivial first-world problems we obsess over in the states. Day-to-day, life-and-death issues such as rampant homelessness. Ninety-five percent unemployment. Countless kids who didn't even own shoes. Power blacking out at any moment. No drinking water. Where Osborn stayed, he was told to never swallow the water he showered in. His mission group brushed their teeth with bottled water.

The people they visited in Zimbabwe lacked a Bible in their language. As part of this conference, a group called Biblica delivered one that was translated.

This trip was every bit as "life changing" to Osborn as getting drafted into the NFL.

Mostly because of the surreal miracles he witnessed. "Crazy, crazy things" that still have Osborn in a visible state of shock.

Says Osborn: "If you saw it with your own eyes, you'd think it was magic."

Inside a church, Timberlake prayed for various people in attendance. The pastor shared the story of how God healed a blind man, and then asked if anybody in the crowd needed a miracle. One man brought down his son. While

Osborn refers to him as a baby in re-telling the story, he estimates the child was 2 years old. Maybe 3. The child's eyes were "glossy" — pale white — staring up at the ceiling.

Only a few of Osborn's closest friends have heard this story.

He tells it with more raw emotion than even saving a man's life.

"Pastor Tim prayed for him," he says, "put his hands over his eyes. And when he removed them, the baby had clear eyes. The baby started smiling. There was a Caucasian lady with us who the baby had never seen before and he jumped into the lady's arms and was hugging her. Everybody was celebrating. They were really happy. It was the highlight of everybody's trip — 'What just happened?!' If you were to see a blind person, it'd be the same reaction: 'Wait. What?' It took my faith to another level.

"It was amazing. Something I have never, ever seen in my life.

"Ever."

That wasn't all. Another lady walked to the front with a severe limp. She couldn't move her back at all. The pastor put his hands on her back and, Osborn says, she "sprung" straight up.

"She could touch her toes. She could spin. She could move. It was crazy. The scene was so intense."

These images will remain at the forefront of his mind. He couldn't believe how such arduous living conditions did nothing to deter the spirits of locals. Many kids needed to walk 2 to 3 hours to school where they'd get their only meal for the day, but families were simply happy to be together. Grateful doesn't begin to describe the feeling that rushed through Osborn. Part of him wished he could take everyone back to America with him. In all honesty, though? He wanted to stay here. Osborn loved the fact that there was hardly any cell service. Away from a screen — ejected into an entirely new world — he gained a new zest for life. He already can't wait to go back with his new church family.

Upon returning, Osborn got the "Be You" tattoo and headed into camp to prepare for the most important football season of his life. Entering the final year of his rookie deal, this is his chance to earn the kind of money that'll set him up for life. His chance to repay a mother sweeping away inside that car dealership. He's well aware that millions of dollars will be at stake every week.

Never before has Osborn faced this level of pressure in football. Thielen's defection created an opportunity, but then the Vikings drafted USC's Addison. Of course, he's not concerned.

"I wouldn't be myself if I looked at the result and not the process," Osborn says. "If you want to talk about the contract — life-changing money — finish. You'll get there. It'll come when it comes. Worry about the game of football. Don't worry about all of the off-the-field stuff. I have an amazing team to handle that stuff when the time comes. I just try to take it a day at a time and be where my feet are."

When any NFL player sees the thin line between life and death firsthand, it can have a powerful effect. Zay Jones nearly threw himself out of a window 30 floors high five years ago. That night was a turning point. Depressed in Buffalo, the wideout learned to completely let go of expectations. By 2022, he was making clutch catches weekly through the Jacksonville Jaguars' improbable sprint to the playoffs.

Now, Osborn brings his new perspective to third and 12, to the fourth quarter, to moments he cherishes. He wrote specific goals for this season on his mirror, goals he'd like to keep to himself. He's his own biggest critic and holds himself to an extremely high standard, but can't help but point out how demanding McCardell is on all Viking receivers. ("Good Lord. K-Mac gets on me!") He knows it all comes from a place of love and is especially craving McCardell's hard coaching at this critical juncture of his football life. With no wife, no kids, Osborn is married to the sport.

He does verbalize one team goal: To win the Super Bowl. Don't let the loss of a few aging vets distract from the fact that the Vikings still intend to win. Osborn echoes Harrison Phillips in shooting down the DVOAified theory that last year's 13-4 run was a total fluke. The Vikings were 11-0 in one-score games, he says, because they practiced for those specific moments. All the way back to "Phase 1" and "Phase 2" in OTAs.

"So when we get out there, we're not guessing," Osborn says. "We've been through it. When you hear Kobe and Michael Jordan talk about those game-winning shots, 'I've shot that shot 1,000 times.' I've caught that pass a lot of times. I've repped that a lot of times in my mind, in walkthrough, in practice."

Defenses had a full offseason to meticulously dissect Jefferson's 1,809-yard season. Bank on coordinators shading coverages his way. Extreme attention that should create more opportunities for Osborn wherever he's lined up. Cousins deserves credit for forcing the issue. As the Buffalo Bills learned on fourth and 18, the QB will give Jefferson a shot in double coverage. But McCardell believes the Vikings have three legitimate starters in Jefferson, Addison and Osborn. They'll cloud Jefferson with DBs at their own peril. Thus, the Vikings should be able to engage in shootouts with anyone in this wide-open NFC.

McCardell, the former Jaguar great, totaled 11,373 receiving yards over a 17-year career. He started on a Super Bowl team in Tampa Bay. Now, he has a burgeoning reputation as a coach with this new generation.

Told what Osborn said, he doesn't hide. He doubles down. ("I am very demanding," he says.) That's how McCardell was coached from the likes of Joe Gibbs, Bill Belichick, Tom Coughlin and Jon Gruden. He tells his receivers in Minnesota all the time, "Good is the evil of great."

"We have to understand that we can't just be good," McCardell continues. "We have to be great each and every play, each and every day. And it starts in practice. Being great in practice. You can't just show up on Sundays and think you're going to be great. ... If you're spot on in games, you're probably going to be playing pretty well. At a high level. With their talents, that can mean greatness. That's how demanding I am. I expect excellence every play."

Osborn, an old soul, is passing McCardell's test so far.

McCardell calls him "Mr. Consistent," because he's never rattled. He loves Osborn's laser-beam demeanor. A personality that helps Osborn both save a man from a burning car and make that fourth-down catch with the game on the line. "He's a guy who's always there when you need him," McCardell adds. "He's always there." The coach sees it the locker room. When a teammate's somber — for whatever reason — Osborn's the player who sits down to chat. The coach sees it on the field. When a receiver drops a ball, Osborn is the first player to speak to him.

Never high, never low. We think the best NFL players have Rob Zombie's music blaring through their mind when it's actually the calmer-than-calm players who excel. A state of Zen is far more advantageous in all those close games.

No moment seems too big for Osborn.

"They might be big moments for other people," McCardell says. "But for him, it's just natural. ... It's like time slows down. When that starts to happen for you as a player, you can do things that are special. You always know what's going to happen."

He's seen other young wide receivers stray from who they are during games. The position itself can turn normal people into maniacs. So much is out of your control. McCardell finds himself telling his guys: "Go back to being who you are." That's never a problem for No. 17.

He'll be tested next week. When the Vikings welcome the Tampa Bay Buccaneers into U.S. Bank Stadium, it'll be more like opening the drawbridge to welcome a Lannister army. The Bucs have declared war on the rest of the NFL. Cornerback Carlton Davis will punch receivers at the line of scrimmage. Safety Antoine Winfield Jr. will shoot out of a cannon like his Dad. The rest of the world expects the Bucs to stink, but — in taking Davis' cue — the Buccaneers fully aim to "wreck shit."

First up: Minnesota.

Osborn will take a hard hit. Or two. There will be trash talk. Fists to the sternum off the line of scrimmage. Like every Vikings game in the history of mankind, this will probably boil down to the final zany seconds, and... Osborn will need to make a play. He's a completely different character than Davis. One scowls with haunting eyes and NSFW language. The other smiles. This day, Osborn is devoid of any volatility whatsoever.

When it's time to catch a pass on fourth down next week — and beyond — he won't get flustered.

All K.J. Osborn ever needs to do is take one glove off and see those two words forever written on his hand.

S Jabrill Peppers



Legacy & Brotherhood: Jabrill Peppers, Deatrich Wise Jr. reflect on impact of 'Divine Nine' during Black History Month

By Alexandra Francisco

The year is 2013.

New England Patriots captain Deatrich Wise Jr. is a redshirt freshman with the University of Arkansas playing against No. 10 Texas A&M. The Razorbacks defensive lineman is having a phenomenal game, with a career-high six tackles in the SEC opener, but there is one celebration in particular that stands out.

Just before halftime, on 4th-and-14, Wise and a teammate sack Aggies quarterback Johnny Manziel. He takes a few giant steps and breaks into the signature shimmy associated with Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Incorporated.

"I ended up sacking Johnny Manziel – a sack-fumble," Wise recalls. "I had just finished my pledge process and became a member (of the fraternity). I was just very excited so that was the first thing I did."

Becoming a Kappa was, in a way, a rite of passage for Wise.

His father was a Kappa at Jackson State, along with a few other men in his family. Wise's mother was a member of Delta Sigma Theta, another historically Black Greek Letter Organization under the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC).

Their influence was apparent in his decision to rush for a fraternity at Arkansas.

"My dad said if you want to pledge, pledge Kappa," Wise said. "If you don't pledge Kappa you just shouldn't pledge."

Patriots teammate Jabrill Peppers also felt called to one of the Divine Nine organizations that make up the NPHC. His mother, too, was a Delta, but when he arrived on Michigan's campus for his freshman year, rushing for Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated wasn't to carry out a family legacy.

His father was incarcerated when Peppers was just seven years old. They shared 15-minute phone calls, but his mother and father never let Peppers visit in person. When he was 14, his older brother Don, who sheltered him from the streets and encouraged him to pursue his athletic talents, was shot and killed.

At a pivotal age, both of the most dominant father figures were taken from him. His mother had to take it all on.

"It's so easy to get caught up in all of the wrong things when you're from where I am from," Peppers said.

"It's so easy to get sidetracked. It's so easy to stray off your path. I didn't have my dad for most of my childhood, so my mom had to wear two hats. She always said she couldn't teach me how to be a man but I think she did a damn good job. She was always on me about my schoolwork, always on me about knowing right from wrong. She taught me that no matter what happens in life, it's up to you to push through."

He did just that.

Staying focused on football and his academics, he earned a scholarship at the prestigious University of Michigan. A long way from home, he organically found his Ann Arbor family.

"One of the main things that drew me to the brotherhood was the fact that I lost my brother," said Peppers.

"Growing up, I wasn't necessarily as close to my brother as I wanted to be because my dad was in jail. So that was a big thing for me, because no matter where I go in the world, there's a man of Omega somewhere nearby. All I have to do is reach out and I have a brother everywhere."

For both Peppers and Wise, the traditions and relationships that came along with joining Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc. molded them into the men they are today.

Since it was founded in 1911, Omega's stated purpose was to attract and build a strong force of men dedicated to the core principles of manhood, scholarship, perseverance, and uplifting.

Peppers says he lived by these ideals long before he was old enough from college. Surrounding himself with those like-minded individuals brought him even higher.

"Friendship is essential to the soul," Peppers said, echoing the official Omega motto.

"At Michigan, I had the bond of brotherhood from my football team, but also from my fraternity," Peppers said.

"It was the best of both worlds, man. Just having my brothers on both sides pushing me to be better and challenge myself – I think that was very instrumental in my growth as a man. That journey made me a better man, made me a better human, and taught me about humility."

Wise echoed that sentiment.

"A lot of people come from different walks of life – people who are similar but with different stories – and it provides a family outside of your actual family," Wise said. "You can't pick your family, but you can pick your friends that eventually turn into family. When everyone is like-minded and on the same path of achieving excellence, aiming to a higher purpose, serving their community, it's promising."

When discussing their respective experiences, both credit their fraternities for emphasizing the importance of accountability, uplifting, and community.

At an early age, various coaches and teachers noticed Peppers possessed the spirit of a natural leader. They drilled into him that his peers looked up to him, and it was up to him to set a good example.

"As a kid, I didn't understand why I was getting in trouble for other kids wanting to do the same things as me," Peppers said. "As I got older I had to understand that people naturally gravitate towards others, for whatever reason. With that comes a lot of responsibility, so as I got older and more mature, I started embracing that role."

Wise agreed that along with the important ideals of Kappas, accountability was how they maintained that standard.

"People are watching what you say and do, because you're not only representing yourself and your family, and for me the football team, but you're also representing a fraternity that is known nationally," Wise said of his fraternity that also dates back to 1911.

"Our motto is to achieve in every field of human endeavor. In everything I do, I try to reach whatever the highest point of achievement in that field is. That's something that is the result of determination, resilience, and hard work. On the field and off the field, being able to persevere and be resilient against things that come up in my life, hard work, being dedicated to my craft, and getting better – that's the model I've also adopted."

Both Wise and Peppers are in good company with their respective fraternities. Many athletes, entertainers, academics, scientists, politicians, and activists who impacted Black culture and society so profoundly were men of the Divine Nine.

"There have been so many instrumental and prestigious men who crossed the burning sands before me, and to call them my brothers, and know they went through what I went through to achieve membership and to be forever intertwined with those guys – there's no feeling greater than that," Peppers said.

"So many men of Omega have had an impact on our history."

Wise adds, "It's a good party to be part of. So many have paved the way for us. We're standing on a lot of shoulders: politics, entertainment, athletes, scientists, doctors – you name it, Kappa has it."

Years removed from college, they're carrying those ideals in everything they pursue to build on that legacy.

Not long after his sack celebration, Wise was completing his summer classes in his sophomore year. He'd spent time on other campuses, noting Southern Methodist University specifically, and saw a discrepancy in the way Divine Nine organizations were celebrated at other campuses.

"I realized a lack of representation on the University of Arkansas campus for the Divine Nine," Wise said.

"Only one fraternity and one sorority had a house. No dedications or plots. When you got to campus you couldn't even tell we were there."

Wise wanted to do something about it and reached out to the NPCH. For eight years, with help of fellow students, they went back and forth, voting on details and pitching the perfect space to Arkansas university officials to the point that he almost forgot about the project.

Finally, he got a call that they would break ground on dedicating the NEPC Garden that overlooks Razorback Stadium. A dedication ceremony was held on Oct. 16, 2021, and he later got to see it for himself while back in town for the football team's Spring game last year.

It now serves as a monument to commemorate the rich heritage of the historically Black fraternities and sororities at Arkansas.

His vision became a reality, and now it will benefit everyone who follows.

"That is the space for the Divine Nine to express themselves in any way they want to," Wise said.

"Whether that's step shows, whether that's community events, whatever. Movies, game nights, anything. Now there's a designated area to represent the Divine Nine, pay homage to the ones who came before us, and lead the path for those who come after us."

Detroit Free Press

Feature: Michigan's Jabrill Peppers turns heads — in every direction

By Mark Snyder

Coming out of Gardena, Calif., in 2014, Adoree Jackson had no doubt he was as talented as any player in the country.

Rated No.7 overall and the No.1 cornerback in the 247Sports Composite rankings, he had boundless ability and thought he was setting a standard.

Then he got to the Under Armour high school All-Star game and realized there was another level.

Jabrill Peppers' level.

"I knew he was special in high school," Jackson said of Peppers this past week in Atlanta before the College Football Awards show. Peppers was No.2 overall in that class.

"They let him go both sides of the ball at the Under Armour game. I was like, 'OK, they didn't let me go, so he's got to be legit.' Then I've seen his highlights his senior year: all offensive plays. And I was like, 'I thought he was a defensive back?' I said, this guy's got to be legit."

They met at the game in Florida, connected and have been bonded ever since, mostly because they understood each other in a way few others could.

Playing in all three phases — offense, defense and special teams — takes rare ability. But while Jackson had flashes, like a three-touchdown game against Notre Dame and played essentially one position in each, Peppers did it all season at many spots.

Heisman Trophy finalist Jabrill Peppers poses with the award in New York, Friday, Dec. 9, 2016. That's why, even though Jackson won the Jim Thorpe Award, Alabama's Jonathan Allen won the Nagurski and Bednarik awards, and Alabama's Reuben Foster won the Butkus Award, they're all jealous of Peppers.

Because Peppers was set to spend Saturday night in Manhattan near the Heisman Trophy as the eighth defensive finalist in the past 35 years.

That's why he won the national award that suits him best: the Hornung Award for the most versatile player.

"I couldn't do it, because me and Jabrill are way different in body size," Allen said, grinning knowing that his 291-pound frame is all that's restricting him. "What he does is incredible. I couldn't do it. You've got to respect a man for what he does. That's why he got the trip to New York."

Isn't that special?

To the college football world, Peppers' achievements are stunning mostly because they are so rare.

At every position, he seems to be an outlier.

There are few 205-pound linebackers because they're too small. There aren't many 205-pound return men because they're too slow.

And there aren't many (any?) defensive players lining up as a wildcat quarterback because they can't be trusted to make decisions.

Michigan Wolverines do-it-all redshirt sophomore Jabrill Peppers. Somehow, it all seems natural to Peppers.

"Most guys when you talk about they have the skill to play on the back end, but that means they can run," Florida State coach Jimbo Fisher said at last week's Orange Bowl news conference in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. "This guy can run, he can bend, he knows how to play on the back end at safety and corner. Then you say, you take these big safeties and you say, we're going to play them at linebacker. That's all fun until one of them 310-pound tackles comes strolling out on you. This guy plays. He knows how to leverage the ball, he knows how to take them on when he has to, he knows how to avoid them when he has to."

As Fisher spoke, he sounded wistful, like coaches across the country, imagining how many holes Peppers can fill on a team.

Michigan had him for 933 snaps (almost 78 per game), lining up at 15 positions.

The glamour spots made sense, because every safety wants to move to linebacker and rush the passer. And every defensive player wants to get to play the wildcat or get carries as a tailback.

But how many are interested in being the gunner or the holdup man on special teams?

That's what has consistently impressed coach Jim Harbaugh — whose pet phrase for Peppers is "it's the darndest thing...." Heavy words coming from a 15-year NFL veteran and 14-year head coach who has seen most of everything football.

Fisher said they've never had a scouting report like this.

"When you look up the definition in the dictionary, you say football player," said Fisher, whose team will face Peppers on Dec. 30 in the Orange Bowl. "He can run, he can tackle, he can throw, he can catch, he can block — there's nothing he can't do. Be a special-teams threat, be an offensive threat, be a defensive threat in all phases. To me, he's the epitome of what you think of a football player. Then when you bring the toughness with it, this guy's a physical guy now. He's not huge, he's big but he's not huge. His skill set is so diverse. He will be a heck of a pain for us, there's no doubt about that."

Guys who know

For coaches and fans, Peppers' workload is impressive.

He's always on the field, moving around.

But to his peers on the field, the players who are training and preparing during the week and playing on Saturday, it's mind-boggling.

The most intriguing part: Each sees a different trait.

"He does a good job of training hard and putting himself in position to play all those positions," Florida State tailback Dalvin Cook said. "You've definitely got to be well-conditioned to do it, and you've got to have a different mind-set to go out there and play all those positions."

Dalvin Cook vs. Jabrill Peppers a big Orange Bowl matchup

Texas A&M defensive lineman Myles Garrett considered himself a Peppers-type player at one point. But then he grew up.

Jabrill Peppers tackles Iowa QB C.J. Beathard during U-M's 14-13 loss on Nov. 12, 2016 in Iowa City, Iowa.

"I haven't done all this since high school," Garrett said. "In high school, I played receiver, tight end, fullback, all special teams. I played linebacker, defensive end. To do that at the next level, that's amazing."

Allen met Peppers at the Under Armour game, and he saw the talent at that time. Doing it all at 205 pounds sets Peppers apart.

"That's what makes it so much more incredible what he's doing," Allen said, realizing how much Peppers gives away when battling an offensive lineman or tight end. "He's a beast. He's all over the field for offense, defense and special teams."

Up top

For all the impressive physical skills — the high school sprint championship, the relentless ability to hit and still run, the sense and athleticism to hurdle a player on one return, juke a few on another and duck a tackler on another — the consensus among the other great players is that Peppers lives on another mental level.

"Everybody wants to do it, everybody wants to play all the aspects of football, but when you think about it, it's really difficult," said U-M cornerback Jourdan Lewis, who sees it daily yet is still impressed. "You've got to coordinate with the offensive coordinators, Coach (Chris) Partridge, the special-teams coach and Coach (Don) Brown. You've got to think about those three components, and all of that stuff isn't simple. There's interesting parts of the game plan which we have to specialize in something. When you think about that, it's actually a lot. When you think about how much he has to take on mentally, it's unbelievable."

Except for Jackson, the rest of the elite players this season primarily play one spot.

They've all excelled in their location, with hours of intense preparation and film study, looking for any edge.

Michigan's Jabrill Peppers leaves the field after a 20-10 win over the Indiana Hoosiers on Nov. 19, 2016 at Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor.

Which is why nearly all of them think it's much tougher on his mind than his body.

"For him to memorize everything, that just shows he's a freak of nature," said Oklahoma receiver Dede Westbrook, another Heisman finalist. "It's crazy. I sit back there and say maybe I can play quarterback or I can play running back. Anybody can say anything. But for that guy to physically get out there and do it and show you each and every week why he's the best at what he does, that's crazy."

Peppers stays focused on Orange Bowl instead of NFL

Cook is extremely impressed but stopped just short of being surprised.

He never considered anything beyond running back, because he "just fell in love with running the ball and scoring touchdowns." Which has worked out over his three-year career, becoming the school's all-time leading rusher.

But the Peppers trait that impressed him most was apparent the first time they met in an All-Star game.

"His confidence is out the roof," Cook said. "When you've got a guy with that much confidence, when they step on the football field, they can be able to do things like that, utilize their talent in different ways."

The competition

Jackson is the only player who can relate to Peppers' situation.

As an elite cornerback, he also worked the return game, making explosive plays.

But the heavy offensive load he took last year backed off considerably. After 157 offensive plays in 2015, he had 13 this year.

Jabrill Peppers dives for a first-quarter touchdown against Michigan State at Spartan Stadium on Oct. 29, 2016. Though there always was an eye to the east, since high school when they began texting and messaging each other.

"Every time I see him play, I comment on him, and he says something to me," Jackson said. "I know I'm doing something that he's doing and he's doing something that I'm doing, and it's great to see things like that happen."

Peppers has dropped Jackson's name a number of times this year, including Friday when he spoke to reporters in New York, saying he thought Jackson would get the Hornung Award for his versatility. And Jackson said he viewed it as a competition all year, with each measuring himself against the other.

It's part of their shared mind-set.

While other players explain why it would be so difficult to play so many spots, Jackson said he and Peppers need to do it.

"I think it's about wanting to affect the game and help out the team as much as possible," Jackson said. "Great athletes that we are, blessed by God with such nice ability that we want to use it as much as possible. We want to go out there, and if we lose a game we don't want (to think) 'if I could have only did this.' When we're put in a situation where we go offense, kick return, punt return, defense, we're already in all three phases of the game. So, if we don't do it, we can't say, '(if) I was in that position.'

"It's all about taking advantage of the opportunity."

Throughout this season, Peppers has seized it in one of the most unique ways in modern college football history.

As he told reporters in New York on Friday: "Wherever you need me to play, I'll play. Just give me two weeks to master the position, if that's all you need me to do. But I was always told to be a guy who's hard to take off the field."

Detroit Free Press

Seidel: Jabrill Peppers' future bright, no matter the NFL position

By Jeff Seidel

Jabrill Peppers rocked back and forth. Even when he tries to stand still, he can't stop moving. Freak athletes always seem to be going somewhere — and his destination seems all but certain.

Peppers swayed back and bumped into a trophy case holding Michigan's 1989 Rose Bowl championship trophy, not to mention a small statue of Bo Schembechler.

It was like the present literally was bumping into the past. Peppers is Michigan's All-America defensive back, one of the best players on one of the best defenses in college football.

Windsor: No surprise to see Jourdan Lewis tweet about election
Jabrill Peppers lays low: Fame is 'double-edged sword'
But the future is just as intriguing for Peppers.

Certainly, Peppers will end up in the NFL, if not after this season then after the next, and the only question is what position would he play? Safety? Linebacker? Punt returner? Some running back? What is he really? What is his best position?

Former Indianapolis Colts president Bill Polian has been studying Peppers, and he has been impressed.

"Where would he play in the NFL?" I asked Polian a few days ago.

"Ah, he could play," he said. "He could play, probably on defense. He's a Troy Polamalu, Bob Sanders type guy. They are similar in terms of his ability to affect games."

Oct 29, 2016; East Lansing, MI, USA; Spartans quarterback Brian Lewerke attempts a pass as Wolverines linebacker Jabrill Peppers defends at Spartan Stadium.

Peppers is listed at 6 feet 1 and 205 pounds, although I suspect that might be stretching his height a bit.

Which makes the comparison to Polamalu and Sanders so intriguing.

Polamalu (5-10, 213) played strong safety for the Pittsburgh Steelers for 12 seasons, making eight Pro Bowls, while Sanders (5-8, 200) played seven seasons with the Colts and one for San Diego. Although Peppers clearly is taller than Sanders.

"There is a place for football players," Polian said. "He's not only a football player, he's an impact guy. He hits like a ton. He runs. He's instinctive. He's got skills."

"Super high?" I asked.

"It's too early to say that," Polian said. "Let's see how he runs and what the numbers look like. But there is no question he's a guy who can play."

Talk about the NFL is not discouraged at Michigan. While the overall focus always is on the team, that never will change, personal goals are important, too. At U-M, the NFL is viewed as an ultimate destination, something to shoot for.

"There's places NFL talk is taboo," defensive tackle Ryan Glasgow told reporters this week. "It's not really around here, never really has been."

"Coach (Jim) Harbaugh said — one thing he said is — 'You know, you can play every play like it's your last play or you can play every play like you want to make a career out of it and make money from it.'

"He's really open about the NFL and knows that's people's goals. ... We have a lot of people on this roster that are really close to realizing that goal. So, yeah, we're pretty open about it."

Like Wilton Speight, Jim Harbaugh almost transferred from U-M

At least one NFL mock draft has Peppers as a top-five pick because of his freakish mix of athleticism, instincts, football IQ, versatility and playmaking ability.

As part of his preparation, Peppers has been studying film of several NFL players.

"You want to try to be the best, so you have to see what the best are doing," Peppers said.

He listed several players he has been studying, a revealing list because it offers some insight into how he views himself and the type of player he is trying to imitate. Peppers mentioned Deone Bucannon (6-1, 211), an outside linebacker from Washington State who now plays for the Arizona Cardinals; Tyrann Mathieu, the Honey Badger; Earl Thomas (5-10, 208), a safety from Seattle; and Eric Berry (6-0), a safety in his seventh season with the Kansas City Chiefs.

"Just people like that," Peppers said. "I think I have similar skill sets that they do. How do they get the edge? I just try to emulate that or implement it in my game."

Despite the media attention, despite the talk about the NFL and the Heisman Trophy, Peppers walks around campus trying to stay under the radar. He doesn't wear football clothing. He tugs on a hat and puts on some headphones, going from his house to his class and back.

"I try to lay low, I just want to play football," he said.

But that's not to suggest he doesn't enjoy some aspects of being one of the best football players in the country.

"I'm meeting a lot of my childhood idols," he said. "This is surreal. Charles (Woodson), meeting Braylon Edwards. LaMarr Woodley. Deion Sanders."

Peppers and Woodson communicate often, which brings us back to that idea of the present bumping up against the past. “Every couple of weeks, he’ll text me something, making sure I’m on top of my game,” Peppers said.

Peppers inspired by late brother, jailed father

What’s been Woodson’s best advice?

“No matter how bad or good it gets, just stay humble,” Peppers said, “and stay 10 toes down.”

Ten toes down? That’s great advice.

But it can’t be easy for somebody who can’t stop moving.



The Game

By Jabrill Peppers

Ask me what the most important game on our schedule is. Go ahead. We get that question all the time, and it’s always the same answer.

The next one.

I know it’s cliché, but that’s our mindset at Michigan. You can’t sleep on anybody. You can’t get caught looking ahead to next week or the week after. That’s how you lose football games. The only opponent we’re ever focused on is the one that’s going to line up on the other side of the ball on Saturday. Nobody else.

So go ahead. Ask me. What’s the most important game on our schedule?

The next one.

The Ohio State game.

There it is. The answer everyone’s been waiting for all year.

And for me, it’s a game I’ve been waiting for my whole life.

Charles Woodson was my hero growing up. He was the guy I tried to model my game after.

I remember watching the rivalry game against Ohio State in 1997. He took a punt return back for a touchdown, caught a pass on offense and intercepted a ball in the end zone on defense.

I was really young at the time — probably too young to even fully remember — but once I grew up a little bit and started to really understand football, I understood how crazy that performance was. It made me want to be that kind of player, the kind who contributes in all three phases of the game. The kind who makes big plays in clutch moments to win games.

My first “clutch” moment was back in Pop Warner, when I took a toss play to the right for a game-winning touchdown as time expired, and I literally ran out of one of my cleats. The whole way down the field I was thinking, Charles Woodson ... to the 15 ... to the 10 ... to the five ...

I can still picture the image of him after that Ohio State game with the rose in his mouth. That’s what made me want to wear the Winged Helmet.

That’s what made me — a kid from North Jersey — want to play football at Michigan.

My father was arrested when I was seven years old. In that split second when he was taken away, I went from having a father who I could work out with and who was on the sideline for all my football games, to being a kid searching for a male role model in his life. And I didn't know how long he was going to be gone.

He was just ... gone.

I never visited him in prison — he and my mom wouldn't let me. They didn't want me seeing him like that. I talked to him on the phone almost every week for 15 minutes at a time. That was really the only relationship I was able to have with him growing up. So all the lessons that fathers normally teach their sons, I had to learn on my own.

So I turned to my older brother Don.

Don was the guy I looked up to. And even though he was out in the streets like most of the other guys in our neighborhood, doing things he wasn't supposed to be doing, he would never let me get involved. He kept me on the right path from a young age. And he was one of the first people who told me I had the potential to be something great — that I needed to chase my football dream.

"You have a God-given gift," he'd say. "It would be disrespectful to God to not make the most of that gift."

Like a lot of kids in urban neighborhoods, we dreamed a lot about the future, of better times. Many kids were so caught up in the street life that they couldn't dream past the city limits. But Don and I talked differently, mostly because of my potential on the football field. That was going to be my way out — our way out.

He always used to tell me, "Little bro, you're gonna get mom that house in the hills. I'm sure of it. Just keep doing what you're doing."

I took his advice and stayed on the right path, but Don was on a very different path.

The streets don't care about your dreams. They don't care if you have good intentions or if your little brother has potential. The path Don was on almost always leads to the same place.

On a cold January day in 2010, the streets caught up with Don, and he paid the price. He was shot and killed.

I was just 14 years old, and for the second time in my life, the most dominant male figure in my life was gone.

Some neighborhoods have a way of swallowing kids up. After Don was killed, I promised myself that I wouldn't go down like that. I was going to make sure that my mom and everybody else in my family would never have to feel that kind of pain again.

Before Don was killed, I was usually pretty smart about what I did and the guys I hung around with. That was a little bit harder after he was gone. There were plenty of times when I was caught up in the wrong things, but I still managed to stay true to my path, thanks to some unexpected help.

When I was a freshman in high school, everybody in the neighborhood started to realize what Don had already seen in me: Football was going to be my way out. On the high school stage, I was getting a lot of notoriety and national attention, and the guys in the neighborhood who used to run with Don took it upon themselves to make sure that I didn't waste my potential. Don was very well respected on the streets of our neighborhood, so when we lost him, I basically became everybody's little brother. They made sure I stayed on the right track.

To honor my brother.

I think a lot about how strong my mom was through everything — watching me lose my father and then losing a son of her own, left to raise me by herself. She never showed weakness. She never complained. She always just did what she had to do.

She always used to tell me, "Jabrill, I can teach you a lot. But I can't teach you to be a man." But it was her who taught this young boy things like how to tie a tie. She taught me the importance of hard work and discipline and that football was a privilege, not a right, and the classroom was just as important as the football field. If I got anything less than a B+ on my report card, I wasn't allowed to play football. She led by example with her work ethic and her drive, working long hours as a social worker and a Baptist minister, and she almost never missed a football game.

She may have thought she couldn't teach me what it meant to be a man, but I think she did a damn good job.

It's my official visit to Michigan and I'm walking through the tunnel at The Big House, pretending it's game day. My shoes hit the grass, I walk out to midfield, square up and squat down like I'm ready for the snap. The imaginary quarterback snaps the ball, drops back, gets off a pass, and I step right in front and take it the other way — all the way.

When I reach the end zone, I turn around, look at the sky and see an imaginary punt spiraling my way. I catch it, shake one imaginary tackler, plant my foot in the grass and take off down the sideline — the same sideline Charles Woodson ran down on that punt return in '97 against Ohio State.

Touchdown.

The stadium is empty and silent, but the 110,000 fans in my mind go absolutely crazy. It's a dream beyond the scope of what most kids from my neighborhood could ever imagine.

I look up at the Michigan sky and think, I'm here, Don. I'm really here. I'm so close to putting that Winged Helmet on ...

Two weeks before that visit, I was back in New Jersey at a friend's house watching the Wolverines take on the Buckeyes on that same field. It was a back-and-forth game — the kind you knew was going to come down to the last minute. And with 0:32 left in the fourth quarter, Devin Gardner hit Devin Funchess for a touchdown to make it 42-41. We were an extra point away from tying the game and sending it into overtime. But we went for two, and the win.

I liked the decision to go for two, but in the end, we didn't get it, and the Buckeyes ran the clock out and took the win.

I was physically sick. I was 600 miles away in New Jersey, still a senior in high school, and it hurt me like I was already on the team and standing on that sideline in Ann Arbor. It's a feeling that's stuck with me ever since that game.

I couldn't wait for my chance to step on the field against the Buckeyes.

I was at the Michigan spring game before my freshman year and I was standing on the sideline next to Charles Woodson thinking, This is surreal ... I'm having a conversation with my idol.

I was just trying not to talk too much or ask too many questions ... I was shocked that he knew who I was and that he knew all my high school accolades.

We talked a lot that day and have built a great rapport since. Every now and then, he'll text me something simple like, "Work hard and make plays." He wants to keep me motivated and keep my mind focused, and he also wants remind me that he's always watching.

During our game against Northwestern earlier this season, I dropped an interception that I should have caught. When I got back to the locker room after the game, he texted me. I was excited after a 38-0 win over a ranked opponent, and all he said to me was, "When we get our hands on the football, we gotta catch it."

All business.

And he was right. I had to get better. I gotta catch that ball.

There's a lot I love about the University of Michigan. The tradition is at the top of that list. Michigan greats like Charles Woodson are always around, and they want us to be great. They want us to carry on that Michigan tradition.

That's what I'm trying to do. For Charles. For my teammates.

For my family.

For Don.

My father was released from prison in 2014. We have a good relationship, but we're still getting to know each other again. I mean, he went away when I was seven years old and he got out when I was 18. That's a lot of crucial years in a young man's life that he missed. But we're not trying to make up for lost time. We're just trying to get to know

each other and move forward. He's made mistakes, but he's still my pops and he's still a wise soul. He's been on this earth longer than I have, so I listen to him and respect his advice and opinions.

These life experiences are what drive me and motivate me. I know I'm not the only person who's experienced hardships and been through tough times, but I carry all those hardships with me. They remind me of how far I've come, and how far I have to go.

They help me stay true to the path.

I'm on a mission. And that mission won't be complete until ... I don't even know when. I guess I have a lot of missions. It's always changing. That's how you continue to grow and get better. You set goals that seem impossible, and when you reach them, you set more impossible goals and do whatever humanly possible to reach those, too.

I want to win a national championship at Michigan. I want to graduate. I want to go to the NFL and have a long, successful career.

I want to get my mom that house in the hills.

But just like we never look ahead to the next week's game and stay focused on the task at hand, I don't look ahead to the next mission. There may be a national championship, the NFL and that house in the hills in my future. But to get there, I have to take it step by step and handle the obstacles right in front of me first.

And the next obstacle on my path is Ohio State.

I didn't play in last year's Ohio State game because of a leg injury. Now, nearly six years after losing my brother, 12 years after my father's arrest and 18 years after Charles Woodson clenched that rose in his mouth and made me want to be a Wolverine, it's game week. It's Ohio State week. And whenever you get two rivals on the same field, you're gonna get each team's best.

When the Wolverines take on the Buckeyes, it's something for the ages. This one won't be any different — except I'll finally be on the field for it.

Go Blue.

K Chad Ryland

The Boston Globe

Patriots rookies Chad Ryland and Bryce Baringer have bonded over football, as well as a shared love of reading

By Christopher Price

FOXBOROUGH — Kicker Chad Ryland and punter Bryce Baringer initially connected during the pre-draft process, and enjoyed the happy coincidence that saw them both end up with the Patriots. But in the months since they arrived at Gillette Stadium, they've been bonded by books.

The rookie duo has found common ground in reading, both for entertainment purposes, as well as looking for subtle ways to gain an edge as specialists in the National Football League.

"I think it really came down to the fact that we both had a desire to start a healthy habit outside of football," Ryland said after practice Wednesday. "Both of us wanted something where we could take our minds off football, but still have something that was applicable to what we do, and help us build in a positive direction, mind-set-wise."

Buoyed by Ryland's suggestion, the two are currently tackling "Atomic Habits" by James Clear. The New York Times best-seller highlights ways for readers to create good habits, break bad habits, and become 1 percent better every day.

"I'm slacking off a bit — I need to do a better job. He's far ahead of me," Baringer admitted. "I've read four or five chapters. He's further along than that. But that's neither here nor there.

"The book is full of great stuff. It could be just a split second of reading a paragraph and it's like you envision in your mind, 'Holy crap, this legitimately relates perfectly to this scenario. How can I respond? What can I do to change the outcome?' Anything of that nature."

The book focuses on small ways to improve daily through a variety of actions, something that has resonated with Ryland and Baringer.

"I go through and underline things, and the first thing I just opened to was, 'Breakthrough moments are often the result of many previous actions,' " Ryland said, leafing through the pages.

"For me, I think it's just staying true to the process and continuing to chip away, and knowing what we're doing, it'll all break through and continue to get better and progress. We both know what it looks like for us to be where we want to be. And it's just about continuing to develop to be better pros at our craft and reach that point."

As for what book might come next, there are a few possibilities. Ryland mentioned "Row the Boat," which was co-authored by University of Minnesota coach P.J. Fleck and is focused on learning how to lead with enthusiasm and optimism.

Baringer, who acknowledged it's "probably" his turn to pick, has his eye on "The Obstacle Is the Way" by Ryan Holiday or "The Subtle Art Of Not Giving A [Expletive]" by Mark Manson.

Baringer already has read the latter but would welcome a re-read.

"At the end of the day, you've got to just move past things," Baringer said of Manson's message. "You can't just change what's happened. You have to move forward. And you can't care sometimes. Life's trajectory is that things might be going up, up, up, and gravity brings you back down. When you get to that low point, what can you do to get back up? Like the title says, you can't give a . . ."

Baringer's current trajectory is a good one. He leads the NFL in punts inside the opponents' 20-yard line with 35 and has the third-longest punt of the season (79 yards). He's a Pro Bowl candidate in his first season.

Ryland, meanwhile, has tasted the bitter with the sweet. He missed a field goal against the Giants that would have sent the game to overtime, was off the mark on a field goal against the Chiefs the week before, and missed a 47-yarder (and an extra point) against the Broncos, before delivering the first game-winning kick of his career.

It was a happy moment in a year that's been an occasional struggle.

"I got a good amount of texts from people back home. Connections I've made all over. It was fun to hear from everybody," Ryland said. "The messages I get via text are the ones I got and respond to. It was all people that are near and dear to me. It's always good to hear from them."

Chief among those supporters? Ryland's fellow book enthusiast.

"A lot of our job as specialists is to be mentally tough," Baringer said. "When things aren't going right, what can we do to shift our focus and be neutral? Another big thing I believe in is being neutral. You can be at the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, but it's about being neutral. Right in the middle. Monotone, as people like to say. Just be locked in. He's one of the best at doing that.

"I trust that kid to win every game for us," Baringer added, looking at Ryland across the locker room. "And I just hope we get more chances like that to prove ourselves. But I believe in him 100 percent."

DB Brenden Schooler

The Athletic

Brenden Schooler has emulated Matthew Slater since HS film sessions

By Mark Daniels

October 13, 2023

FOXBOROUGH – The father and son sat together, huddled at a computer in their garage. It was here where NFL dreams were conceptualized.

The father discovered the perfect player for his son to emulate. So he pressed play and they stared at the monitor watching clips of Matthew Slater. Then talked about what made him special.

The Patriots legend was living proof that you could make it to the NFL by focusing on special teams. In the Schooler household, there was no better example.

Long before Brenden Schooler signed with the Patriots to play with Slater, his father, Tom Schooler, taught him the importance of special teams. That's why this teenager didn't dream of playing quarterback in the NFL. He wanted to be the next Slater.

"I do remember sitting in the garage, watching the clips with (my dad). Just talking about it – trying to break it down," Brenden Schooler said. "Obviously we don't know as much as I do now about special teams, but try to break it down and see what he's thinking and why he's doing what he's doing. I remember those days like it was yesterday."

"I'd show it to him and go, 'Look, this is what we're trying to do with you now in high school, but this is the way they do it at the next level,'" Tom Schooler added. "I'm a big visual learner guy. Brenden is too. He needs to see it be kinetic about it and do it as well."

As a teen, Brenden Schooler was an outstanding athlete. There was a point where his parents thought he might play collegiate volleyball like his mother, Christine. In his one year of track, he became one of the best sprinters and long jumpers in California.

However, the household's passion revolved around football and Slater was the perfect player to idolize.

Slater, like the Schoolers, grew up in Southern California. Tom Schooler actually met his father, Jackie Slater, at a local event. As Matthew Slater carved out a role as an all-time special team player in the NFL, the lightbulb went off for the elder Schooler – if his son was going to reach the NFL, this was his avenue.

"Early on, he had a knack for making plays on special teams," Tom Schooler said. "It was like, 'Brenden, you can do this. If for some reason you can't get on the field as a position player, there are still opportunities for you to fulfill your dreams of playing in the NFL. And look at this guy. This guy did it. This guy made a career out of this.'"

Little did he know, it would come full circle for his son.

Schooler was an elite special teams player early

Tom Schooler always loved football and was an all-conference linebacker at Eastern Michigan. However, he also loved special teams – he roomed with the punter in college and learned how to long snap to make himself more valuable.

After college, he coached in high school and was an assistant for his sons, Brenden and Colin, teams.

Tom didn't allow his kids to play tackle football until middle school, but in the Schooler household, sports were everything. Brenden played volleyball, basketball, baseball, football, and then track and field. As he got older, his athletic ability became evident. In his lone track season at Mission Viejo High School, Brenden ran a personal best 10.76 100-meter dash.

"Early on in high school he started showing flashes of being able to outrun people and just to understand the big picture of the game," Tom Schooler said. "A lot of special teams is just understanding the situation, where you are, angles and things like that. That's where we started looking at it going, 'Hey, you could have a future here.'"

Brenden loved football so much. His father preached pride in special teams. By the time he got into high school, Brenden started to enjoy it. He played wide receiver and safety, as he did in college, but was also a dominant special teams player.

During his senior season, he blocked two punts and two field goal attempts.

"It's 33.3% of the game. The offense and defense hold the other 33.3%. it's an important part of the game," Brenden said. "You can win or lose a game with special teams. I think that's why I took it so seriously."

It was toward the end of his high school career that his father started to research information about Slater. It was amazing how this Patriots captain not only carried himself off the field but carved out a career for himself as a special teams ace.

When Brenden would tell his dad his NFL dreams, Tom emphasized the improbable odds. It was another reason to lean into special teams.

"We did the numbers – early, early on. The top 5% of high school athletes play Division I college football. Out of that 5%, 2.5% of all college athletes play Power Five college football. Out of that, 1% go on to the NFL," Tom said. "You have to make sure you understand what it takes to be one of those guys and put the work in and be valuable."

"Let's do everything, let's do offense, defense, special teams because that's going to open your avenue for possible positions in the NFL."

Schooler came to Patriots looking to be the next Slater
The Patriots were too hard to ignore.

Leading up to the 2022 NFL Draft, Brenden Schooler had interest as a priority free agent from multiple NFL teams. At Oregon and Texas, he played safety and wide receiver. Special teams, however, always got him noticed. At Oregon, Brenden twice earned Pac-12 All-Conference first-team honors as a special teamer before transferring to Texas where he played two seasons as a Longhorn.

The goal was to get to training camp, but that spring, Patriots special teams coach Cam Achord traveled to Texas to work out Schooler, who also met with assistant special teams coach Joe Houston. When he wasn't drafted, he had the Patriots and Green Bay Packers after his services.

The choice for the family was obvious.

"We looked at each other and were like, 'Patriots. You could be the heir apparent to Matthew Slater.' That was the first thing that came to mind," Tom Schooler said. "We didn't know how long Matthew was going to be around and we hoped he'd be around for a long time to mentor him, but I was like, 'Hey man, that could be you. You could be the next Matthew Slater, which are big shoes to fill. This is the perfect situation, to go to a team that values special teams the way the Patriots do.'"

At the time, Brenden was well-versed in core special team players around the NFL. He admired Slater, Nate Ebner, Cody Davis, and Joe Cardona. Of course, the first time he walked into the Patriots locker room, he stopped dead in his tracks and stared for a moment at Slater's locker.

He was awestruck.

"I was walking by and was like 'Oh, yup, I know who that is,'" Brenden recalled.

"That's somebody we've been looking at for years," added Tom. "We put him up on this untouchable pedestal. Somebody you want to emulate and somebody you look up to. We're not really a family that's starstruck but when you're in that situation, you can't help but feel that way."

It didn't take long for Schooler to fit in. That first offseason, it was obvious to Slater that the Patriots found another special teams gem. He had all the traits. At 6-foot-1, Schooler was lightning fast, the right mixture of reckless and smart.

"It didn't take very long. Honestly, within the first couple of weeks," Slater said. "I think about how long it takes some guys to acclimate to the way we do things – to speak our language. That transition for him was pretty seamless. He was the type of guy, if you tell him something once, he's going to get it and he retains it and goes out and executes it flawlessly every time. It didn't take long to realize, 'Hey, I think we've got something here.'"

Schooler's following in Slater's footsteps

Slater wanted to be like his father when he was a boy. A Hall-of-Fame offensive lineman, Jackie Slater played in the NFL for 20 years. But Slater found himself waiting for a growth spurt that never came.

Instead, Slater was an elite high school sprinter who went to UCLA with the hopes of playing receiver. He didn't dream of being a special teams ace, but Slater found a path that allowed him to follow in his father's footsteps.

He never imagined a time when someone would idolize him. Now in his 16th season with the Patriots, Slater was flattered when Schooler told him about those old film sessions.

"It's pretty surreal coming from a player of his caliber, who I think is going to be special for a long time," Slater said. "You don't really think people are looking at what you do when you do what I do. You kind of put your head down, do your job, and hope you're helping the team. It's pretty cool to have a young player come in and say, 'Hey, my dad and I used to watch you.' Like, man, that's pretty awesome. I'm humbled by it."

Schooler came to the Patriots looking like a player who was molded to be a special teams standout. Last season, he led the Patriots with 14 special teams tackles, including 11 solo special teams tackles. That was the second most in the NFL. He also recovered two fumbles on the punt team. This season, in Week 2, he blocked a field goal attempt against the Miami Dolphins.

Before that play, Slater went up to Brenden and told him he was going to make the play. A day later, Slater said, "I have so much confidence in him. I know we've only played together for a little over a year, but it feels like we've played together for a decade."

That makes sense as the Schoolers had been looking up to Slater for almost that long. Two weeks ago, in Dallas, Tom Schooler met Slater in person for the first time. It's been a dream to watch his son play in the NFL, but as a parent, he couldn't have wished for a better mentor for his son.

"I told Matthew I can't thank him enough as a father to have Brenden there and have Matthew take him under his wing. Not just as a football player, but as a man and teach him how to be a professional," Tom said. "I couldn't thank him enough. I hope he understands what his leadership and his mentorship means to Christine and I."

Schooler idolized him from afar, learned from him up close and now, as Slater's career winds down, he's in position to take the baton from his fellow former track star.

"It's a dream come true," Brenden said. "And I wouldn't want to be under anyone else or learning from anyone else right now. I'm thankful every day I get to come into work and get to work with that guy. Slater is an awesome guy, an awesome player, and an even better person."

Added Slater: "I tell him all the time, I'm glad I played long enough to be able to play with him."

K Joey Slye



"Swole" kicker Joey Slye inches closer to fulfilling promise made to late brother

By Bill Voth

CHICAGO – Joey Slye could have quit. Most would have.

The Buccaneers didn't want the kicker after a rookie minicamp tryout last summer. Neither did the Browns. Then after spending all of last season away from football, Slye got a chance with the Giants in May. He was cut a week later. The Giants called again on the eve of training camp last month. He was cut four days later.

So why keep going?

"I promised my brother, who passed away in 2014, that I would make it," Slye explained after making field goals of 29, 42 and 55 yards in the Panthers' preseason-opening win over the Bears.

If you were watching closely, you might have seen Slye hold up six fingers after each of his makes. 6 is the number AJ Slye wore in high school before heading to play linebacker at Salisbury University.

"He came home after his first semester and was diagnosed with leukemia. He then passed away 14 months later," said Joey Slye, who has two tattoos on his back. One represents the Slyestrong#6 Foundation. The other is the tattoo AJ Slye was supposed to get when he beat cancer.

For Joey Slye, Thursday was why he keeps kicking. It was also a huge high in what's been a roller coaster kicking career.

After walking-on at Virginia Tech, he became the Hokies' all-time leading scorer. But Slye went 15-for-22 on field goal attempts his senior season, and the NFL wasn't all that interested in a kicker who made just 68.2 percent of his tries.

"Coming out, I didn't have a very good product to where a lot of teams were kind of iffy on me. I've just been working my butt off to get an opportunity to come back and show that I got," said Slye, who once made a 70-yarder:

"Ultimately, I've got a big leg. And that's why everyone says that accuracy has always been an issue."

So Slye spent the past year meticulously working on the part of his game that too often let him down. If he could improve the accuracy, it may all come together.

It sure did last Wednesday in Spartanburg.

After the Panthers had finished their sixth training camp practice, a handful of offensive line prospects worked out for front office staff and coaches. Meanwhile, on an adjacent field, Slye quietly had his own tryout. That ended with a bang when he nailed a 66-yarder.

"I hit a 56 or 58 and I didn't even realize where we were at. (Coach) asked me if I wanted to back up and I said, 'Yeah, let's go 66,'" Slye said.

The Panthers added Slye because Graham Gano has been battling what head coach Ron Rivera said is "a tired leg." That's why it was Slye and not Gano kicking against the Bears. Still, Slye's impressive debut made some speculate whether this could turn into a competition. But according to Rivera, Slye's role is to give Gano "rest." Plus, it's not like every team (see: Chicago) has a settled kicking situation. So the kicks Slye made Thursday could be more valuable than just helping the Panthers win a preseason game.

"It's an interesting set of circumstances because of what's going on throughout the league. There's always a need for good players, and when you have a lot of good players, people will call you, people will reach out and ask," Rivera said. "So we'll see what happens. Joey did a great job. He was given an opportunity and he took advantage of it."

He also gave teammates a reason to get to know him better.

"Literally one of the offensive linemen dapped me up after one of the field goals and was like, 'I didn't even realize you were the kicker,'" said the 5-foot-11, 213-pound Slye, who doesn't look like a kicker.

"I've been getting that since I was in high school."

And it's continued into the pros for a guy who professed, "I'm in love with the weight room."

Which led to this story:

"I tried out and got on the (Panthers) and am getting my locker all set up and everyone's kind of walking past me, not realizing that I'm the kicker. And I started hitting kicks in practice and half of them are like, 'I thought you were brought on as a linebacker.'"

Added quarterback Kyle Allen:

"The swole kicker? ... He's impressed. Good for him for taking advantage of his opportunities."

So for one night, at least, Slye lived out the dream. But to kick in games that count – that's the promise to his brother he still plans to fulfill.

"This is preseason. Ultimately these are kicks that are live on film, but as soon as the regular season starts, that's the ultimate game," Slye said.

"This isn't a journey that's going to end quickly."



North Stafford grad Joey Slye returns to his roots

By David Fawcett

Joey Slye told his mother, Laura, he would do his own laundry. But Laura insisted.

Savoring the moment, she picked up the pile of clothes and plopped them in the washer with a grateful smile on her face. Her son was home – even if for just a short while.

After a circuitous journey as an injury-replacement for the Houston Texans and San Francisco 49ers during the 2021 regular season, Slye had moved back to Stafford County to live with his parents when the Washington Commanders signed him in November as their latest kicker.

Slye had the option of living closer to the Commanders' training facility in Ashburn, but it made more sense to stay with his mom and dad in a familiar place. He spent the night at an Ashburn hotel only if a workout ran late.

Otherwise, Slye happily made the hour-long commute each way to work, while eating dinner with his parents and reluctantly letting his mom wash his clothes or even buy groceries.

A close-knit group, neither party knew how long this arrangement might last so they took advantage of it as much as possible.

Courtesy

Then came the news this spring Slye and his parents hoped for. On April 11, Washington announced it had signed Slye to a two-year contract reportedly worth up to about \$5 million, including \$2 million in guarantees that makes him the Commanders' starting kicker going into the preseason.

The multi-year deal, the first of Slye's NFL career, gives him job security. The deal also keeps him with the team he prefers playing for. But as an added bonus, the deal allows him to remain close to his roots.

For all his travels as a kicker, first at Virginia Tech, followed by the NFL, Stafford was still his base.

It's where Slye's family moved in 2007 when the Air Force transferred his father, Dave, into the area. It's where Slye gave up his dreams of playing linebacker in college based on his undersized 5-foot-11 frame to become a kicker at North Stafford when his predecessor, Austin Grebe, told him he was next man up.

It's where friends, teammates and coaches knew him as Joey, the kid who valued relationships and worked hard to maintain them no matter how long he'd been away.

His best friend is Myles Kennedy, a former North Stafford teammate. His second dad is Allan Henshaw, North Stafford's strength and body teacher who coached football when Slye attended the school. And his fiancée, Brittaney Nealis, is a Colonial Forge graduate.

Slye will remain less than an hour away when he and Brittaney move back into the area. And when they do, prepare for some more dinners and more game-nights, a Slye staple.

It's just who they are and what they do.

"As a military family, we always loved being together as a family," said Laura, who has been a math teacher at North Stafford since the family moved here. "We really like each other. Family is the most important thing to all of us."

STAYING PATIENT

Slye first heard about his new Commanders' contract right before he attended a rehearsal dinner near Staunton. Slye was a member of the wedding party for Justin Field, one of his former North Stafford football teammates.

Slye couldn't talk long when he called his parents to tell them the news. But he mentioned enough for everyone to breathe a collective sigh.

Slye established himself as a reliable kicker for Washington last fall after the team cut Dustin Hopkins and then Chris Blewitt. In six games, Slye converted all 12 of his field-goal attempts and was 9 for 10 in extra points. He missed three games with a hamstring injury suffered when he tried to tackle Seattle's Rasheem Green after Green blocked a field goal. Call it a lesson learned.

"I tried to be an athlete when I'm not an athlete," Slye said.

After the season, Slye had the option of going somewhere else when the Commanders initially tendered him a qualifying offer of \$2.43 million that allowed them to match any offer from another NFL team.

Slye understood. This is still a business. Despite his success, the Commanders made no promises about bringing him back as their starting kicker. But Slye stayed patient, believing his body of work with Washington warranted not only an opportunity, but a long-term one.

He left the negotiations to his agent, Glenn Schwartzman, whom he credits with keeping him employed during the ups-and-downs of his NFL career.

Slye was used to one-year deals with no guarantees when he entered the NFL as the Carolina Panthers' kicker in 2019 as an undrafted player out of college.

The New York Giants had already signed and then released him. So, too, had the San Diego Chargers, the Cleveland Browns and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Slye spent two seasons with the Panthers before they released him Aug. 28, 2021.

But Slye trusted Schwartzman to find the best situation for him.

"He has a great reputation around the league," Slye said. "One of the first things I noticed about him is how respected he is."

When the contract came together, Slye saw it as a win-win. He received some things he wanted, as did the Commanders.

"I wanted to have some security financially, but Washington's investing in me," Slye said. "It's nice for both sides. We both benefit."

Slye liked working with punter and holder Tress Way and long-snapper Camaron Cheeseman. He also had a good rapport with members of the Commanders' organization, including head coach Ron Rivera, with whom he first crossed paths while playing for the Panthers.

But beyond football, Slye and Rivera have connected on other fronts. Both are from military families and have been impacted by cancer.

Rivera announced in August 2020 he had been diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma, a cancer in his neck. He underwent treatments during the 2020 season, and in January 2021 said he was cancer-free.

Slye lost his older brother, A.J., to leukemia. A.J., an all-state football player at North Stafford, was diagnosed in December 2012 and died Feb. 27, 2014. North Stafford's football stadium is named in A.J.'s honor. Slye honors A.J. a number of ways, including with a tattoo on his right shoulder that shows a picture of he and A.J. holding hands the last time they played football together at North Stafford.

"I felt a little bit I could relate more," Slye said of Rivera. "To do what he did and show his face around the facility, it's incredible. I have a lot of respect for him."

Slye and Brittaney first crossed paths in seventh grade. They attended different schools, but stayed friends until they started dating after attending Virginia Tech together. They plan to marry next April.

The Commanders' decision to retain Slye will require some short-term adjusting for the couple. Brittaney moved a year ago to join Slye in Charlotte after she received her doctorate in physical therapy from Marymount University.

But it's worth it. She's now closer to her parents, who are Commanders' season ticket holders and have a garage filled with Washington football mementoes.

And after bouncing around last year without any guarantees about the future, Slye is settled in familiar surroundings both professionally and personally.

"I wanted to stay with [Washington] and start a good career here and build on what I started," Slye said.

WR JuJu Smith-Schuster



JuJu Smith-Schuster's No. 7 jersey is a tribute to his mom, who has seven children

By Khari Thompson
July 27, 2023

The number seven is synonymous with luck.

But, for wide receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster, who wears No. 7 for the Patriots, the number carries more than one meaning.

"It kind of represents a lot of things, my mom's favorite number is seven," Smith-Schuster said. "She had seven kids, lucky No. 7, one of my favorite football players in soccer wears No. 7, Vinicius Jr., year seven [in the NFL]. So, it was kind of a number that I picked that represented a lot of things."

Also, the Patriots have six Super Bowl wins. While they went 8-9 and missed the playoffs last season, Smith-Schuster said bringing a seventh title to Foxborough is a goal of his.

"Seventh Super Bowl, there you go, add that in there too," Smith-Schuster said. "That's always a goal of mine for sure."

The 6-foot-1, 215-pound receiver is coming off his first Super Bowl win with the Kansas City Chiefs. The only Chiefs player with more catches, targets, and receiving yards than Smith-Schuster last season was Travis Kelce.

Smith-Schuster said knowing how a championship feels only makes him hungrier to experience it again.

"I always wondered why a guy like Tom Brady, guys like Patrick Mahomes who have been there and done that, why they always want to go back," Smith-Schuster said. "It's because of that feeling. People always ask me what it feels like to win the Super Bowl and I was like, 'It's really hard to explain unless you're in that moment.'"

"The only way you can actually feel that moment is getting there," Smith-Schuster continued. "So, that hunger on why those guys want to go back, I love it. It's the best."

Smith-Schuster said he hopes to use his experience to teach younger players and add veteran leadership.

Smith-Schuster has the versatility to line up both on the inside and outside. He says it's an honor to follow in the footsteps of previous Patriots receivers.

"The slot position has been a big position here with Troy (Brown), to (Julian) Edelman to all these great guys who have been in this position," Smith-Schuster said. "It's an honor to play that position. Being able to play inside and outside, moving around, but having that opportunity to say I'm on the inside is really nice. It's a compliment."

Matt Groh, Patriots director of player personnel, was careful not to compare Smith-Schuster to Edelman or Brown but said that Smith-Schuster's resume is good enough to stand on its own.

Smith-Schuster was a Pro Bowler in 2018 when he hauled in 111 catches for 1,426 yards and seven touchdowns. He played a role in Kansas City's championship run last year and is looking to make a solid first impression in Foxborough.

"We're really excited to have JuJu. It's good to see him out here today. He's been working," said Groh. "The guy loves ball. The guy wants to compete, and the guy is tough. So I know we're used to seeing those types of players at his position around here. So having JuJu around here, it's a new face and a new name, but I don't think it'll be a big deviation from what people around here are accustomed to seeing."



There's more to JuJu Smith-Schuster than meets the eye

By Bill Dundas

It's been a long and heartwarming road from John Smith to JuJu Smith-Schuster.

John Smith was the name given to the Pittsburgh Steelers' No. 19 at birth. His parents separated when JuJu was only a small child, and his mother, Sammy Toa Schuster, married Lawrence Schuster about the time when JuJu reached school age. His stepfather took the boy under his wing, teaching him invaluable lessons about football and life.

The impact of Sammy and Lawrence on the arc of the young man's life was crucial, and JuJu principally credits them with making his accomplishments possible. As a testament to this deep level of respect, the former JuJu Smith had his last name legally changed to "Smith-Schuster" when he turned 18 years old and had legal standing to do so. Of his stepfather, JuJu unequivocally says, "Without him, I wouldn't be where I am today."

If you thought the nickname "JuJu" was some kind of Hollywood hype, think again. That's a handle bestowed upon him by his aunt while he was still an infant. Perhaps she knew back then that she was holding a special child blessed with a bright future.

Before JuJu was a Steeler

As a kid, JuJu was already playing football in the Los Angeles area Little Leagues. He went on to become a high school football phenom (rated as a 5-star athlete by Scout.com, 247sports and Yahoo) at Long Beach Polytechnic High. This is the high school that's produced more NFL players than any other in the nation. JuJu's former coach at Poly, Raul Lara, was certainly giving high praise when he motioned towards JuJu and said, "That kid right there will be one of the best ever to come out of Poly." Later, as a star receiver for USC—compiling 3,092 yards receiving, 25 TDs and a 14.5-yard average in only three seasons—his former coach Steve Sarkisian remarked, "JuJu is, if not the most, one of the most competitive guys on our team. It's all day, every day."

This competitive spirit stems at least partially from the fact that Smith-Schuster was the second of seven children in his family. Furthermore, the circumstances of JuJu's childhood were anything but easy or carefree. During his formative years, his parents lost their jobs and their home. The only option open to the family was to move into the garage of JuJu's grandmother's home. They lived there for eight years until his final (junior) year at USC. Throughout that period, JuJu was sleeping on a lightly padded concrete floor.

But as Steelers fans already know, JuJu has never allowed circumstances to take the fun out of life. In this respect, Steelers' General Manager Kevin Colbert and the team's front office deserve kudos for drafting a player who's more than just a great athlete, but also a young man with the character to take a serious approach to the responsibilities of his career while, at the same time, knowing how and when to have fun. That's an attribute rarely found in 20-year-olds of any generation.

It's difficult to escape the notion that JuJu's fun-loving side might have something to do with the heritage he shares with former Steelers safety Troy Polamalu. Both men have Samoan family roots, as well as being connoisseurs of high jinks. In his leisure time, JuJu is still a kid at heart, enjoying bike riding (you knew that), video games, Kool-Aid and Minions wardrobe accessories.

Because winter is right around the corner (and also possibly due to the treacherous hills of western Pennsylvania), JuJu will soon be switching his bicycle for a driver's license and a car. In fact, he's lately been seen taking driving lessons from war hero/offensive lineman Alejandro Villaneuva. But JuJu probably will be keeping the bike and his AirWheel unicycle all the same.

Making his mark in Pittsburgh

Considering his rookie status, JuJu's 424 yards receiving, four touchdowns and 17.7-yard average per catch seem to be harbingers of bigger things to come. As Pittsburgh fans recall quite well, it didn't take very long for players like Antonio Brown, Hines Ward, Louis Lipps, Lynn Swann and John Stallworth to assert themselves in the NFL. JuJu appears to already be on a similarly fast track, using his size and deceptive speed to provide a welcome bookend target for Ben Roethlisberger.

After everything that No. 19 has been through during his nearly 21 years of life (JuJu will turn 21 on November 22nd), there seems little doubt that he'll meet the tough challenge of becoming one of the top NFL receivers. That's a safe bet because JuJu's life story is the quintessential American tale of succeeding against all odds by doing whatever it takes.

Los Angeles Daily News

With Team JuJu behind him, Smith-Schuster prepares for NFL Draft

By Mike Guardabascio

In the six years since JuJu Smith-Schuster started his first varsity football game for Long Beach Poly High, many things have changed.

His name, for one. In 2011 he was listed on the roster as plain old John Smith, as anonymous a listing as any future superstar could have. He switched his program listing from John to his lifelong nickname JuJu the next year. At USC he legally added Schuster, a tribute to his stepfather, Lawrence.

Smith-Schuster's status has grown along with his name. When he first suited up in 10th grade, the only people who knew him were his enormous family fan group, devotees of local youth rugby or the Snoop Youth Football League, and Poly head coach Raul Lara, who was a believer even back then. Now, he's a social media darling and a possible first-round NFL draft pick after announcing last weekend he was leaving USC following his junior year.

Smith-Schuster covered a lot of ground in Southern California the last six years. Fans at USC and Poly saw him grab 312 receptions for 4,842 yards and 42 touchdowns.

Yet despite that literal mileage (4,842 yards translates to 2.75 miles), Smith-Schuster has stayed close to home for his entire journey thus far. He's always been within driving distance for Team JuJu, his family support group and cheering section that often swells to over 100 people in the stands or at the tailgate.

With all the games he's played, his mother, Sammy Schuster, has missed just one (in Boston in 2015). Now, for the first time, Smith-Schuster's football journey is out of his control. He's living in Newport Beach and training at Stars Academy in Anaheim, working hard for the NFL combine, which will be held the first week of March in Indianapolis.

But where he goes when the draft takes place in Philadelphia April 27-29 is totally out of his hands.

"I'm so scared that I don't know," said Sammy. "He doesn't have NFL hats in front of him and you get to pick. It's whatever team picks you, picks you. You have no choice."

When Smith-Schuster was first playing football at 8 years old, he asked Sammy to promise him that wherever he went when he made it to the NFL, she'd move with him. She hugged him, smiled, and said yes. But that a boy's fantasy, and that was when Sammy just had JuJu and his sister, before his other five brothers and sisters were born. Needless to say, Sammy was happy to see the Chargers announce their move to L.A. on Thursday.

"I was so excited to hear about the Chargers," she said. "Let's get them all in L.A. Bring the Raiders down, too. At least Vegas isn't too far away."

Sammy always believed in her son, and wasn't surprised when others began to as well. He was on an SYFL team when Snoop Dogg nicknamed him "Sportscenter," since he told the young JuJu that's where he expected to see his highlights one day.

Still, as a freshman at Poly, he looked like any one of 100 Jackrabbits, with a skinny physique that was as anonymous as his name.

Poly coach Raul Lara had an inkling from the first time he watched him playing in a freshman game. He put Smith-Schuster on varsity as a sophomore and told anyone who would listen that he had something special.

"That kid right there will be one of the best to ever come out of Poly," he told a reporter before Smith-Schuster had ever played a varsity snap. That's high praise considering Poly's produced over 60 NFL players, more than any other high school in the country.

Asked about that prediction now, Lara has plenty of reason to feel smug.

"I think when you're around Poly and a certain caliber of athlete for long enough, you get good at recognizing talent very quickly," he said. "What set JuJu apart wasn't just his family or his talent, though, it's that he really loved the game and he had so much fun playing it."

Lara coached Poly greats like Willie McGinest as a defensive coordinator, and other NFL standouts like Mercedes Lewis and DeSean Jackson as a head coach. In his eyes, Smith-Schuster stands out even amongst that group.

"He was the very best kid, he's the kid that I loved coaching the most," said Lara.

After his senior season, the fun-loving Smith-Schuster played a memorable prank on his mother on Signing Day. He worked the college recruiting process, taking official visits all over the country and securing a live ESPN announcement in the Poly auditorium, with a few dozen Team JuJu members standing behind him. After hinting to those around him all year that he'd be selecting USC, he told Sammy the night before that he was going to pick Oregon.

With five hats laid out before him and cameras rolling on national TV, he faked toward the Oregon hat before snatching the USC hat and putting it on his head. Sammy burst into tears. Her son would be playing just up the street.

"We actually just watched that video and I was dying laughing," Sammy said, hoping he wouldn't pull a similar prank regarding his NFL decision. "It took me back to that moment. I told him this time you better not wait until the last minute to tell me, I better not be the last one to know or I'll kill you."

Just as many assumed during his senior year of high school that he'd sign with USC, it seemed a foregone conclusion all year that he'd declare for the NFL draft after the Trojans' season was over. But Sammy said the decision was harder for him than he expected.

"After you win the Rose Bowl all the emotions hit you," she said. "He really thought about going back, but he realized he'd done everything he needed to for USC. He was ready to go after that next challenge. We told him we're behind him 100 percent."

Smith-Schuster announced that he was declaring on Twitter, then the next day he, Sammy, and Lawrence were off to New York, where he signed with Jay-Z's sports agency, Roc Nation.

While in New York, Smith-Schuster played tour guide, since he'd been in the city while running with the Poly track team, and neither of his parents had been. He rented bikes and they rode around Central Park, then he took them to Times Square. It was a pause, an in-between moment where he wasn't a college athlete, and not quite on the professional grind.

"We took the time to reflect on the journey," said Sammy. "We sat back and looked at him, we watched him in the meeting with his agent laying out what he wanted to do. To sit back and look at our son making these huge decisions is amazing."

Now, ready or not, mother and son may be separating. Smith-Schuster's job for the next two months is preparing for the combine, then doing other pre-draft workouts and interviews until late April. Sammy? She'll be working, raising his younger siblings and continuing her role as the unofficial CEO of Team JuJu, coordinating family dinners and watch parties.

"It's been a roller coaster ride, it's been overwhelming, it's been a blessing, it's been emotional," she said with a laugh. "It's been all over the place."

In three and a half months, one of 32 NFL teams will call Smith-Schuster's name and make his decision for him as to where he'll start his career. Depending on which jersey he's putting on, Team JuJu may not be with him as he starts that journey. But they'll always be behind him.



NFL star JuJu Smith-Schuster covers nearly \$10,000 in layaway balances at Kansas City store

By Simrin Singh

JuJu Smith-Schuster, wide receiver for the Kansas City Chiefs, got in the holiday spirit this week by donating nearly \$10,000 towards customers' layaway balances at a local Burlington store.

The 26-year-old helped several families with the costs of their holiday gifts through his charitable organization, the JuJu Foundation.

In a video posted by his foundation Tuesday, Smith-Schuster recalled holidays from his childhood where he did not receive any presents.

"I was once in their position. There were times, you know, years, I didn't get gifts. There were years where I had to share gifts," the NFL star said.

"Knowing how it feels to be in their shoes at a young age, and how it is now, knowing that I can give back — it's really cool," he added.



(See video [here](#))

While this was the JuJu Foundation's first-ever event in Kansas City, Missouri, since Smith-Schuster's signed with the team this past offseason — after spending five seasons with the Pittsburgh Steelers — it is not his first charitable activity.

The University of Southern California alum said he has always enjoyed giving back to the communities he's been a part of, including Pittsburgh and Los Angeles. Monday's event was his way of supporting the people who show up for him and his team each week, he said.

"These people are die-hard fans, they support us every Sunday, every game that we play in," Smith-Schuster said. "It's just nice that I have an opportunity to be a good role model to these kids and give back to the community."



As for what Smith-Schuster wants for Christmas?

"I came here to win the Super Bowl," he said. "That's my Christmas wish."

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 Montera 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.”

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."

OL Cole Strange

The Boston Globe

Cole Strange on Dramamine, nacho cheese Doritos, and, most importantly, helping veterans

By Juliet Pennington

New England Patriots offensive lineman Cole Strange has a soft spot in his heart for veterans — so much so that in September 2023 he created a foundation to honor, support, and show appreciation for the sacrifices of military veterans impacted by physical or mental health issues. "I feel like they've done more than other citizens by putting themselves at risk," said Strange, 25, when asked why he chose this cause. "It's common sense to me that they should get help. ... I feel that as a country, we need to do more for those folks." The Knoxville, Tenn., native held a farm-to-table fund-raiser last month at Ward's Berry Farm in Sharon and is looking forward to holding other events to raise funds for agencies and organizations that help veterans. Strange also enjoys meeting with veterans and hearing about their experiences. During a recent phone conversation, Strange said he had lunch earlier that day with 70 veterans at Clear Path for Veterans New England in Devens. "It was emotional," he said. The 6-foot-5-inch left guard, who was injured during the Dec. 17, 2023, home game against the Kansas City Chiefs, said he will miss the start of the upcoming season, but will return to the field sometime this fall. We caught up with Strange, who lives in Foxborough with his girlfriend, Mallary Quaderer, a dental student and Patriots cheerleader, and their dog, Otto, a schnauzer-shih tzu mix, to talk about all things travel.

If you could travel anywhere right now, where would you go? I want to travel to Copenhagen in Denmark. When the Patriots traveled to Germany for our game [in Frankfurt against the Indianapolis Colts on Nov. 12, 2023], so many of my teammates mentioned that they loved visiting Copenhagen and how clean and nice it was.

Do you prefer booking trips through a travel agent or on your own? When it comes to booking travel I am a do-it-yourself guy. I always book my own flights and hotels.

Thoughts on an “unplugged” vacation? I am all for unplugged vacations. I love any excuse to unplug from the digital world and try to unplug as much as I can.

What has been your worst vacation experience? My family always enjoyed our vacations together, but I remember one vacation when I was in high school where I was miserable for a couple of days. We were on the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Destin, Fla., and we went deep-sea fishing. I was seasick after the first 30 minutes and had the worst sunburn of my life. I had an awful time. I love to fish, so after that charter trip, I learned my lesson. Now when I go out on the water, I take my Dramamine and bring sunscreen.

What is your favorite childhood travel memory? Every year during my childhood, my family drove from Knoxville to the Panama City area to enjoy the Gulf of Mexico. While I enjoyed all of those vacations, the years that my grandmother was alive and able to join us were my favorite vacations. Every year — before her death — she would make the drive with us to Florida and was a great travel buddy for me.

Do you vacation to relax, to learn, or for the adventure of it all? It is hard for me to pick just one. I am going to go with a combination. I always make time to relax on vacation and can't come home without a little adventure during the trip.

What book do you plan on bringing with you to read on your next vacation? Right now, my books-to-read are focused on learning more about finances. I am moving through books with subjects that include general investing, real estate investing, [and] securing my financial future. I want to be able to make wise, educated decisions about my finances, and reading is a great way to become more knowledgeable.

If you could travel with one famous person/celebrity, who would it be? My dream vacation buddy would be Ronnie Van Zant, the original lead vocalist of Lynyrd Skynyrd who died in a plane crash [in 1977 at age 29]. It would be great to travel with someone with a huge passion for life and having a good time. I read that he was always up for adventure and exploring, and that is my approach to traveling.

What is the best gift to give a traveler? The best gift to give a traveler would be a pair of binoculars. You can't go wrong for any type of trip. Binoculars are as great on the water as they are in the mountains.

What is your go-to snack for a flight or a road trip? I don't have a go-to snack but I am pretty set on lunch or dinner. I am always up for a burger or sandwich with chips. And the chips have to be original nacho cheese Doritos.

What is the coolest souvenir you've picked up on a vacation? On one of our beach vacations during my childhood, I bought a [so-called] Megalodon tooth from a beach tourist stand. I know now that it was fake, but I carried that around forever.

What is your favorite app/website for travel? Not at all. We usually find an area that we like and just look up places. Shoutout to my brother, Dylan. He handles a lot of the travel planning. Also, I never travel without Hulu or Paramount+ downloaded. I like to keep up with shows while on vacation and watch a few movies while I travel.

What has travel taught you? Not to trust the authenticity of the souvenirs I am buying — but to remember whether they are real or not, I should appreciate them just for the memory of the moment and the experience of the travel.

What is your best travel tip? If you don't want to spend the money upgrading to first class, always spend the extra to upgrade to the exit row.

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."

LB Sione Takitaki



FAMILY, FAITH AND FOOTBALL LED TAKITAKI TO BYU

By Unnamed

As a young married couple, Vaimaua and Fissipeau Takitaki immigrated to the United States from Tonga. They didn't know a lick of English, but they hoped to make a better life for themselves and for their future children.

Despite the hardship of moving to a foreign country, Vaimaua and Fissipeau pushed forward, knowing that it would all pay off in the future. The Takitakis instilled the same attitude of enduring through hardship in their children, including their son and current BYU linebacker, Sione, in his life on and off the football field.

Takitaki grew up in California as the youngest of seven children. During his elementary school years, Takitaki's parents put him into a number of sports. Among baseball, soccer, and countless others, football stood out as Takitaki's favorite and he pursued it vigorously.

As he continued investing time in football, Takitaki excelled, playing linebacker, defensive tackle and running back at Heritage High School. His contribution to the team even led to a championship win during a losing season for the Patriots. His love for football translated on and off the field. While in uniform Takitaki gave football his all and when he was off the field, he continued prepping for the game by setting out his clothes the night before events and talking football with his dad.

Though these early years on the field led to an intense passion for the sport, he had other motivations that played into his pursuit of the game. While he was an underclassman in high school, Takitaki's father passed away. Losing his father played a large role in Takitaki's decision to continue playing in college because Vaimaua had been such a strong supporter of his talents from the sidelines.

"None of our siblings went to college, and I think his biggest motivation was making our dad and our family proud," said Salaloma Talamalavio, Takitaki's older sister.

When Takitaki played football as a kid, his father offered continual support at each game. Because of his humble and quiet nature, Vaimaua stood away from his family and the main crowd of spectators so he could cheer on Takitaki without bringing too much attention to his family, himself or his son.

"Our dad was so supportive," Salaloma said. "He brought a snack for Sione before games and talked to Sione from the stands telling him to play his hardest. When people talked to him about Sione, he was always so humble about it."

Takitaki's shyness, humility and desire to be a good man all come from the example that his father set for him.

"His dad was a big role model to him," said Takitaki's wife, Alyssa. "Sione wants to become a man like his dad and coming to BYU was Sione's way of making his dad proud."

In addition to the quiet nature that he inherited from his father, Takitaki is described by family and teammates as a fearless athlete with a kind heart. "He's a good person with a good heart and has strong character," Alyssa said. "His parents raised him to be a good man."

And though he seems quiet around strangers, Takitaki has a fun and energetic personality that comes out on the football field. "Without Sione on the field there's no mojo going on with the defense," said linebacker Butch Pau'u. "But when he's out there we're all getting hyped up and enjoying our time together."

Because his heart was set on playing football in college, Takitaki spent the summers growing up attending BYU camps where he gained more exposure to the program and the school. Takitaki attended BYU's signing day in 2014 where he made the decision to play for the Cougars.

When he started at BYU that year, Takitaki quickly became an asset. He lettered as a freshman, played in 11 games and recorded 19 tackles at the end of his first season. "Sione brings fearlessness, tenacity and aggressiveness to the team," Pau'u said. "When he carries that vibe with him, we all gel and play more aggressively."

After this first successful season and a second under his belt, Takitaki redshirted in 2016 to spend some time focusing on matters off of the field. Though it was a challenge to take time away from football, the year provided him with opportunities to learn and grow as a person. Just weeks after finishing his sophomore season, Takitaki sat in a Church of Jesus Christ sacrament meeting where a talk was given about patience. He believed this message was important for him, and it served as a reminder to stay patient, develop good characteristics and continue pursuing football.

It was also during this year off the field that Takitaki dated and married his good friend, Alyssa Penney, a former swimmer at BYU. The two met each other at a bonfire the summer before their freshmen years at BYU and stayed good friends until they began dating and sealed the deal in the Sacramento California Temple. "Alyssa pushes me in all categories of my life," he said. "She regrouped me and has been my biggest supporter all around."

After a year spent growing as an individual, a husband and a football player, Takitaki returned to play for the Cougars in the 2017 season. When he rejoined the team, he was more than ready to show BYU fans how his contribution made a difference on the field. Takitaki led the defense in the home opener against Portland State, recording two sacks. Takitaki's 2017 season proved to be his most successful yet as he led BYU with 12.5 tackles for loss and was second on the team with 79 overall tackles, including 43 solo stops.

"Sione had a hard time being away from football," Alyssa said. "He played well in his first game in 2017 and I could see his energy on the field from up in the stands. He was so happy to be back."

"When Sione returned he was calm and collected," Pau'u said. "He was able to mature a ton while he was off the field and he came back and was one of the defensive leaders last season."

To cap it all off, Takitaki received the team's defensive player of the year award following the season, an award that symbolized his growth as a person and as a player. "Winning defensive player of the year is my biggest achievement right now, but I hope for more in the future," Takitaki said.

Coming into this season, Takitaki was named to the 2018 Polynesian College Football Player of the Year Watch List. This year he has already earned a College Sports Madness National Defensive Player of the Week for his 13-tackles performance at No. 6 Wisconsin. Takitaki intends to make this year his most successful season yet.

"The window to play football is so small and I need to attack it everyday," he said. "I only have so many years to play and I want to take advantage of that time."

Talking Takis

People sometimes confuse Sione Takitaki's last name with Takis, the Barcel snack food. What others don't know is that original flavored Takis are one of Takitaki's favorite foods. His wife has even caught him snacking on them in the middle of the night. "My ultimate dream is to be sponsored by Takis so I can have an endless supply," he said.

In addition to his love for Takis, Takitaki developed an affinity for Chips Ahoy cookies as a child. Each day before a football game, he would crunch up the cookies into a bowl and pour milk on them, eating the cookies like cereal.

Takitaki's love for snack foods isn't unusual in the sports world; professional athletes spanning from the NFL to the WWE have secret favorite foods as well. Despite the strict diets most professional athletes maintain during season, a majority of athletes have favorite cheat day and off-season foods. Here's a sample of famous professional athlete's foods of choice:

LeBron James (NBA): Fruity Pebbles
Marshawn Lynch (NFL): Skittles
Alex Rodriguez (MLB): Homemade kale chips
Sidney Crosby (NHL): Chinese food
Aaron Rodgers (NFL): White cake and ice cream

Ronda Rousey (WWE): Chicken wings
Landon Donovan (MLS): In-N-Out burgers
Luke Kuechly (NFL): Skyline Chili
Serena Williams (Tennis): South Carolina fried chicken

The Athletic

On the education of Sione Takitaki, an old-school thumper in a new-age NFL

By Tom Reed

BEREA, Ohio — Rookie linebacker Sione Takitaki read the play, shot the gap and met running back A.J. Ouellette behind the line of scrimmage in Thursday's practice.

Thwack.

Takitaki is often heard before he's seen in Browns training camp, flying into piles and looking to ram his pads into a ballcarrier or blocker. Management and coaches love his physicality.

But on this play, Ouellette escaped his grasp and the only one who got wrapped up was the eager-to-please linebacker. Coach Freddie Kitchens placed both arms around the 24-year-old Takitaki and emphatically stressed the importance of finishing the play.

"Whether we are taking them to the ground or not, it does not matter," Kitchens said. "... Working on the technique of tackling needs to be shown every time. That is not a sometime thing.

"I do like the aggression. You can't teach aggression. You can teach tackling. That is where we sit with them. We are teaching them how to tackle, but I want (Takitaki) to bring his feet, bring his hands and bring his arms. That is how we tackle. We do not try to knock everybody out. We are going to play some pretty big guys. You are not going to be able to knock everyone out, so you better know how to tackle."

The education and development of Takitaki will be closely monitored this season. He's an old-school thumper in a new-age NFL, one where the role of linebacker is evolving.

Soft against the run a season ago, the Browns wanted to add snarl and stiffness to their depth chart. They selected Takitaki, whom some draft experts pegged as a sixth-rounder, with the No. 80 overall pick.

He grew up in Southern California idolizing Ray Lewis and fellow Polynesian Junior Seau. Takitaki brings a similar mentality to the position. But in a league increasingly being played in space, proper tackling techniques and angles never have been more important.

That represents a challenge for the hard-hitting and relentless BYU product.

"I tell guys all the time when you think you are in position to make a tackle, take one more step," defensive coordinator Steve Wilks said. "We have thrown a lot at these (defenders). ... When you look at what we are doing, I think he is swimming a little bit, but he will get it."

Takitaki fell in love with football at age 8 in 2003. At that time, half the league's teams ran the ball on at least 45 percent of the snaps. Last season, just seven teams eclipsed that percentage.

It's why Wilks plans to routinely employ an alignment featuring five defensive backs and just two linebackers when opponents show a one-back look.

The ability to drop into pass coverage is vital for today's linebackers. It's the strength of 2017 Pro Bowl selection Joe Schobert, who's entering the final year of his contract. It's also earned rookie Mack Wilson, taken in the fifth round, praise during the first week of training camp.

"I love his athleticism," Wilks said of the Alabama product. "When you look at him out in space, he plays well, good change of direction. When you look at the matchups throughout this league, a lot of times you do not really have

safeties that can cover these big tight ends, so you need a linebacker that can run. That is the mode that we have right now. He fits that mode right there being able to cover a tight end as well.”

The good news for Takitaki (6-foot-1, 238 pounds) is the Browns don’t see the need to rush him into the lineup. He should get plenty of reps in preseason games, working with Wilson on the second unit.

Barring injury, veterans Schobert and Christian Kirksey are the club’s projected Week 1 starters.

Takitaki is likely to see plenty of time on the Browns’ special-teams units, a facet of the game he enjoys. But make no mistake, general manager John Dorsey did not select Takitaki in the third round to be a career special teamer.

The Browns were the NFL’s worst-tackling defense a season ago, and they envision Takitaki as a linebacker who can run sideline to sideline and put a hurt on ballcarriers.

In the camp’s first few practices, he irked some veterans with his ultra-aggressive approach. Running back Duke Johnson did not appreciate a jarring hit from Takitaki when the players were still in shorts, sans pads.

Coaches asked Takitaki to dial back his intensity for fear of injury. He is still searching for the right gear, the one between full throttle and tortoise tempo. He hinted that was in the back of his mind as he failed to wrap up Ouellette on Thursday.

“I feel like I am a high-energy guy, so I just go out there and try to attack stuff and do everything right,” Takitaki said earlier in the week. “Like you said, it kind of got chippy (during practice). That is just me being a rookie not understanding what the NFL is and coming out here and practicing right.”

BYU coach Kalani Sitake is not surprised to hear reports concerning his former player’s rambunctious training habits. The Cougars endured similar experiences with Takitaki.

“I think I warned everyone about him,” Sitake said of conversations he had with NFL personnel before the draft. “He is just a very physical player. It was hard for us to walk through with him because it’s hard for him to tone it down and slow it down. I told that to everyone. It can be a good problem to have, though.

“The one thing is teaching him to hit correctly so he doesn’t get a targeting penalty. He is a violent person who loves contact on the field.”

Three years ago, a pro football career appeared unlikely for Takitaki, whose father died of cancer when the family’s youngest child was 14.

His off-field discipline issues and multiple suspensions at BYU are well chronicled. He missed the second half of the 2015 season after being charged with misdemeanor theft for stealing athletic equipment. Takitaki was redshirted the following year, and his return to BYU was not guaranteed.

He spent time working construction and growing closer to his girlfriend, Alyssa, who became his wife. He rejoined the football team in 2017 and finished his career as a co-captain.

“He grew up,” Sitake said. “He was given some trust and some responsibility. That along with dating a person who loves him. The beauty tamed the beast a little bit.

“But once he gets on the football field, he is wild. So fun to watch.”

Takitaki played multiple positions at BYU, and some worry that he’s a classic “tweener,” a player without a natural position.

While he plans to complete his degree in sociology — Takitaki is 15 credit hours shy of becoming the first member of his family to graduate from college — Sitake believes his former player will blossom outside the confines of a university environment.

“I think he went to school just so he could play football,” the college coach said. “Now that it’s all football, he’s in the right place.”

Takitaki's football education is ongoing. His ability to master the game's graduate-level details will determine whether he can flourish in the NFL. That means covering tight ends and taking proper pursuit angles against football's most elusive players.

Wilks concedes there's plenty of work ahead.

"It is a lot that he needs to improve on," the defensive coordinator said. "Of course, man-to-man is one of them. We are throwing a lot at these guys, particularly these rookies."

Everyone is eager to see Takitaki perform in preseason games when he no longer needs to worry about reining in his intensity.

"I am a rookie coming in trying to prove something," he said. "Since I was 8 years old, I have played the same style. So, I'm probably flying around at a little higher pace than everybody wants me to."

"I am working on everything. I mean everything. I'm not getting comfortable because I know I can't afford to do that."

Takitaki's game is perfectly suited for the age of Lewis and Seau. But the NFL has changed, and he must evolve with it or risk grasping at air.

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."

WR Tyquan Thornton



Personal tragedy before Tyquan Thornton's first NFL touchdown inspired his My Cause My Cleats platform

By Alexandra Francisco

The first touchdown of Tyquan Thornton's NFL came on a two-yard slant up the middle in a Week 6 against the Cleveland Browns.

The Patriots receiver was playing in his second game back since surgery for a fractured collarbone that placed him on New England's injured reserve. After the win, tight end Jonnu Smith praised his rookie teammate's performance, vaguely insinuating what Thornton was dealing with off the field. Until that point, few realized the significance in Thornton's first touchdown celebration, where he instantaneously sprung up from the turf at FirstEnergy Stadium and pointed up to something in the sky. They weren't privy to the devastating phone call that rocked his world a few days earlier.

Even if only spiritually, his childhood friend, Cedric Walker Jr., was there with him during the NFL milestone. And when Thornton takes the field this week, with a pair of customized cleats benefiting a cause against gun violence for My Cause My Cleats, his friend will be there too.

"Growing up in Miami, it's not a secret what was going on down there," Thornton said of why he chose to benefit March For Our Lives for the NFL initiative. "There's a lot of violence going on. I'm the hope of the city -- not just me, but a couple of other guys. There's a lot of guys that have talent, but don't make it out. I feel like this is my chance to speak and play for the ones who don't get that opportunity."

Thornton and Walker grew up together in Miami, fast friends in little league who kept going strong through high school football at Booker T. Washington and beyond.

For the now-Patriots receiver, Walker was a moral compass of sorts – the friend who would help sort right from wrong and give honest insight about any situation he found himself in.

When Thornton's football talent began to materialize into Division I offers, Walker encouraged his relentless pursuit and was as supportive as anyone. Just get out of Miami.

"I was the one that got the full ride scholarships from different schools, and I chose to go to Baylor," Thornton said. "It was to separate myself from some of the stuff that was going on back home in the city. I was the one that was able to get out of that."

While away at Baylor, Thornton was able to host Walker in Texas for a handful of games. As their realities strayed further apart, the two remained very close. In a text message exchange Thornton shared to his Instagram profile, Walker urged him to treat his opportunity in the NFL like "Baylor times 100."

As far as he could control, Thornton was doing just that. He underwent a procedure for the broken collarbone he sustained in a preseason game against the Carolina Panthers and was activated to the Patriots 53-man roster on Oct. 8 before a bout with the Detroit Lions.

If his rookie debut was a memorable one, Thornton's second game as an NFL pro was monumental.

"I was packing my bag getting ready for the game when I got the call," Thornton said of the moment he learned his friend was killed. "It was a lot."

Thornton fielded a ton of calls from family and friends in the immediate aftermath. All of them encouraged him to play against Cleveland. It's what his friend would want. The 22-year-old knew it was what he had to do, and credits pushing through the pain to making him a stronger person.

"I feel like the coaches and my teammates opened up their arms, listened to me, and tried their best to keep a smile on my face," Thornton said of the experience playing that week. "I feel like I'm doing a pretty good job handling it, but I'm still mourning to this day."

Against the Browns, Thornton's first touchdown came in the third quarter from fellow rookie Bailey Zappe. It didn't stop at the reception, though. After New England recovered a muffed punt later on in the fourth, Thornton took a jet sweep 19 yards to also score his first points rushing.

"My first touchdown, if you watched the video as I scored, I celebrated. I pointed up straight to the sky," Thornton said. "I feel like he was there at that moment, in the stands watching me. In some of the plays that happened, I feel like he had a part of that. He was playing through me is what it felt like."

Thornton will forever remember playing with a heavy heart that day. With the non-profit March For Our Lives on his cleats and Walker in his heart, Thursday's game will be similarly special.

LB Joshua 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.

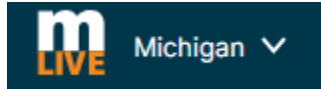
"Growing up as males, you're always told to toughen up, kind of suck it up and stuff like that," Uche said. "I've seen the NFL do a lot of different initiatives to make mental health a priority. I feel like the tide changing, and that stigma is starting to soften up a little bit."

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.



Josh Uche wanted to quit football, leave Michigan. Now he's a coveted NFL linebacker

By Aaron McMann

INDIANAPOLIS — Josh Uche considers his journey one of perseverance, having to convince the Michigan coaching staff to give him more playing time.

But it his complicated life in football began much earlier than that. Let's go back more than a decade, to Uche in fourth and fifth grade, his Pop Warner days.

His father signed him up to play, and by Uche's own words, he wasn't very good.

"Kind of got bullied, to be honest with you," he told reporters Thursday at the NFL Scouting Combine. "I got hit really hard, my head was hurt and I didn't want to play anymore."

The idea of quitting and doing something else ran through his head, he says. But his father "toughened him up" that year and sent him back out there. Soon, Uche was one of the best players on defense and learned to enjoy football.

Fast forward to early 2018, when Michigan was coming off an 8-5 season despite having one of the best defenses in the country, statistically. Uche wasn't playing much — and said his roommate, Khaleke Hudson, was taking himself out of games just to get him in there — and went to defensive coordinator Don Brown.

— OL Jon Runyan Jr. wants to step out of his dad's shadow

"He wanted to fight me, I think," Brown said later that summer. "But he wants to play. It's easy to say, 'Coach, I want to play. Let me play.'"

"Well, go earn it."

Uche thought he was doing everything he could. He was making plays in practice, he said. He had a good grasp of the packages Brown implemented. He considered transferring.

Then, that offseason, a lightbulb went off.

He bulked up and got into better shape. He ate better. And mastered what Brown was trying to do. By fall camp of 2018, "everything clicked for me," he said.

"That's when I got every single package down pat," Uche continued. "All my different roles and checks."

While playing time was a gradual thing, Uche proved to be an impactful third-down pass-rusher in 2018 — leading Michigan in sacks (7) on a limited number of snaps. His responsibilities grew again in 2019, when Brown allowed Uche to play more on first- and second-down. The turning point for the 6-foot-1, 245-pound Miami native came Week 2 against Army.

"I literally played every single down," Uche said. "I was the defensive player that game. I made a lot of big plays that game and proved myself that I could stop the run, if anything."

— Mike Onwenu sheds weight, open to playing DL in NFL

Uche led the Wolverines in sacks again in 2019 (with 8 1/2), but did a lot more this time around. He added 11 1/2 tackles for loss, had two pass breakups, eight quarterback hurries, two forced fumbles and a recovery. He became a headache for opposing offensive lines — with Alabama offensive tackle Jedrick Wills, a projected first-round pick in April's NFL draft, saying Uche was the most difficult pass-rusher he faced all season.

"Had some kind of moves, speed to him," Wills said this week. "He was a good matchup there."

Uche really turned heads late last month at the Senior Bowl, where he graded out highly during the week and shined in the game. The NFL has given Uche a grade of 6.26 (out of 8), projecting him as a fringe starter over the next couple of seasons. Draft analysts Mel Kiper (ESPN) and Daniel Jeremiah (NFL Network) both believe Uche could be a second-round pick. And Uche says teams like his versatility.

"I can do a multitude of things at a very high level," Uche said. "But it's definitely the pass-rush aspect of it. I feel like I'm one of the best edge-rushers in this draft class, and one of the best linebackers in this draft class."

Two years ago, Uche was sitting the bench, not getting much playing time. He could have transferred and went nearly anywhere else to start. But that what have been the easy way out, he admits.

He doesn't like easy. And it's through his hard work and dedication things are beginning to pay off for him.

"I worked my butt off to get to this point here," Uche said. "Nothing was given to me. I didn't have a silver spoon. Every single rep I was given, I made the best out of it. Whatever job coach Brown wanted me to do, I did it at a high level. By God's grace, I'm here today, I'm in the position I am today, by working hard and keeping my faith."

DE Keion White

The Boston Globe

Bill Belichick's words helped lead to Keion White's position change in college, and now he's looking to make an impact as a Patriots rookie

By Varun Shankar

Bobby Wilder knew he was in trouble. The Old Dominion football coach was coming off a four-win season and had just replaced almost his entire defensive staff. He needed improvement on that side of the ball, particularly with the pass rush.

He watched his players during winter workouts and his eyes consistently returned to one — a tight end coming off a redshirt freshman season in which he caught just 11 passes but showed immense physical talent: Keion White.

As the workout continued, Wilder's mind drifted to an ethos he attributed to the leader of his favorite NFL team — Bill Belichick — that said coaches should take their best players and put them in the most impactful positions.

And so, Wilder called White into his office in January 2019 and told him the Monarchs wanted him to become a defensive lineman. The coach knew White liked to hear the "why" behind decisions and came in prepared with his rationale.

No. 1, White could impact every play as a defensive end because of his athleticism.

"And No. 2," Wilder recalled telling White, "you've got a shot to be a first-round draft pick."

Even though the move didn't save Wilder's job — he stepped down after Old Dominion went 1-11 in 2019 — it worked out.

White tied the program's season record with 19 tackles for loss before transferring to Georgia Tech. There, he developed into an All-ACC talent and nearly fulfilled Wilder's first-round prediction — instead going 15 picks into the second round to Belichick and the Patriots.

That 2019 conversation, specifically White's desire to explore the reasoning behind the position change, was an example of the inquisitiveness and maturity the 24-year-old pairs with size and speed in a mix that many believe will ease his transition to the professional ranks.

Three games into Old Dominion's 2019 season, White validated the position change. He had a sack and three tackles for loss against Virginia in a performance that caught the attention of Power Five teams.

Notre Dame, which was scheduled to take on the Cavaliers next, had called a member of Wilder's staff to discuss the mutual opponent and mentioned White's impressive performance.

"[Virginia] couldn't block him," Wilder said. "They did everything they could, tight end, tackle, running back [and] tackle, they slid the line to him, put the guard and tackle on him, he was dominant.

"I don't think you could have honestly asked a person in that stadium that night who the best player was and got an answer other than Keion White."

After Wilder departed and the Monarchs canceled fall sports in 2020 because of the pandemic, White searched for a new home in the transfer portal. He found it in Atlanta with the Yellow Jackets — in part because they were one of the few programs that told him where he needed to improve, per Georgia Tech defensive coordinator Andrew Thacker.

Keion White transferred to Georgia Tech after leading tying Old Dominion's single-season record with 19 tackles for loss in 2019.

White had still barely played defensive end in college, but his athletic traits gave Georgia Tech reason to believe they had an impact player if properly developed.

"Most [270-pound], well-built dudes don't run the way that he runs, and he's got some uncanny power," Thacker said. "It's natural power."

White's first season with the Yellow Jackets sputtered out. Transfer rules kept him away from the team until summer workouts. In the interim, he went to play pickup basketball and dislocated his ankle. The injury kept him out for most of the season and limited his production after he returned.

Now a redshirt senior entering his sixth collegiate season (the NCAA granted all athletes an extra year of eligibility because of the pandemic), White was expected to be one of the team's leaders.

Summer workouts started and a healthy White gathered among droves of Yellow Jackets. He always stood in the back and maintained a stoic demeanor throughout team activities. When coaches asked the players to clap, cheer, or do the pageantry associated with a college football practice, White was compliant but not overly enthusiastic, Thacker said.

That led the coaches to wonder if they had an independent contractor on the roster, a one-year transfer who was looking to get his and get out.

They couldn't have been more wrong, and quickly realized as much.

White stood in the back during drills because it gave him the best vantage point to see his teammates and offer critiques if necessary. He wasn't especially fiery because that just wasn't his personality. His leadership came by spending quality time with his teammates and developing a mutual trust that then allowed him to hold them accountable.



"He had as much influence on the team as anybody, but he did it in his own ways," Thacker said. "So when he did speak or he did [take] the opportunity to address the defense or address the team, it carried a lot of weight."

White also continued his on-field ascent by starting all 12 games, recording team highs in tackles for loss (14) and sacks (7.5), and was named third-team All-ACC.

After leaving Georgia Tech, White went to train with Lilian Abdelmalek, the owner and founder of Dynamics Speed and Agility Training. White's detail-oriented nature showed in his choice of facility.

"He knew that going to other combine facilities, there may be 20 to 40 guys and sometimes you kind of get lost in the crowd, and he just wanted a little more one-on-one attention," Abdelmalek said.

White took a fine-tuned approach to the pre-draft process, the same way he has throughout his life. Now he comes to Foxborough to play under Belichick, whose impact on Wilder is one of the reasons White swapped sides of the ball in a move that changed the trajectory of his football career.

The Patriots aren't getting the flashiest pass rusher, Thacker said, adding that White's arsenal doesn't lend itself to YouTube clips. But they are getting a player who pushes the pocket and plays with a desire to understand the purpose of his actions — a mentality Wilder believes will mesh perfectly with Belichick's thoughtful manner and ability to explain that intent.



Potential Day 1 Georgia Tech EDGE took long-winding road to NFL draft

By Benjamin Raven

INDIANAPOLIS -- Keion White made a splash at the Senior Bowl with his athleticism popping from the trenches. Now, the Georgia Tech edge defender is among those getting early love as someone to break out at the NFL's scouting combine.

NFL Network's Daniel Jeremiah projects White as a late first-round prospect, sending him to the Dallas Cowboys at Pick 26 in his most recent mock draft. Jeremiah expects the twitchy pass rusher to be one of the stars of the week in Indianapolis.

And that makes sense, with White one of the prospects featured on The Athletic's "Freaks List," earning praise for reportedly hitting 21 mph despite weighing nearly 300 pounds. The Detroit Lions have an interesting group of young pass rushers, with the nucleus of Aidan Hutchinson, James Houston and Josh Paschal. Still, someone like White can add some juice with his speed-power combination while doing some work inside and outside. He's a 6-foot-5, 285-pounder that looks more ready to stop the run game than create havoc on Day 1. Pro Football Focus compares his game to Lions defensive lineman John Cominsky, a fan favorite around these parts.

"At the beginning of the (2022) season I was trying to be a speed rusher because everybody was like, 'you need to add more moves; you need to showcase your talent, that you can do other things,'" White said. "And that wasn't me. So I wasn't being productive. Once I got back to being a powerful rusher and being dominant again, that's when my sack production picked up."

White was ultra-confident, direct and composed at the podium, delivering one of the more entertaining press conferences in recent memory. He touched on his time at Old Dominion, switching sides of the ball and how he's done playing basketball until his football career is over. White suffered a serious ankle injury playing basketball, and said he popped his ankle back in himself, then tried to stand up and knew there was something seriously wrong. And even though that was a "freak accident," his hooping days are done for the foreseeable future.

"It was a split-second decision. I saw it was sideways, and I was like, 'it's not supposed to be like that,'" White said. "So I just put it back in place. And I was like, 'cool, I'm good.'"

"I tried to (walk). That did not happen ... Oh, my coach was pissed. But this was in between me transferring from Old Dominion to Georgia Tech. And Georgia Tech really stuck with me for the whole process, which was a really dope experience."

And White also further detailed his fascinating path to this year's draft, and how that helped. He spent six years at the college level, joking that that's way too long no matter how beneficial the experience was, saying:

"Six years in college is long as (expletive). I don't know if I can say (expletive) up here. But it's long. I did two years as tight end at ODU when I started off. One year at defensive end, COVID, injury and then had a good year last year to get me here. It's been a road, man."

White added that he wasn't recruited much out of high school. He went into college thinking he'd prepare to join the workforce and be a normal person while gesturing to the dozens of beat writers and media types standing in front of the podium.

But that long-winding road here also provided White with an opportunity to blossom in two different programs, learning tight end before making the switch to defensive end. He spent three years at Old Dominion where he started as a tight end. White caught 11 passes for 124 yards in 2018, noting that there wasn't much to go his way while the Monarchs rocked two 1,000-yard receivers (Travis Fulgham and Jonathan Duhart).

He made the switch the next season, breaking out with 19 tackles for loss, 3.5 sacks, one interception and one forced fumble. White then transferred to Georgia Tech, sat out a year, then missed most of his first season in the ACC with that previously mentioned ankle injury. White was back on the field this past year and looked like the 2019 version, though. He posted 14 tackles for loss and upped his sacks to 7.5 across 12 games. PFF credited him with creating 30 hurries, playing 39 snaps over the B gap, 96 over the tackle and 445 outside the tackle. He won 20.1% of his pass rushes and was even stronger against the run.

"As a tight end, you practically have to be a second quarterback," White said. "So you know route concepts and blocking schemes. So, taking that and going to defense, one, it made defense seem way easier because all defense seems like just play tight/go left/go right/go straight. But it makes you understand how they want to block you and the things they didn't want you to do. And I just did those. That really showed when I moved to defensive end."

"It wasn't a terrible switch. It was an adjustment period, for sure. I had no idea about the metrics, so when I finished my first year, I finished it with 19.5 tackles for loss and I was like, 'OK, that's normal.' I didn't realize I was leading the nation. It was just an adjustment, for sure."



Georgia DL Keion White is great on the field, and better at the microphone

By Doug Farrar

INDIANPOLIS — Not that Georgia Tech defensive lineman Keion White had too much to prove at the 2023 scouting combine — the 6-foot-5, 286-pound Old Dominion transfer and former tight end put up seven sacks, four quarterback hits, and 30 quarterback hurries in his 2022 season, and was blowing offensive linemen up at Senior Bowl week — but when he took the podium on Wednesday, it was quite an event.

On the field, White reminds me of Michael Bennett, the former Seahawks star pass-rusher who could nuke blockers from anywhere in the formation. Bennett has always marched to his own drumbeat and has a unique mind. It was nice to experience that White is definitely an original when he's talking, as well.

White had been in college since his freshman year at Old Dominion in 2018, which is a long time, as he noted.

"Six years in college is long as [expletive]," he said. "I don't know if I can say '[expletive]' up here but it's long."

Well, too late for that. The non-recruited White transferred to Georgia Tech following the COVID year of 2020, and he firmly established himself as a premier pass-rusher and run defender in the one season he was able to show out at that level. He had just 36 snaps in his first season with the Yellow Jackets, but when he was given opportunities to shine, he showed all kinds of first-round talent.

The journey made his combine experience a bit out of this world.

"I was not recruited at all coming out of high school," he said. "When I got to go to college, I just planned on working in the workforce and being like one of y'all, just a normal person. Coming here and being part of this is just a surreal experience."

The tape is far from ordinary, though.

Power moves are White's forte. and he has a lot of confidence in what he does best.

"At the beginning of the season, I was trying to be a speed rusher because everybody was like, 'You need to add more moves; you need to showcase your talent, that you can do other things.' And that wasn't me. So I wasn't being productive. Once I got back to being a powerful rusher and being dominant again, that's when my sack production picked up."

And what did he learn from that experience?

"Don't listen to what everybody said you need to do or the scouts wanna see. Scouts see what they're gonna see. I'm going to be me and let them evaluate it from there."

As far as where he'll best fit in the NFL, White, who played 80% of his spans outside the guards, 17% inside, and 2% at nose tackle, is perfectly fine with wherever his next team wants to put him.

Of course, he does have some opinions about that.

"That's cool with me," he said of a main 5-tech role. "I've shown throughout my career that I can go wherever I need to go. Personally, I like playing the 5. Anywhere from 3 to 9 I think it's reasonable for me to play. And I like being able to play anywhere from 3 to 9, and that versatility. That only makes you more valuable as a player."

White is also quite sure that he won't need to add weight to transcend any "tweener" concerns.

"No. I'm 285 pounds, reasonably strong. I've been playing end, and I'm reasonably quick enough to play the outside as well. I like the weight I'm at. If teams need me to, obviously they're paying money, I'll go anywhere if they give me money for it. That's how I feel about it."

Of course, some people are going to misinterpret White's opinionated nature as making him hard to coach... or that old combine chestnut, "Do you love football?" Which really means, are you going to keep your mouth shut and do what you're told?

If that's what you want, White isn't your guy.

"That's a tough question because I could tell you any bull[bleep] answer and you'll be like, 'Yeah, okay.' It's more something you have to show. That's not just something you can evaluate from the tape because anybody can go out there and play, it's just about how hard you play and the dedication you put into it. It's just like if I asked you, 'Do you love media?' How am I supposed to know if you love media? No, it's what you do. It's just a personal thing. I enjoy doing this every day."

Perhaps White's independent nature is tied to the fact that he has serious business plans in his future. Budding real estate magnate, in fact.

"Probably property acquisitions and real estate, things like that," he said, when asked what he would do were he forced to work an "ordinary" job. "I worked for a couple companies when I was in Atlanta doing certified finishes and at McKenney's, I was doing [work in] the accounting department and the estimating side. From there, I realized office life sucks, so [corporate] life is trash, and football is definitely the career path I need to be on."

Once White gets his NFL contract (he missed out on the NIL boom, to his chagrin), he plans to get that ball rolling.

"Numbers have always come easily to me, and I've always been knowledgeable in seeing the information. I've realized a lot of the millionaires outside of sports that you see have ventures in real estate and that's how they develop their portfolios and build up their network. I was like — if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me."

So, Keion White is a one-off, both on and off the field. He's already proven it on tape and at the mic, and he's eager to reinforce that when the defensive linemen run through their drills at Lucas Oil Stadium on Thursday.

T Tyrone Wheatley Jr.



Tyrone Wheatley Jr.'s family ties give suiting up in the Silver and Black even more meaning

By Levi Edwards

The year was 2002 in Alameda, California, and Tyrone Wheatley Jr. was five years old.

Wheatley Jr. and his younger brother, Terius, were rambunctiously running around the Raiders' facility. Their father, Tyrone Wheatley, was a running back for the Oakland Raiders at the time, having compiled 26 total touchdowns in the Silver and Black up to that point.

While Wheatley's two children were playing around, he stressed to them to be careful and not get into any trouble.

But kids will be kids.

"We were in the weight room and my little brother got on the treadmill," Wheatley Jr. recalled. "I told him to get off and he fell and scraped his face. [Athletic trainer Scott] Touchet, who's still here helping us now, ended up patching him up and helping him out.

Wheatley Jr. laughs now thinking about that day at work with his father, but vividly remembers the running back not being happy at all.

"My dad was pretty mad at us that day," he said. "That was the one thing he said to us. He said, 'Stay off the treadmill' and we went right to the treadmill."

The eldest son of the former Raiders' running back remembers a lot about his father's run in Oakland. He fondly remembers the sights and sounds of the Oakland Coliseum, including the Black Hole. And of course, he remembers his father's Super Bowl run in Oakland – that same 2002 season.

"I got to go to the Super Bowl as a little kid. Granted we loss, but it was still a cool experience," said Wheatley Jr. "And growing up with a lot of kids of the other players, that was the coolest part for me."

Wheatley Jr. was a tight end all of his career leading up to going pro. He made the transition from tight end to offensive tackle shortly after graduating from Stony Brook, noting that a combination of injuries sustained while playing tight end diminished his route running abilities.

His father and several of his coaches helped him with making the decision, telling him that switching to offensive or defensive line would be ideal to have a realistic chance to play professionally. The transformation including him gaining roughly 60 pounds to adequately make the jump.

"It definitely was a transition. The biggest thing for me has been learning how to pass set in pass protection. When I played tight end I did a lot of run blocking, so that part was pretty easy it's similar. It's not exactly the same, but it's similar.

After a year of training and playing in the American Football League, he signed with the Chicago Bears and was on their practice squad last season. This offseason, he followed assistant general manager Champ Kelly to the desert and signed with his childhood team.

If Wheatley Jr. earns a spot on the 53-man roster, he and his father would find themselves as rivals, as the elder is currently the running backs coach for the Denver Broncos. However, the Raiders organization will always be a special place for the Wheatley family.

"The first day I got here, I came for rookie minicamp, and it was pretty emotional. I had to remember it was a business trip, it was a tryout. Just walking around seeing the Silver and Black, it was wild. My whole life, I grew up with signed Jerry Rice jerseys, Tim Brown jerseys, Randy Jordan, I grew up with his kids. I always grew up around the Silver and Black and it will always be a part of our family.

"I got the opportunity to try and be a Raider. Now, I'm on the team fighting to make the team, which is pretty cool."

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.



Legacy & Brotherhood: Jabrill Peppers, Deatrich Wise Jr. reflect on impact of 'Divine Nine' during Black History Month

By Alexandra Francisco

The year is 2013.

New England Patriots captain Deatrich Wise Jr. is a redshirt freshman with the University of Arkansas playing against No. 10 Texas A&M. The Razorbacks defensive lineman is having a phenomenal game, with a career-high six tackles in the SEC opener, but there is one celebration in particular that stands out.

Just before halftime, on 4th-and-14, Wise and a teammate sack Aggies quarterback Johnny Manziel. He takes a few giant steps and breaks into the signature shimmy associated with Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Incorporated.

"I ended up sacking Johnny Manziel — a sack-fumble," Wise recalls. "I had just finished my pledge process and became a member (of the fraternity). I was just very excited so that was the first thing I did."

Becoming a Kappa was, in a way, a rite of passage for Wise.

His father was a Kappa at Jackson State, along with a few other men in his family. Wise's mother was a member of Delta Sigma Theta, another historically Black Greek Letter Organization under the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC).

Their influence was apparent in his decision to rush for a fraternity at Arkansas.

"My dad said if you want to pledge, pledge Kappa," Wise said. "If you don't pledge Kappa you just shouldn't pledge."

Patriots teammate Jabrill Peppers also felt called to one of the Divine Nine organizations that make up the NPHC. His mother, too, was a Delta, but when he arrived on Michigan's campus for his freshman year, rushing for Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated wasn't to carry out a family legacy.

His father was incarcerated when Peppers was just seven years old. They shared 15-minute phone calls, but his mother and father never let Peppers visit in person. When he was 14, his older brother Don, who sheltered him from the streets and encouraged him to pursue his athletic talents, was shot and killed.

At a pivotal age, both of the most dominant father figures were taken from him. His mother had to take it all on.

"It's so easy to get caught up in all of the wrong things when you're from where I am from," Peppers said.

"It's so easy to get sidetracked. It's so easy to stray off your path. I didn't have my dad for most of my childhood, so my mom had to wear two hats. She always said she couldn't teach me how to be a man but I think she did a damn good job. She was always on me about my schoolwork, always on me about knowing right from wrong. She taught me that no matter what happens in life, it's up to you to push through."

He did just that.

Staying focused on football and his academics, he earned a scholarship at the prestigious University of Michigan. A long way from home, he organically found his Ann Arbor family.

"One of the main things that drew me to the brotherhood was the fact that I lost my brother," said Peppers.

"Growing up, I wasn't necessarily as close to my brother as I wanted to be because my dad was in jail. So that was a big thing for me, because no matter where I go in the world, there's a man of Omega somewhere nearby. All I have to do is reach out and I have a brother everywhere."

For both Peppers and Wise, the traditions and relationships that came along with joining Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc. molded them into the men they are today.

Since it was founded in 1911, Omega's stated purpose was to attract and build a strong force of men dedicated to the core principles of manhood, scholarship, perseverance, and uplifting.

Peppers says he lived by these ideals long before he was old enough from college. Surrounding himself with those like-minded individuals brought him even higher.

"Friendship is essential to the soul," Peppers said, echoing the official Omega motto.

"At Michigan, I had the bond of brotherhood from my football team, but also from my fraternity," Peppers said.

"It was the best of both worlds, man. Just having my brothers on both sides pushing me to be better and challenge myself – I think that was very instrumental in my growth as a man. That journey made me a better man, made me a better human, and taught me about humility."

Wise echoed that sentiment.

"A lot of people come from different walks of life – people who are similar but with different stories – and it provides a family outside of your actual family," Wise said. "You can't pick your family, but you can pick your friends that eventually turn into family. When everyone is like-minded and on the same path of achieving excellence, aiming to a higher purpose, serving their community, it's promising."

When discussing their respective experiences, both credit their fraternities for emphasizing the importance of accountability, uplifting, and community.

At an early age, various coaches and teachers noticed Peppers possessed the spirit of a natural leader. They drilled into him that his peers looked up to him, and it was up to him to set a good example.

"As a kid, I didn't understand why I was getting in trouble for other kids wanting to do the same things as me," Peppers said. "As I got older I had to understand that people naturally gravitate towards others, for whatever reason. With that comes a lot of responsibility, so as I got older and more mature, I started embracing that role."

Wise agreed that along with the important ideals of Kappas, accountability was how they maintained that standard.

"People are watching what you say and do, because you're not only representing yourself and your family, and for me the football team, but you're also representing a fraternity that is known nationally," Wise said of his fraternity that also dates back to 1911.

"Our motto is to achieve in every field of human endeavor. In everything I do, I try to reach whatever the highest point of achievement in that field is. That's something that is the result of determination, resilience, and hard work. On the field and off the field, being able to persevere and be resilient against things that come up in my life, hard work, being dedicated to my craft, and getting better – that's the model I've also adopted."

Both Wise and Peppers are in good company with their respective fraternities. Many athletes, entertainers, academics, scientists, politicians, and activists who impacted Black culture and society so profoundly were men of the Divine Nine.

"There have been so many instrumental and prestigious men who crossed the burning sands before me, and to call them my brothers, and know they went through what I went through to achieve membership and to be forever intertwined with those guys – there's no feeling greater than that," Peppers said.

"So many men of Omega have had an impact on our history."

Wise adds, "It's a good party to be part of. So many have paved the way for us. We're standing on a lot of shoulders: politics, entertainment, athletes, scientists, doctors – you name it, Kappa has it."

Years removed from college, they're carrying those ideals in everything they pursue to build on that legacy.

Not long after his sack celebration, Wise was completing his summer classes in his sophomore year. He'd spent time on other campuses, noting Southern Methodist University specifically, and saw a discrepancy in the way Divine Nine organizations were celebrated at other campuses.

"I realized a lack of representation on the University of Arkansas campus for the Divine Nine," Wise said.

"Only one fraternity and one sorority had a house. No dedications or plots. When you got to campus you couldn't even tell we were there."

Wise wanted to do something about it and reached out to the NPCH. For eight years, with help of fellow students, they went back and forth, voting on details and pitching the perfect space to Arkansas university officials to the point that he almost forgot about the project.

Finally, he got a call that they would break ground on dedicating the NEPC Garden that overlooks Razorback Stadium. A dedication ceremony was held on Oct. 16, 2021, and he later got to see it for himself while back in town for the football team's Spring game last year.

It now serves as a monument to commemorate the rich heritage of the historically Black fraternities and sororities at Arkansas.

His vision became a reality, and now it will benefit everyone who follows.

"That is the space for the Divine Nine to express themselves in any way they want to," Wise said.

"Whether that's step shows, whether that's community events, whatever. Movies, game nights, anything. Now there's a designated area to represent the Divine Nine, pay homage to the ones who came before us, and lead the path for those who come after us."

LB Oshane Ximines



Ximines credits mother for his success on and off the field

By Harry Minium

Oshane Ximines slung a blocker aside, avoided another trying to grab him, then sprinted 20 yards across the field to catch a Liberty running back from behind. It was a typical Ximines play, made with passion, heart and hustle.

"He's one of the hardest-working players I've ever coached," Old Dominion football coach Bobby Wilder said of his senior defensive end.

You need look no further than his right arm to see where that work ethic comes from. "Family is where life begins and love never ends," reads a tattoo.

"It all comes from my mom," he said of Dane McDonald. "She ignited in me the desire to work hard."

McDonald, who emigrated from Jamaica as a child, is an American success story. Some parents tell their kids to work. She showed hers that hard work can transform your life.

As a single mother she moved from New York to Ahoskie, N.C., in search of a better life.

Two days after that move, she enrolled at Roanoke-Chowan Community College. Each weekday she attended classes from 7 a.m. until 2 p.m., came home and hurriedly cooked dinner, then went to her job at a nursing home. She often came home after midnight and would study for several hours.

Her family lived in a rundown, two-bedroom home where Ximines shared the second bedroom with his three sisters. His father lived in New York, so Ximines became the father figure to Natasha, Siane and Mikalah. Ximines has a tat across his chest that says he's his sisters' keeper.

McDonald said her work ethic came from her mom.

"The culture in Jamaica is much different than here," she said. "There's more discipline. You have to work hard for whatever you have. I let my kids know early on that I'm not their friend, I'm their mother.

"We were poor in Jamaica, so I know what it is to do without. I knew I didn't want my kids to have the same life I had as growing up, so I went back to school."

McDonald got her nursing degree after four long, hard years. The family moved into a better home, and McDonald has since purchased a house in Suffolk.

"I saw first-hand someone who came from nothing, who worked all day and stayed up late at night studying," Ximines said. "And now she's a homeowner.

"My mom is really something special."

So is Ximines, who transformed himself from a skinny, 6-foot-4 raw freshman into a redshirt senior likely to become the first Old Dominion player drafted by the National Football League. He's gone from 212 pounds at his first weigh-in as a freshman to 255, and his bulging biceps tell you every ounce is muscle.

Ximines has also applied his work ethic to the classroom. He has a 3.4 grade-point average in finance and hopes, after an NFL career, to invest his money and become rich.

Don't bet against him. He's shrewd. He could have graduated this summer and begun a master's degree program this fall. "In the end, I didn't think it would be a good idea to start work on a master's degree when I don't know yet what I want to do in life," he said.

So he finished this summer one class short of a degree. He's taking an introduction to Spanish class online.

"The NCAA lets you take just one class if that's all you need to graduate," he said.

Ximines didn't begin playing football until the ninth grade. His mom laughs when she talks about how sore he was after the first day of practice.

"He said, 'Ma, you know what, I'm think I'm going to stay in school and just do academics. I don't think I want to play football,'" she said. "I guess somebody hit him real hard."

Her message to him was unsympathetic.

"You can't just give up like that," she said. "Things aren't always going to go well. If things don't go well, you have to get up, brush yourself off and keep working."

Work he did. He was on the varsity as a 10th grader. As a senior he was a consensus two-star recruit. All the ACC schools in North Carolina recruited him. But in the end they said he was "too stiff, too slow or too skinny," Ximines said.

Recruited by ODU assistant coach Ron Whitcomb, Ximines verbally committed to the Monarchs over nearby East Carolina. But he briefly wavered when Marshall, then a nationally ranked program, made a last-minute scholarship offer.

"Old Dominion was home," he said. "Old Dominion was the first school to recruit me and they never backed off of me. That was something I didn't forget."

"Everyone wants to go to a Power 5 school. But sometimes, going to a school like Old Dominion is better for you. Here, I got to develop. The coaches focused on me, and really pushed me. I'm not sure that would have happened anywhere else."

"I'm so happy he's at Old Dominion," said his mom, who admits that she doesn't really understand football. "He's really thrived there."

Ximines said he's proud of helping ODU move up to the Football Bowl Subdivision and playing on the school's first bowl championship team in 2016.

"Coming to ODU was the best decision I ever made," he said,

Nonetheless, he wondered for a time if NFL scouts would find him at ODU.

"I told him if you put in the work, they'll find you anywhere," his mom said.

"God has you right where he wants you to be," I said. "If you were supposed to be somewhere else, you would be there."

QB Bailey Zappe



Western Kentucky quarterback Bailey Zappe is making the most of his FBS opportunity

By Trevor Sikkema

Bailey Zappe is living a dream in 2021. With the Conference USA title game on the horizon, the Western Kentucky senior quarterback leads the country in passing touchdowns (52), passing yards (4,941) and yards per game (414). With a title game and a bowl game yet to play, Zappe is close to breaking two of college football's most impressive records: Joe Burrow's 60 touchdown passes and B.J. Symons' 5,833 passing yards.

And yet, it's just his first year of FBS football.

"Not many people down in the Victoria (Texas) area where I'm from get to go play at the Division I level," Zappe told PFF. "I'd say both the NFL and college were a dream for me. I grew up watching football. My team was USC, so when I was young, I was watching Reggie Bush, Matt Leinart and those guys. I would say it was a dream."

Before leading the nation's top passing offense this season, Zappe came from humble beginnings as an afterthought in the recruiting world. He has a profile in 24/7's recruiting database, but there's not much detail. Zappe started for three seasons at FCS Houston Baptist before transferring to Western Kentucky for one shot at operating an FBS offense and adding to his NFL draft stock.

So how did the 6-foot-1, 220-pound redshirt senior transform from a lightly recruited FCS player to an NFL draft prospect?

FROM HBU TO WKU

You hear about guys who were three- and two-star recruits. Zappe didn't even have one. He was not ranked. On the player profile that still lives online, there's no crystal ball prediction of where he would play. Like Zappe said, not many football players from Victoria, Texas make it far. In fact, only one school even bothered to take a chance on him: Houston Baptist University.

"My class was kind of some of the first guys from Victoria to make that move to play Division I football," Zappe said. "HBU was my only offer. I got that, I believe, in December or early January a month before national signing day. So, it was kind of a quick process like, 'OK, we're offering you.' 'Okay, I commit.' So it was kind of a fast process there."

The process of Zappe becoming the team's starting quarterback was similarly speedy. He played in 10 games during his redshirt freshman season, starting nine. But he learned very quickly that high school ball and college ball are quite different, even at the FCS level.

Zappe is having a career year in almost every passing category, but his rushing stats don't compare to his first season at HBU — and that was not by design.

"It wasn't because I wanted to run around, it was because I had to," Zappe said with a laugh. "It was more of like, 'Set, go.' I catch the ball, one read, 'OK, I gotta go. Somebody's coming for me.' And then now here, as y'all know, we have the best pass protection O-Line in the nation. So I sit back there as comfortable as I am anywhere. I mean, it's awesome."

"That's kind of the reason why I don't run around nearly as much, and a lot of the reason is I really don't have to. They block their tails off — everybody knows they're the best in the nation. This is the best unit I've ever been a part of and then we've got four running backs that can tote the pill, as well. It's really made my job a lot easier coming here, for sure."

Nov 27, 2021; Huntington, West Virginia, USA; Western Kentucky Hilltoppers quarterback Bailey Zappe (4) throws a pass against the Marshall Thundering Herd at Joan C. Edwards Stadium. Credit: Ben Queen-USA TODAY Sports
Zappe isn't just a homer regarding the success of his current offensive line. As a unit, their 667 pass-blocking reps are the second-most of any team in the FBS, and their 92.3 pass-blocking grade as a team is the best in the country.

It did take some time for Zappe to find his sweet spot behind WKU's offensive line. After running for his life during his redshirt freshman year at HBU, Zappe began to settle in as a passer in the offense of offensive coordinator Zach Kittley. Zappe passed for over 3,500 yards and 35 touchdowns as a sophomore, and in the shortened COVID season he threw 15 touchdowns and just one interception with over 1,800 passing yards in just four games.

Year	School	Games	Completions/Attempts	Yards	TD/INT
2021	Western Kentucky	12	406/584	4,941	52/9
2020	Houston Baptist	4	142/218	1,829	15/1

[Click here to view Bailey Zappe's career in PFF Premium Stats...](#)

That production brought with it a decision: stay another year at HBU, make a jump to another school in the transfer portal or take a chance at going pro.

"After that year, I was eligible to go to the draft, so at first I had to make that decision. Do I wanna take a chance? Do I want to declare or do I want to stay another year and kind of see what happens?" Zappe said. "That was honestly an

easy decision. I wanted to stay another year in college. I wanted to see what my last year of college was like, how it went.”

Zappe was going to have to learn a new offense either way, as coach Kittley was moving on to Western Kentucky.

“I wanted to move up a level and go somewhere with higher competition and a better opportunity to put myself in position to go to the next level,” Zappe said. “So, I went into the transfer portal. I think it was like 8:30 that next morning, the first person calling me was coach Kittley. He said ‘I just wanted to be the first one to offer you.’

“I had Tennessee and Texas Tech offer me. I had some other schools slide in the DMs asking me what’s my interest and stuff like that, but WKU was always my No. 1, being able to come here and play under coach Kittley for one more year.”

FAMILIAR FACES AT WKU

So why Kittley? Why would Zappe put all his chips in a basket that he’d already experienced at the FCS level? Zappe doesn’t hesitate to answer the question:

“Honestly, just the scheme and the way he calls plays, getting guys open, making it easy on me to get our playmakers the ball and let them do their job,” Zappe said. “The connection that we’ve been able to build over the last four years, still to this day, I spend most of my day hanging out with coach Kittley, picking his brain on this week’s opponent, kinda seeing what his thoughts are going into the game, what he’s looking at, what he’s seeing. Just trying to gain the knowledge of this week’s opponent.”

Zappe wasn’t the only Houston Baptist Husky to earn a shot at the next collegiate level: Wide receivers Jerreth Sterns, Josh Sterns and Ben Ratzlaff came over with Zappe from HBU as well.

“All the guys that came here with me, we were all kind of deciding,” Zappe said. “Already knowing the offense, kinda being another coach on the field for these guys, speeding up the process of teaching the guys that were already here the offense that we’re bringing in.

“It’s the step I wanted to take. Playing in the Conference USA is a step up from the FCS level and there’s great competition here with guys we played at Marshall, UTSA and then our non-conference games against Indiana, Michigan State. We had the opportunity to go play some big time teams and kind of put ourselves in position to be seen by NFL scouts like that. It’s been the best decision of my life and it’s worked out in our favor, for sure.”

Zappe is the signal-caller for the second-best scoring offense in the nation (43.3 points per game) behind only Ohio State (45.5 PPG). He’s having a career year in terms of pass attempts, completions, passing yards, passing touchdowns, completion percentage and quarterback rating. Zappe become a notable 2022 NFL Draft name and has accepted an invitation to the Senior Bowl in early January.

He says coach Kittley even got him a Ferrari — figuratively, of course.

“[Coach Kittley] hands me the keys to the Ferrari — he calls his offense the Ferrari — and he hands me the keys before every game,” Zappe said. “He has this little joke that he says. He’s like, ‘Look, you got the keys to the Ferrari. Just don’t wreck it.’ It’s kind of a thing where we’re out on the field no matter what down or distance it is, I have the full range of the offense to check in or out of any play that I want. That’s kinda what makes it work.”

Zappe has kept the mistakes to a minimum while operating such a high-powered offense: His 52-to-9 TD-to-INT ratio is the best in the country. Keeping the interceptions below double digits while throwing the second-most passes in the country this season is extremely impressive.

Year	School	Games	Yds/Att.	aDOT	Big-time throw %	Turnover-worthy play %
2021	Western Kentucky	12	8.5	8.2	5.8	3.4
2020	Houston Baptist	4	8.4	8.8	4.3	3.2

Still, Zappe isn’t completely satisfied.

“Well, to be honest with you, I’m still mad at myself for throwing nine [interceptions],” Zappe said. “I wish I was back down at like three or four.”

So has the offense been so efficient on so much volume?

"I think a large part of it is offseason stuff, getting down here with the guys, doing extra work, working on my accuracy. Putting the ball where it's really my receiver or nobody. Trying to make it easy for the receiver to make the catch, and especially this year I've got some dudes around me. They make it a lot easier for me for sure. The 50/50 balls, I think here it's 75/25 for us. I've got guys around here that make it easy for me. I think that's why we're able to keep the turnovers down.

"Like I said before, nine is too many for me. I'm going to continue to work on these next few games and try to keep it at nine and not throw any more."

A CONFERENCE TITLE AND DRAFT STATUS ON THE LINE

Zappe and this current group of WKU offensive players have two games left. One is for a conference championship against UTSA. The other is for a bowl victory. It's two more chances to show the world this group of players and coaches at WKU is special — two shots to potentially put Zappe's name atop two of college football's most prestigious passing records.

What Zappe has done this season deserves a spotlight. But when you ask Zappe what it's like to have the light shone on his passing accolades, the more he reflects it to those around him.

"I ain't hear just because it's me," Zappe said. "I ain't here without the o-line, without the other guys around me. I'm not in this position without those guys. That's the first thing that comes to my mind.

"I'm blessed, to be honest with you. I'm blessed to have that front-five that I have, the best unit in the nation. I'm blessed to have the receivers that I do, the running backs that I have, the coaches that I have. I'm not here without those guys. Every day from here till I leave here I'm going to tell them thank you, to be honest with you. I'm going to tell them thank you for turning my career from what I was doing my freshman year to now.

"It's been a surreal moment, just to kind of look back and see the improvement that not only I've made but the improvement that me, Coach Kittley, Jerreth [Sterns] and all of us have made over the years. To see it all come to fruition is awesome to see. Like I said, I'm blessed to have the guys that I have here — none of this stuff happens without those guys."
