

2025 NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS



FEATURE CLIPS

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Chairman and CEO Robert Kraft

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 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.

Head Coach Mike Vrabel

The Athletic

Mike Vrabel's winding path made him the coach the Patriots need now

By Chad Graff and Zack Rosenblatt

FOXBORO, Mass. — Mike Vrabel needed a moment to think. He stood at a lectern, dozens of reporters and New England Patriots staffers staring at him, hanging on every word, but now, the question posed to him hung in the air.

All around him last Monday afternoon, there were signs of what the Patriots once were, remnants of a bygone era when the franchise sat alone on the NFL's mountaintop. Vrabel noted the six championship banners hanging at the stadium. What those Patriots teams accomplished has no bearing on what his Patriots team will do now. "But it's going to give us a blueprint," Vrabel said.

This is where Vrabel became one of the best football players on the planet at the turn of the century, going from a backup to a three-time Super Bowl-winning All-Pro linebacker, where he was shaped by the greatest to ever wear a whistle. This is where his personality — brash, but with a touch of empathy — blended perfectly with a demanding coach, bolstering an up-and-coming team. It's where the seeds of his own coaching career were planted.

Now, 16 years after he was shipped out in a trade to the Kansas City Chiefs, Vrabel is back, tasked with restoring the most dominant franchise of this century to the top of the NFL. Owner **Robert Kraft** chose Vrabel to bring stability and credibility back.

He isn't back with the Patriots because of what he once was on the field, but rather who he is off it. Those who know him best describe him — in the nicest way possible — as an "empathic a-hole." Quick with a quip but eager to lend an ear. Someone who can lay into a player and then move on minutes later like nothing happened, a positive relationship still intact. A ball buster and a technician. Honest and accepting. Most importantly for these Patriots, genuine and authentic.

Last week, Vrabel didn't shy away from the expectations. AFC East titles. Home playoff games. Championships. The idea that with him in charge, the Patriots will be "hopefully just as successful."

Now that he's been given this weighty job, there's that difficult question. Did he ever dream of this moment, of being named the head coach of the New England Patriots?

The truth is ... complicated.

News of the Patriots' free-agent signing of Vrabel in March 2001 ran on page F7 of The Boston Globe. It was below a story about Long Island University basketball and alongside the results from the previous day's greyhound races. The story was all of three sentences.

After a record-setting career at Ohio State, Vrabel struggled to find his place with the Pittsburgh Steelers. No one questioned his knowledge of the defense, but the Steelers never settled on a position for him.

Bill Belichick, of course, loved those kinds of players. After not starting a single game over four years in Pittsburgh, Vrabel started 15 for the Pats in 2001, including the Super Bowl. He became a fixture of the dynasty. Along the way, he was one of the few players who could get away with needling Belichick.

Belichick loved spending time in the linebackers room. It was a stacked, veteran-laden group: Vrabel, Tedy Bruschi, Roman Phifer and, later, Junior Seau. At one point, Belichick got them all rocking chairs, poking fun at their age.

Belichick loved to show the group film from his New York Giants defenses of the 1980s. Lawrence Taylor, Harry Carson, Carl Banks and Pepper Johnson — they, Belichick noted, played the way linebackers were supposed to. Chad Brown, a member of the 2007 Patriots, remembers once, as Belichick waxed poetic while narrating Giants highlights, Vrabel leaned back in one of those rocking chairs.

“That f—ing guard is 260 pounds, Bill. The guy I’m playing this week weighs 325.”

Vrabel once showed up to a Patriots practice wearing Giants gear, a not-so-subtle ribbing of his head coach. He shouted at Tom Brady when the defense made stops during practice and spiked the ball next to Brady after interceptions.

“Mike certainly was not the fastest of linebackers,” Brown said, “but because he had such a great knowledge of the game and he knew what was asked of him mentally, he was on the same page with Tom and Bill.”

Scout-team reps were a chance for the defense’s veterans to catch their breath — except for Vrabel. He seemed to relish any chance to play with the backups, lining up as a safety and pretending to be Troy Polamalu, anything to continue talking trash.

“He was an annoyance at every position,” Troy Brown, his Patriots teammate for seven years, said.

When Scott Pioli left New England’s front office for the Chiefs’ general manager job in 2009, he wanted a player to come in and set the culture — who better than Vrabel? That February, he dealt a second-round pick to New England in exchange for quarterback Matt Cassel and Vrabel.

Pioli thought Vrabel would be pumped; playing under Belichick could be taxing. Instead, Vrabel was pissed. He had been upset about his contract with the Patriots and wanted a new deal. Still searching for that new contract when he arrived in Kansas City, Vrabel would sometimes give Pioli the silent treatment, ignoring him at the facility. At one point, Pioli called him out: You’re being unprofessional.

Vrabel, laughing, told The Athletic that he responded: “No, it would be unprofessional if I said what I wanted to say. This is me being professional.”

Eventually, Vrabel relented — and vented — to Pioli. He said he’d never had the chance to be a free agent, to choose his destination. If Pioli hadn’t made the trade the Patriots might have cut him, giving him his shot on the open market. Pretty much every time Vrabel and Pioli saw each other that season, Vrabel made his feelings known.

Pioli called it “the most important growth moment” in his 27 years in the NFL. He learned how to consider the human impact in a league with a lengthy daily transaction wire. Vrabel played out that final year of his contract with the Chiefs. Then he signed an extension to stay.

“This is part of the reason I think Mike is and has been a great coach,” Pioli said. “Because he empathizes and understands more feelings than someone who has never been in the shoes of a player. That doesn’t mean he’s going to acquiesce to their demands. But he’s going to consider their feelings.”

Around 9 a.m. on July 11, 2011, Vrabel announced his retirement from the NFL.

Around 11 a.m. on July 11, 2011, Vrabel was announced as the new linebackers coach at Ohio State. He replaced Luke Fickell, who had been promoted to interim head coach when Jim Tressel was fired.

By the end of Vrabel’s playing career, he’d morphed into a player-coach of sorts anyway. Some offseasons he’d spend coaching up his son Tyler’s kindergarten indoor flag football team in Columbus. Vrabel, still a Patriot, would wake up early, go to church and get some breakfast — and the games would start around 8 a.m. “It was a blast,” Vrabel said. Kirk Herbstreit’s son was on the team. “He talked to them the same way he talks to these (NFL) players,” Herbstreit said on an Amazon broadcast of a game featuring the Cleveland Browns, with whom Vrabel spent the 2024 season as a consultant.

As he mulled retirement, Vrabel had offers to coach in college from Fickell and Bill O'Brien, then Penn State's head coach. On O'Brien's first day as a low-level assistant with the Patriots in 2007, Vrabel was the first player to introduce himself and welcome O'Brien to the team. "I'll never forget that," O'Brien said.

But Fickell had an edge. As a player, he hosted Vrabel on his recruiting visit to Ohio State. They became roommates — Vrabel would cook, Fickell would clean. When they'd go out to eat, Vrabel would often pay for both of them and kept a running tab of how much Fickell owed him. Years later, he still tells Fickell he's waiting for around \$780.

Vrabel wanted to work at his alma mater, so he took the job at OSU. Looking back, he admits he dove into coaching without any sort of plan or idea of how to do it. "There's no handbook," he said. So, he coached how he was coached — which was a little advanced for teenagers.

"He just had to kind of figure it out because he's an intelligent guy and the people that he was coaching, what could they handle?" Fickell said. "In his mind, he can handle anything. When you get into coaching, at any level, you've got to figure out, truly, what your guys can handle."

When Urban Meyer was hired the next year, Fickell moved to defensive coordinator. When Vrabel interviewed with Meyer, it was "the worst interview that anybody's ever had," he said. Fickell convinced Meyer to give Vrabel another shot — he did, offering another interview eight hours later. Meyer still wasn't convinced. So, rather than giving Vrabel the job, he gave him a trial run.

Fickell expected Vrabel to be turned off by that proposition. Instead, Vrabel embraced it. He won over Meyer and spent the next two years coaching up the defensive line. The intensity from his playing days carried over; in warmups before a 2012 game against rival Michigan, Vrabel head-butted a helmet-wearing Buckeyes player. He coached that day with a bloody, stitched-up forehead. The players loved him for his intensity — and because he looked out for them.

He'd hold meetings in the morning with his position group and often would have his student assistant, John Streicher, fetch breakfast for the players, on his dime. He'd host them for dinners at his house too.

"He probably didn't make any money at Ohio State," Streicher said. "He took care of his players like nobody else. They would, to a man, say that he was not only a great coach, but also like a father figure or a best friend."

Fickell knows the perception of Vrabel, the headstrong former linebacker who doesn't take s— from anyone. "Some people would say, well, there's an arrogance to him. But there's a humility that you might not see because of the way he comes off, his confidence level and his ability to speak," Fickell said. "He understands that you get what you deserve and you get what you earn, no matter whether you've played for two years or 14."

In 2014, O'Brien was hired as the head coach of the Houston Texans, and Vrabel was one of his first calls. When Vrabel was a player, it was his attention to detail that stuck out — he could see how a particular offensive lineman or wide receiver was lining up and could call out what was coming in the moment, even during games.

He carried that over into coaching. O'Brien said Vrabel would run clinics in the offseason to help educate Houston's coaches on things like tackling techniques and their situational effectiveness. On the field, he'd wear a padded vest and get in the mix with the players — he still does now — lining up as an offensive lineman, going against defensive ends in edge-setting drills, blocking the likes of Jadeveon Clowney and J.J. Watt, bruised and bloodied and smiling the whole time. O'Brien called him "instrumental" in the development of players like Clowney and Whitney Mercilus. "He was the best assistant coach I ever had," O'Brien said. Clowney, who also played for Vrabel with the Titans in 2020, said: "Everywhere I went after Houston was nothing compared to what he taught me. He gets the best out of his players."

Added Detroit Lions defensive tackle D.J. Reader, who played for the Texans from 2016-19 and still keeps in touch with Vrabel, "As a player, you already respect him because you know who he is. He played that long in the league. Then as you get to meet him, you talk to him — he's a guy's guy. He's normal. He's not boring you with X's and O's all day. ... If you're in search of a guy who is really going to lead men ... he's definitely that guy."

In 2017, O'Brien promoted Vrabel to defensive coordinator, anticipating that he'd soon start getting head-coaching interviews. He did after one season: first with the Lions, then the Indianapolis Colts and then, finally, he sold the Titans on his vision.

In 2018, Vrabel's first season as the Titans' coach, linebacker Kevin Dodd walked into a team meeting after skipping OTAs and showing up a day late for training camp. The room was full, everyone was seated. Dodd went to sit in the front row. Vrabel shook his head.

That row is for players only.

He tried to sit elsewhere. Nope.

The room went silent. Eventually, Dodd got the hint, walked out and spoke with then-general manager Jon Robinson: He was being released.

Dodd was a second-round pick two years earlier, but nobody was above the team. Vrabel would always say: You'll get treated how you treat the team.

During Vrabel's early days in Tennessee, players would walk into team meetings on edge. At any moment, he might call on a player and quiz him in front of everyone. The players needed to not only understand the full breadth of the team's game plan each week, but they needed to learn about everyone in the Titans organization. At random, Vrabel would pick a player.

What's the janitor's name?

He did this for the team's stars, including A.J. Brown and Derrick Henry, just as he did it for those fighting to hold onto a roster spot — questions about the game plan, the opponent, his teammates, the Titans staff. He brought the same energy to his early morning routine when he'd work out and then camp out by the team's training room. If a player hadn't been practicing, he'd better be showing up on time for treatment. If not, he'd hear about it.

"I had to make sure that I'm doing my job to hold people accountable, to protect the team," Vrabel told *The Athletic* in November. "It's about how their behavior affects the team, and trying to show them how important it is about giving themselves to the team and putting the team first."

Center Ben Jones said he and Vrabel used to cuss each other out, in front of the team, and it only strengthened their bond.

"He knew I cared. I knew he cared," Jones said. "We both wanted to win. It came down to: hey, he was going to do what's best for us. And so you had to trust him to do that. He was our leader."

If at first Vrabel's methods were intimidating, eventually the players understood where he was coming from — and appreciated that he didn't simply treat them as numbers on a roster. He made it a point to learn all about their families, their backgrounds, their spouse's names. When Jones' daughter was dealing with some health issues, Vrabel would insist that he leave the facility early to be there for his wife. Often, Jones would bring his daughter to the facility on an off day. She'd walk straight to Vrabel's office and start drawing on his whiteboard, which was full of plays he'd drawn up. "He didn't care," Jones said.

Cornerback Caleb Farley, a 2021 first-round pick, lost his father when their family home was leveled in a 2023 explosion, and Vrabel was there for him. "He always picked me up and lifted me up," Farley said. "He pushed me. He taught me about what it means to be an NFL football player."

Added Terrell Williams, then the Titans defensive line coach: "You always felt like you were working with him and not for him."

The on-field buy-in started early in his first season. In Week 1, the Titans lost starting quarterback Marcus Mariota, both offensive tackles (Taylor Lewan and Jack Conklin) and star tight end Delanie Walker to injuries. Heading into Week 2 — a game against Houston and O'Brien, his old boss — the Titans were outmanned. But Vrabel laid out exactly how the Titans would win:

Run the ball 30 times.

Hold them to 17 points or fewer.

Force two turnovers — or win the turnover battle.

The Titans needed to hit two of those marks, Vrabel said. They incorporated some "Wildcat" runs with Henry and ran a successful fake punt with safety Kevin Byard throwing to safety Dane Cruikshank for a touchdown. They ran the

ball 34 times. They held the Texans to 17 points. They forced one turnover and didn't turn the ball over themselves. They won 20-17.

"Now everyone is at least buying in," Vrabel said. "OK, there's a way to win, somehow, every game. It may not be pretty, but this is what we may have to do."

The three keys to victory became a crucial part of the Titans' identity. That Texans game was the moment many in the organization felt players and coaches starting to buy what Vrabel was selling. His message was getting through — and it changed every week.

"He did that for six years," Streicher said. "He could develop a plan based on an opponent and it could be totally different from the week before just because that's what we needed in that week."

In 2019, the Titans went on an improbable run to the AFC Championship Game, beating Belichick and Brady along the way. They went 11-5 in 2020 and 12-5 in 2021, when Vrabel was named NFL Coach of the Year. He was fired after two losing seasons and a falling out with Titans ownership, but he'd left his mark. (The Titans went 3-14 in 2024 under new coach Brian Callahan, and fired GM Ran Carthon after the season.) Vrabel's Titans, often outmanned and underdogs, went 30-23 in one-score games. In his six years, the Titans had the third-best penalty margin in the league and Tennessee also outscored opponents by 50 points in the fourth quarter, when Vrabel was often at his best.

After a season as a consultant in Cleveland, Vrabel interviewed with the New York Jets on Jan. 3, before the Patriots season had even ended. It created a somewhat awkward situation at the Jets facility — while he was talking to them, the team (led by interim coach Jeff Ulbrich, who he'd have been replacing) was practicing on the field. But for a few hours, Vrabel won the room over — a room that included owner Woody Johnson. The Jets wanted to hire him, and his interest was genuine.

A few days later, **Kraft** fired Jerod Mayo after a disastrous first season as head coach. The firing came hours after the Patriots' season-ending victory over the Bills. The Jets quickly lost hope. Vrabel took another interview with the Chicago Bears, while the Patriots were open to being blown away by Lions offensive coordinator Ben Johnson. But once Mayo was fired, it was no secret who New England was targeting to replace him. Vrabel interviewed in Boston on Jan. 9 and then camped out in the area for a few days, awaiting his fate. The Bears and Jets tried calling at the last minute to sway him, but it didn't work. Less than a week after the Patriots' wrapped up a dreadful 2024 season, the job was Vrabel's.

Last week at his introductory news conference, Vrabel mentioned that he'd had a chance to pursue a spot on Belichick's staff. But sometimes, to get where you want to go, you have to leave where you're comfortable.

Vrabel's road back to the Patriots didn't start in New England, but that didn't change the fact that this is where he wanted to be, and that's especially true at this moment.

Vrabel told The Athletic this fall that he was prioritizing three things in his next job: an open dialogue with the owner, true collaboration with the general manager and a quarterback. The Patriots could offer all three.

"I might remind everyone in this room, in 2019 he beat us right here in the playoffs," **Kraft** said in his opening statement at Vrabel's introductory press conference last week. "It was Tommy's last game as a Patriot."

That day, Vrabel used Belichick's own tricks against him. The Titans held a 14-13 lead late in the game when Vrabel instructed his Titans to purposefully take three penalties in a row — delay of game, false start, neutral zone infraction — which killed an additional minute of game clock thanks to a loophole in the rules. On the opposite sideline, Belichick lost it. Vrabel tried not to smile, but he couldn't help himself.

Standing next to the stage five years later, Vrabel smirked.

He's a man shaped by a variety of experiences but has remained consistent throughout. Still, that question tripped him up. Did he always dream of this?

"When I started my coaching career, I felt like it was important to forge my own path somewhere else, and if all those experiences led me back here at the right time and the right opportunity, then that was going to be what was meant to be.

“When I started my coaching career, I said, man, let’s go, and let’s see where we can go and take this and work with other people. If the time’s right to go back, then there will be a right time.”

The Athletic

Inside Mike Vrabel’s year off: His season with the Browns and what he wants next

By Zack Rosenblatt

NASHVILLE — The lighting inside The Corner Pub is dim enough that it feels like nighttime even when it’s light outside. There is cheap beer, a wide selection of whiskey and a frozen-drink machine churning “Bushwackers,” described as an adult version of a Wendy’s frosty, full of booze. Sports memorabilia covers the walls — jerseys and photos of famous athletes who have come through over the years, like the late Steve McNair, the city’s first NFL star who used to call the bar’s owner after games to make sure it would stay open for him. A red No. 94 Ohio State jersey hangs over one of the corner tables.

On a Thursday night in August, the pub was packed with regulars and the TVs lining the bar showed an NFL preseason game. After a round of golf, Mike Vrabel took an Uber, walked through the parking lot and came in through the back entrance. He went right to that corner table beneath the Ohio State jersey, his jersey. His golf buddies, whom he met here a couple of years ago, were already waiting for him, light beers in hand.

For the next few hours Vrabel talked and laughed, and didn’t move from his seat. He remains one of the most recognizable faces in a town known for country music stars (Post Malone was at The Corner Pub the week before). Vrabel is beloved for coaching the Tennessee Titans to the AFC Championship Game in the 2019 season and helping build a winner despite an imperfect roster. But on this night, The Corner Pub’s patrons mostly left him alone, giving him space to enjoy beers and meatballs — the pub is known for those — with his buddies. Aside from a chat with the bar’s owner and his son, only one other person, stumbling, approached Vrabel, simply to let him know the Titans made a mistake firing him months earlier. Vrabel smiled and thanked him.

“I was born for bars like this,” he said later.

For Vrabel, this was a day off from his consulting job with the Cleveland Browns, an endeavor he took after he didn’t land another head-coaching job. Five months later, he is the most coveted candidate of this hiring cycle.

A flurry of interviews awaits, but Vrabel spent this week at his home in Park City, Utah, celebrating the New Year with his family, watching college football and remaining unbothered by the stress of what’s next. The Browns permitted Vrabel to leave with one game left in the regular season, giving him a head start on interviews with teams that already have job openings: The Jets, Saints and Bears, with others soon to come when the regular season ends.

Over the last five months, The Athletic spent extensive time with Vrabel as he worked for the Browns, and worked to create a vision for what his next head-coaching job would look like. He reflected on his time with the Titans, particularly the day it ended, and sized up what he believes is an inaccurate perception many around the league hold of him: a hard-ass, and hard to work with. It’s a challenge to overcome, though it won’t change Vrabel.

“I do love what I heard one time,” Vrabel said: “What somebody thinks of me is none of my business.”

In late August, Vrabel walked up to his favorite diner in Nashville, two cups of Starbucks in hand — one, a quad espresso, for him, and the other for the journalist spending the day with him. Vrabel wakes up at 4:30 most mornings to work out and, as far as he’s concerned, diner coffee won’t get him through the day. When he was informed outside beverages weren’t allowed, he chugged his cup, tossed the other and made his way to a corner booth.

Vrabel was on a break from his duties with the Browns, returning to Nashville for a few days to finalize the sale of his home — he and his wife, Jen, downsized but stayed in town — and, of course, to golf. His phone buzzed throughout breakfast, calls from contractors and inspectors and also Browns colleagues, including tight ends coach Tommy Rees.

Along the way, he shook hands with a few people dining at the restaurant, locals he’s gotten to know over six years in Tennessee. He rested his arms on the back of the booth, took a breath, and told a story about how he recently met a fan who didn’t realize he’d been fired and asked Vrabel how the team was going to be in 2024. His response was playful but dry: “I couldn’t give two s—s.”

Vrabel was called into Titans owner Amy Adams Strunk's office on Tuesday, Jan. 9, last year. Team president Burke Nihill was there too. The late-morning meeting was brief, lasting maybe two minutes — Vrabel didn't have any interest in lingering. He was fired. He asked Strunk to give him an hour to clear out his desk and to address his staff; the owner gave him the OK.

Vrabel gathered more than 20 coaches, the group cramming into a small room at the Titans' facility. One by one, holding back tears, he told each person how much they meant to him. He told tight ends coach Tony Dews he wished Dews' four daughters could have finished up their school in one spot. He told defensive coordinator Shane Bowen how much he was going to miss his family, and thanked him for all he'd done for the defense. He told defensive line coach Terrell Williams he was hoping to see Williams' son graduate from high school and to attend more of his hockey games, and he thanked him for teaching Vrabel how to better connect with his players.

"He had a story for everyone," Williams said.

"It was off-script and from the heart," said John Streicher, the team's director of football administration. "He took a hard day for himself and for everyone else and made everyone feel comfortable and loved, like everything was gonna be OK."

Vrabel called it "pure instinct."

"I obviously didn't plan on being fired," Vrabel said. "But I had a lot of close, personal relationships with the men and women in that room. I hired them, I know their families. They gave a lot for us, and I wanted to recognize what they'd done for us, what they meant to me and how I've seen them grow as people, or coaches, or watched their kids grow up, for goodness sakes."

Vrabel's Titans were considered overachievers during his six seasons. Coaches and players point to an approach built around week-to-week adaptability and attention to the smallest details. There were "teach tape" meetings — a look at how penalties were called and mistakes were made by other teams — on Friday, and officiating-crew deep dives on Saturday. "He always would say going into games: I want you physically and mentally exhausted by the end of the week by how hard we worked in practice and how much we put into the game plan," former Titans center Ben Jones said. "And I would be absolutely braindead by Sunday."

Every week Vrabel identified three keys to victory, emphasizing specific statistical targets (for instance: turnover differential, total rushing attempts or points allowed) depending on the opponent. Jones estimated that if the Titans hit their three keys, they won 90 percent of the time.

Vrabel would get to the facility early in the morning to work out and, for hours, camp outside the training room. If a player didn't show up for treatment on time, he'd call them to "make sure they had a great morning," Jones said, laughing.

The emphasis on accountability stretched from the practice squad up to the team's biggest stars. Vrabel was unafraid to call out A.J. Brown or Jeffery Simmons or Derrick Henry in front of the entire team. There was candor — brutal at times. Not everyone appreciated it, and Vrabel admits that, at times, he focused too much on the things players were doing wrong, instead of highlighting the things they were doing right. But most of the Titans locker room understood where he was coming from.

Said cornerback Caleb Farley, a Titans first-round pick in 2021: "Something coach Vrabel taught me was it doesn't matter what car you pull in on Sundays. It just matters if you're gonna hit somebody in their mouth. Football is a grown man's business. It's a nasty business. There's no room to be sensitive."

Despite a roster that was middling at best, the Titans went 9-7 in Vrabel's first year and narrowly missed the playoffs. The next year they went 9-7 again, this time not only making the postseason but also going on a surprise run to the AFC title game after upsetting the Patriots and Ravens (they lost to Kansas City in the conference title game). They went 11-5 in 2020 and 12-5 in '21 — then things changed. In 2022, general manager Jon Robinson traded Brown, an All-Pro, to Philadelphia and didn't adequately replace him. Injuries struck and the depth wasn't there; the Titans lost seven straight games to end the season, during which Robinson was fired.

Vrabel preferred interim GM Ryan Cowden take over for Robinson to maintain continuity, but Strunk "wanted to go in a new direction," Vrabel said, adding: "I was looking for a sound structure with a clear vision, open dialogue and communication." The Titans owner hired Ran Carthon from the 49ers and fired Cowden after the 2023 draft. Vrabel appeared to still be a part of the franchise's long-term plans heading into 2023, but the Titans struggled to a 6-11 season, after which Strunk decided it was time to move on.

Vrabel interviewed for a few head coaching jobs. He felt like he would have landed the Chargers gig if not for that franchise's connection to Jim Harbaugh. It never felt like he had a real shot at the Falcons job, and he wasn't especially interested in coaching the Panthers. But he felt there was a persistent line of questioning throughout those interviews, touching on a perception that he doesn't collaborate well with owners and general managers.

"I care about the team. No job is too small for me or anybody else to help the team win," Vrabel said. "I feel like I can work with anybody. I feel like winning is the ultimate goal and I — just like our team — have got to be willing to adjust and adapt to things that are going on.

"But I believe that I can respectfully disagree, have a conversation and move on and get past it. I'm also not afraid to share my opinion and what I believe in, my convictions about things that relate to helping a football team win, building a team or helping players, helping scouts. I love when coaches and scouts get together post-draft, I love collaborating with the general manager on inactives (on game day). I tried to incorporate that system into Tennessee because it's something that I embraced and loved about what we did in Houston. It's a unique relationship (coach and GM), one that has to remain respectful at all times. I think that it always was. Are we going to disagree? Yeah, I hope that we do so that we can grow. But ultimately, somebody's gotta be in charge."

Vrabel rented a different car each time he flew into Ohio this season, but lived out of the same room at a Residence Inn — "Resi Inn," as he calls it — a couple miles down the road from the Browns facility in Berea. He got to know the hotel staffers, and every morning they had a coffee, with extra shots of espresso, waiting for him. A mile down the road is one of Vrabel's favorite haunts, named, fittingly, Mike's Bar and Grill.

On a Wednesday night in November, he popped in to grab a bite to eat. Vrabel sat down, leaned his 6-foot-4, 260-pound frame against the back of one chair and propped his feet up on the seat of another, jet-lagged after a 10-day excursion to Italy with Jen to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary during the Browns' bye week. It was his first true vacation ... maybe ever. And it will probably be his last for a while.

"To me," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said in November, "it's insane that he's not a head coach."

The prospect of taking a year off never crossed Vrabel's mind. Some teams were interested in bringing him on as a defensive coordinator but he wasn't into that idea. He could have taken a consulting job at the University of Wisconsin under Luke Fickell, his college roommate, but he wasn't eager to leave the NFL orbit. Vrabel considered overtures to work in media, "but that wasn't a direction I wanted to head into yet" (he added he's open to the idea of media work down the line).

"I was as surprised as anybody when he didn't get a job," Stefanski said, "so I reached out and said: What's your plan here? Are you going to go sit on the couch for a year? If you know Vrabel, he has so much energy. You can only ski so much, right?"

Browns GM Andrew Berry viewed it as a unique opportunity to bring in someone of Vrabel's stature to enhance their player-development program while helping in other areas; Berry and Stefanski put on the full-court press to recruit him. Vrabel didn't have a relationship with either man outside of interactions at league meetings — which actually made it more appealing. It was an opportunity to spend the year learning from an analytically minded organization that does things a little differently from what he was used to, and a chance to stay in the NFL and keep an eye on how other teams around the league (especially the ones with potential job openings) were going about their business. Add in that he'd be returning to Northeast Ohio, where he grew up, and the fit was right.

He joined the Browns in March, though his position was not quite a full-time coaching role, giving him the freedom to spend more time with Jen ("We find ourselves missing each other when we're not together," Vrabel said) and to fly to Park City, Utah, where he also owns a house, to ski and celebrate holidays with his wife and two sons. He'd sometimes pop over for dinner at his parents' house, a 30-minute drive from the Browns' facility — one night in training camp, his mom gave him two cakes, carrot and red velvet, to bring to the facility — and on off days he'd often fly back to Nashville.

At the start of the season, Vrabel was working primarily with tight ends while helping Stefanski and Berry in other areas. The original plan was for Vrabel to spend most of the week with the team for home gamedays and fly back to Nashville or Park City when the team played on the road, still helping out with game-planning and watching film on a laptop plugged directly into the Browns' network. He was in a group text with the team's tight ends and he'd communicate throughout the week when he was out of town, especially after games on Sunday.

Vrabel was excited to be part of a team, though he admitted it was a strange feeling gearing up for Sundays.

"I kind of miss being there," Vrabel said in August. "Yeah, you're doing some stuff for them remotely, but you miss being around the guys, you miss the connection about being with the players and the young coaches. (Week 1 was) the first time I haven't been on the sidelines since before I got to high school."

During the weeks in Ohio, Vrabel routinely drove to the facility and worked out with the training staff, often before sunrise. For a stretch, Browns head trainer Joe Sheehan wasn't working out with them, so Vrabel started bombarding him with playful texts and selfies with the staff, enough to shame Sheehan into eventually joining them. Somehow — perhaps it's those quad espressos — Vrabel was still raring to go for practices in the afternoon.

For one November workout, the Browns were forced inside because of rain. When they're indoors, the practice area shrinks, making it easier for Vrabel to roam around. If coaching consultants are supposed to stand in the corner and observe practice, Vrabel didn't get that memo. As players started to stretch, Vrabel, wearing a Browns polo and shorts, skipped through the crowd — joyful, a man in his element. He'd periodically stop to chat, or to pat a player or two on the back. He stopped to talk to an assistant coach, and then, briefly, Stefanski. He walked over to a practice-squad defensive lineman, got in a three-point stance and showed him pass-rushing moves.

When Vrabel finally reached the opposite sideline, he picked up a red pinny with the No. 56 and joined the offensive linemen for the start of individual drills. "It's third down!" he called, then lined up as an edge rusher, the only one not wearing a helmet. He got into a pass-rushing stance and went at center Ethan Pocic. And then tackle Jedrick Wills. On one play, Wills nearly shoved him to the ground but Vrabel kept his feet. Later, Vrabel lined up as a linebacker and nearly was trampled by a group of offensive linemen.

"This guy is going to get hurt," said Joel Bitonio, the Browns' longtime guard, with a laugh.

Mike Vrabel, working as a Browns consultant in 2024, went through live drills with the offensive line at an indoor practice.

Vrabel, sans helmet, wasn't shy about jumping into the fray during live practice drills. (Zack Rosenblatt / The Athletic) Berry didn't know what he was going to get when the Browns brought Vrabel into the fold, or how often he'd even be around. But it clicked for Berry during OTAs, sitting in his office overlooking the practice field, watching Vrabel, drenched in sweat, racing Browns quarterback Jameis Winston from end to end at every practice.

"Anyone who asks me (about Vrabel), I would give this visual of him sprinting with the quarterbacks," Berry said. "He's doing it for the pure, unbridled joy of coaching football and teaching. I think that is unique and special."

Berry leaned on Vrabel, hired both for his personnel and coaching acumen, during both the free agency and draft processes, particularly the latter. And Vrabel found that process — seeing how Berry prepared for the draft — to be educational. Vrabel said he was permitted to read the way Browns scouts and talent evaluators wrote their scouting reports, how they incorporated analytics and how Berry "asked questions that would create some critical thinking for coaches." Berry gave Vrabel a list of prospects to study and asked Vrabel his opinion on how he would approach certain parts of the evaluation process. Berry also included Vrabel on some of the Top-30 visits, when prospects come to the team facility for interviews and evaluations.

"The stuff that he did wasn't just: What do you think about this guy?" Vrabel said. "There were more thought-provoking questions: What one skill are you most excited to work with about this player? What's one skill that you're most excited to try and develop in this player? I like that instead of him simply reading the (scouting) report on the computer."

Berry thought Vrabel was an "excellent" addition to the draft room and was moved by his willingness to collaborate. "He has the big-picture perspective," Berry said. "I think it's not only sitting in the head-coaching seat, but as someone who's had to recruit in college (at Ohio State), a former player, a successful defensive coordinator in the NFL — I think the mosaic of those experiences has really suited him well."

As for the perception that Vrabel is difficult to work with: "He has been a phenomenal partner in every area," Berry said. "Working with everyone from Kevin to our QCs (quality control assistants). Look, you want people who have strong opinions, but you also want people who can develop good working partnerships and be collaborative, and I would absolutely put Mike in that bucket."

When tight end Blake Whiteheart was on the practice squad at the start of the season, he said Vrabel would meet him (and other practice squaders) at the facility on off-days to watch film. They'd work on things like run-blocking techniques too.

"He's the same person every single day," Whiteheart said. "He's gonna try to make you the best player you can be. You can tell that because of how much time he spends with everybody — like, he spends time with me, I'm undrafted and he sees value in that."

Midway through the season, Vrabel switched from tight ends to the offensive line room after talking with Stefanski, feeling like he could be more useful with a larger group of players. Quickly, he bonded with second-year offensive tackle Dawand Jones. Vrabel was instrumental in building up Jones's confidence. Jones has struggled with weight at times (he's listed at 6-foot-8 and 374 pounds) and Vrabel made it a point to get Jones (and his coaches) to celebrate small victories, like when Jones lost 11 pounds one week.

"Nobody's going to develop in anything they do without some small victories along the way," Vrabel said.

Vrabel hadn't been traveling for road games, but Jones asked him if he'd start coming — with Stefanski's permission, Vrabel agreed. "Dawand was really working hard and trying to change some behaviors and work on himself," Vrabel said. "I felt like I had made a commitment (to him) and wanted to be involved." (Jones fractured his ankle in Week 11 but Vrabel kept going to the road games.)

On gameday, Vrabel wore a headset and could listen to coaches but wasn't involved with play-calling outside of offering Stefanski the occasional opinion or assisting coaches on the sideline. He acted as a hype man, for offense and defense, in between plays, and usually helped coach up offensive linemen during pre-game warmups. It was in those moments, and watching him on the practice field, that Stefanski came to a realization about Vrabel.

"He likes being around here, we like having him around," Stefanski said. "Sometimes I'll look over and Vrabes is playing as the defensive tackle on our scout team and our guards are putting their hands on him and moving him. So I'm thinking to myself: What the f— else would you be doing with your life right now?"

Vrabel doesn't have a good answer to that question.

"I've only had three jobs in my life," Vrabel said. "I caddied and carried golf bags in high school, I played football and I coach football. I'm not cut out to do much more."

Vrabel has spent the past year really considering what he wants out of his next head-coaching job, the kind of coach he wants to be, and what he wants out of the organization that hires him. His season away helped to crystalize his priorities. As always, he broke it down into three keys: Ownership, collaboration, quarterback.

"There's got to be clear communication with ownership, so that we understand as coaches what the expectations are," Vrabel said. "That's so we can explain to them what's reasonable, what we can do, what we probably can do and what we're going to try to do — or die trying. I want to have a structure in place that people see the game the same way I do from an X's and O's standpoint, from a personnel standpoint, with team-building. We would hopefully have that alignment, which is critical.

"And I would like to be able to say that there's a quarterback that you feel like you can win with — or that there's a path to find the one that you can win with."

In late October, Vrabel took his seat in a crowded New York City restaurant, in town to meet up with some NFL friends. He leaned back into the booth to take up less space at an already-cramped table. He indulged in pasta as wandering eyes began to stare. A man in a Jets hat, dining with his girlfriend, drank a glass of wine and, eventually, mustered up the courage to slide across the booth, putting him by Vrabel's side.

He asked for a photo; Vrabel obliged.

"Where are you gonna go next?" the man asked. "You gonna come to the Jets?"

Vrabel smiled.

"We'll see in January."

Brent Keally and Kent McMillin are regulars at The Corner Pub. In 2019, Vrabel and Jen had stopped in to watch March Madness games. Keally had a table reserved (in the corner, of course) and spotted the coach looking for somewhere to sit in the crowded bar. Keally offered the Vrabels a seat; the group became fast friends.

They golfed that Sunday and then, on average, about four times a week throughout his time with the Titans, McMillin said — and now every time he flies back to Nashville. Over his six years with the Titans, Keally and McMillin would attend most Titans games as Vrabel's guests, and they knew not to bother him after Wednesday night, when game prep intensified. They accompanied Vrabel to the NFL Honors in Los Angeles in 2021 when he won Coach of the Year, and to New England last year when the Patriots put him in the Ring of Honor for his tenure as a Pro Bowl linebacker and a part of three Super Bowl winners.

"Everybody else sees him as a guy who blows off people at press conferences," McMillin said. "But that's not Mike. Mike is closely vested. And then when he feels comfortable, he opens up. He keeps that circle tight and small."

Last January, less than a week after Vrabel had been fired, the trio was back at The Corner Pub. Vrabel was at his table, laughing with his buddies, drinking Miller Lite. His friends were stunned when Vrabel didn't land a head coaching job last offseason, but they never worried about him, because Vrabel wasn't worried. It's January — we're about to see why.

METROWEST DAILY NEWS

Patriots Beat: A mind for the game

By Albert Breer

Gerry Rardin coached Mike Vrabel for four years at Walsh Jesuit High, so he knew not to be shocked by the kid's antics.

But even for Vrabel, this was a little much.

It was the summer of 1993, and Rardin - on his first trip down to Columbus from Akron to visit - was told to meet the Ohio State freshman in head coach John Cooper's office.

Vrabel was there, alright. Feet up on the desk. Hands clasped behind his head. Smile on his face.

"He'd already taken over," recounts Rardin, "the same way he did at our high school."

Here was this 18-year-old recruit, mere weeks beyond his high school graduation, without having even donned a Buckeye uniform, in the office of the leader of one of the most powerful and decorated college football programs in the country. With his feet up on the desk.

And the best part is this: There was nothing to anyone who knows Vrabel even remotely odd about it.

Sure, next to no one could skate with that kind of bravado, much less the new kid at a tough-guy football factory. But Vrabel could. No matter where he was, no matter who was involved, he always could.

"That's him," says Vikings linebackers coach Fred Pugac, Vrabel's defensive coordinator at Ohio State. "That's his make-up, that's his character."

Other parts of his character? A work ethic unmatched. A mind for the game. A compassion for others. A willingness to help anyone.

It's little wonder that Vrabel wants to coach when he hangs up his cleats.

But to say this has been the plan all along would be wrong. Had Vrabel not gotten to this level of playing, he really doesn't know where he'd be.

"I don't know if it'd be in coaching," he said. "I think I've really enjoyed learning the game by playing football. So if it wasn't for playing the game, I don't know if I'd necessarily be coaching. But over my years, I've played with some good coaches, going back to high school and college and pro football.

"You start to understand the game, you start to see how they approach different players, how they get the most out of each player. So I think that's where the attraction is. Because I've done it for so long, this is what I know."

With all the respect in the world, those around Vrabel are going to call him on that, the same way he'd call them out on just about anything.

The kid was born to coach, they say. If he didn't choose coaching at a young age, well, coaching probably just chose him.

People person

The reason for Vrabel's ability to push people's buttons at just the right times may be, in part, his sense of humor.

But moreso, it's because he knows his audience and the situation. He knows what he can get away with and when he can't get away with it, and he's going push things to the limit on both counts, with toes planted firmly on the line.

"He gets that wit from his mother," says his dad, Chuck Vrabel, himself a decades-long basketball and football coach at Norton High in Ohio. "He's always been able to do that. That's the piece of him that's obvious, he likes to have fun and work. When it's time to work, he'll roll up his sleeves."

It's that part of his personality that funnels directly into a coach's ethos.

A taskmaster risks losing his players by driving too hard. A jovial guy risks losing their respect.

Somehow, Vrabel knows how to be both.

"He has a great sense of what time it is," says Rardin. "He knew when he could make a crack, or make a comment on someone or something. And he knew when it was time to shut up and play his hardest. I can't remember one time when I thought he was being out of line."

Even better, he seems like to being both.

Because, in his mind, it's all a part of getting to know people and, really, that's the part of coaching that really intrigues him. It's to help the next guy on down the line, and make him better, and develop a relationship that means more than wearing the same logo.

That's why all these guys can see him going from jersey and shoulder pads to polo shirt and headset seamlessly.

"I envision him being a tough guy coach," says Pugac. "A guy who's fair, friendly and firm. He'll understand his players."

And as far as understanding the game, he's got that part down.

Passing it on

In a lot of ways, Vrabel's current career is graduate school for his next one.

By preparing harder than anyone on a week-in and week-out basis, he's learning to do what he'll do when retirement calls.

"You study the game, you try to prepare like a coach would," says Vrabel of getting ready to coach. "And you work with players. Whether it's college players or younger players, you just try and relay what you know in a formal fashion they can relate to."

On so many levels, that's just what Vrabel's been doing.

In Foxboro, it's tutoring young linebackers like Pierre Woods or Eric Alexander. At his alma mater, it's working with guys like Packers linebacker A.J. Hawk or Cowboys linebacker Bobby Carpenter or Chargers linebacker Matt Wilhelm, all of whom have credited Vrabel for helping in their development.

And it's also in running the FUNDamental Football Camp - put on by the Second and Seven Foundation that he founded with OSU teammates Ryan Miller and Luke Fickell to promote literacy - where kids from ages 8-to-14 come to learn the game. Or even packing up his own sons, Tyler and Carter, and driving to West Virginia for a similar camp that teammate Troy Brown runs over the summer.

"He'd help other players, all the time," says Pugac. "I remember him coming back during the offseason, when I was at Ohio State, and at spring ball he'd be there talking with the players. He'd be sitting in my meetings and talking. He wants to be involved with people. He's a people person."

That, too, is nothing new. At Walsh, Vrabel would tutor the younger throwers on the track team, hold the blocks for the champion 300-meter runner, and he'd make everyone around him better.

Because he genuinely cared to.

"You'd see it time after time," says Chuck Vrabel. "He was always trying to help, doesn't matter if you're talking about Little League or the pros. And he never wanted to do it to coach. He cared about the guy next to him."

Student teacher

Vrabel's moving back to his old role this year, playing outside linebacker on early downs and as a rush end in passing situations. Last year, he was an inside linebacker on early downs and an underneath cover man in long-yardage.

Yes, that speaks to his athleticism. But it's also his encyclopedic knowledge of the game that facilitates that versatility.

"Vrabel knows the entire defense inside and out," says fellow linebacker Tedy Bruschi. "That's probably the biggest compliment I can give him. Ask him what a safety does on a particular coverage, and he'll tell you that, and he'll throw in what the strong-side corner does too."

As Vrabel said, all that's part of becoming a better player, while preparing to coach. But there's other stuff, too, he's done that really is coaching specific.

When he talks with Fickell, now co-defensive coordinator at Ohio State, he's getting an idea for the life of a college coach. He's got the ear of Buckeye head coach Jim Tressel, who knows of Vrabel's desire to coach and stay near the central Ohio home he's made for his wife and kids.

And he's kept close notes in learning from coaches in his past like Rardin, Cooper and Bill Cowher, and those in his present with the Patriots.

What he's thinking, for now, is to catch on as a strength-and-conditioning assistant or position coach when his playing days are done (no, there isn't a timetable on that, yet). Then, he'll work his way up.

Ask most who know him, and they say it'll happen quickly.

"He's always been a coach, so I think it'll be easy for him. He was coach on the field here for us," says Rardin. "He always helped the younger guys. We'd run team defense in practice, and he'd stand up and say 'stop' if it wasn't right. Then, you'd see him moving kids around and getting kids in position. That was common."

Maybe, Rardin says, he'd rag on someone while doing it. Maybe he'd be hard on them. Either way, it always seemed well within his right.

"Because there's nothing fake about it," explains Pugac. "Not everyone loved Mike. But the guys you want in your foxhole with you went to him. ... He's a tough ass, he's a people person, he's a smart ass. He's all those things, he knows how to deal with everyone. That's just Mike."

That Vrabel, these guys say, is no different than he's ever been. It's the high school freshman Rardin had in Spanish 1, whose cracks, Rardin says, had a "nothing is sacred" edge to them even back then. It's the same kid who aced that class and just about every other one he took at Walsh.

It's the Vrabel who not only goes back to help at Ohio State, but joined his wife Jen in donating \$75,000 to the school, then months later, went at basketball coach Thad Matta's request to speak to the school's Final Four-bound hoop team. It's the same loyal guy who goes back to Walsh whenever he's asked to.

"It doesn't matter what it is, if you ask Mike to do it, he'll do it," says Chuck Vrabel. "Mike just wants to be Mike. He's never demonstrated he wants to be known as a big pro football player. With him, it's simple: 'I'm Mike Vrabel.'" That means he's just another guy, yet a leader. The funny man, yet the serious one. The one who knows everything about his scheme and gameplan, yet wants the guy next to him to know it better than he does.

It's all that which says that at some point, when Vrabel puts his feet up on that head coach's desk, not even the most distant stranger will cast a befuddled eye. Because some day, chances are, that desk will be his own.

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 [Ekualle] 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."

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.

OL Will Campbell



Sunshine in his pocket: Memory of lost 'brother' fuels Patriots' Will Campbell

By Mark Daniels

The phone started to ring as the band played Justin Timberlake's "Can't Stop the Feeling."

Will Campbell sat on a white leather couch wearing a green pinstripe suit, surrounded by his closest family members. When he answered the phone, with the Patriots on the other line, his dream came true and those around him couldn't believe it.

The shock wasn't because Campbell was drafted No. 4 overall. It was the lyrics to the song that echoed from above.

"I got that sunshine in my pocket. Got that good soul in my feet."

The surreal moment at the 2025 NFL Draft brought the family so much joy – and also served as a reminder of who wasn't there.

When the 21-year-old arrived in the green room, his aunt, Lindsey Braddock, handed Campbell and his brother, Thomas, a photo of her son, Tarver Braddock, who passed away last year at the age of 16 in a fire.

Campbell, who loved Tarver like a brother, and Thomas each placed the photo inside their suit pockets, keeping their best friend close.

"And then right before Will's phone rang from the Patriots, 'Sunshine in my pocket' was playing on the loudspeaker," Lindsey Braddock said. "It's really crazy - kind of like he was there with us."

"It's crazy just the way that God works," Campbell added. "He sends you so many signs of the person that you lose."

The loss of Tarver Braddock deeply impacted the community of Monroe, La., and devastated the Braddock and Campbell families.

A junior in high school, Tarver loved to make others laugh and relished every chance to root for his cousin. In his favorite "drip," he was a fixture at Campbell's LSU games. When Campbell was drafted and his dream was realized, Tarver was naturally on his mind. While Tarver's spirit was there, his presence was missed.

"I think that he was with us every second, and we joked because he would have been living it up in the green room," said Holly Campbell, Will's mother. "Like that is totally his vibe. The flashier, the better - life of the party. He would have been savoring every moment. We definitely felt his presence."

The family aims to turn the tragedy into something meaningful through the Tarver Braddock Foundation. During a challenging and emotional year, Will Campbell has done everything he can to preserve his cousin's memory - and to give back in his name.

Tarver Braddock was a shining light
It was hard not to smile around Tarver.

There were many layers to the charismatic teenager. He played football, and baseball and was on the student council at Neville High School, and he gave back, helping on church retreats. Tarver loved his family, and they adored him. He was a fierce protector of his sister, Stella.

For Campbell, calling Braddock his cousin would have downplayed their relationship.

"We were brothers," Campbell said. "The only thing we didn't share was a last name. We did everything together - me, him, and my brother. Our family is very close... That was one of my best friends since he was born."

Sisters Lindsey Braddock and Holly Campbell lost their mother, Debbie, when their children were very young. That's when they decided that the two families would help raise each other's children – Will, Thomas, Tarver, and Stella.

The families live 5 minutes from each other in Monroe. The Campbells and Braddocks did everything together. A teacher, Lindsey taught all of them in fourth grade at Sallie Humble Elementary School in town. She's the self-proclaimed disciplinarian. Holly is the softer one of the group.

"We just kind of rallied and raised each other's kids," Holly said.

As they grew older, Tarver and Will got closer.

Campbell thought Tarver was the funniest person on earth. They riled each other up, often getting into mischief, even in church.

"Will was this 6-foot-6 giant of a person that everybody thought was so mature and so grown up. But when he was with Tarver, he acted like a 12-year-old," Lindsey said. "They just were so silly and so rowdy. Tarver was a character. That was his whole mission, to make people laugh and to make people smile."

The families were a traveling pack, rarely missing an LSU game and the chance to see Campbell develop into the top offensive tackle in the nation, even on the road. They sat near the sidelines or in the stands wearing his No. 66 jersey. Tarver was his No. 1 fan. When Campbell committed to LSU, he was there in Baton Rouge to help him move into his first dorm.

"They've not only been supportive through football, but that's just how we are with everyday life," Campbell said. "It doesn't have anything to do with football. That's just a part of it. We're just that tight of a family, and I have that good of people around me, which I'm very fortunate and blessed. It means everything."

A prolonged year of mourning

Campbell entered his final season at LSU in pain. A 6-foot-6 offensive tackle, he was used to being hit, but this was different.

"It was probably the most difficult stretch of my life," Campbell said.

On Feb. 3, 2023, his childhood friend, Luke Moses, took his own life. In the 15 days that followed, two of his high school teammates, David Jackson and Martavius Martin, each died. Once he thought he had a chance to breathe, the grief didn't stop. On Oct. 16, 2023, Will's grandfather, William L. "Billy" Husted III, died at the age of 71.

Three months later, Will Campbell got more devastating news.

On Jan. 5, 2024, around 4 a.m., a fire started and moved quickly through a mobile home where six teenagers slept. The group was there on a hunting trip in Jefferson County, Miss. While the other boys, including Thomas Campbell, survived, leaping out of the windows, Tarver died at the scene.

"I believe it was the pot belly stove on the patio, and I think the wind shifted, and it was all such in a hurry," Lindsey said. "(Tarver) was the one that would handle all the plans ... He was just very, very like that. He was in charge. The fact that he didn't survive, was truly mind blowing to everyone that knew him."

The loss was crushing for the family.

The tragedy happened four days after Campbell played in LSU's bowl game against Wisconsin. After losing three friends and his grandfather, Campbell had one brother hospitalized and another gone.

The devastating loss created a hole for the projected first-round pick to carry through his final season at LSU.

"Obviously, it's a family's worst nightmare," Holly Campbell said. "A student-athlete has a lot on their plate in a normal circumstance, so this was heavy. And (Will) really did channel all his emotions and just stayed focused. I really can't say enough about his support system in Baton Rouge. He pressed on and stayed the course."

Football became Campbell's ultimate release.

"It was a long lead-up of things that just kept hitting me off the field," Campbell said. "I just think that my outlet was football. That was a place where I could walk into the building, forget about everything that is going on in the world, and just go and focus on what I love to do."

Tarver Braddock Foundation

Holly Campbell used to pick up her young sons from elementary school and take them to the local mall in Monroe. Campbell has memories of standing on the sidewalk outside, ringing a bell to help raise money for the Salvation Army around Christmas time. He recalls times he went with his church to give food to the homeless.

His family always preached giving back.

"It was instilled in us. It's important to us to always serve. I think that's what God has in mind for us," Holly said. "There's nothing more important to me for them to be a good human and not just a good athlete."

As Campbell developed into an obvious NFL prospect, his plan was always to start a foundation. He and his aunt dreamed of starting a charity to help people in need.

After Tarver died, that plan was put into motion much quicker than anyone ever wanted. Lindsey and Brett Braddock started the Tarver Braddock Foundation and Will instantly became its most recognizable spokesman. They aim to bring joy to others through random acts of kindness.

They've donated money to a local children's museum, a playground, a ministry, a youth baseball program, and more. They've handed out scholarships to students and helped families in need.

"Over these past two months, my aunt and uncle, while I was flying around the country and ended up in New England, they gave out like 10 college scholarships to kids around the Northeast Louisiana area," Campbell said. "There's no act that's too big or too small."

Along this journey, Campbell has put his face on Louisiana billboards. He's run football camps in honor of Tarver and the foundation. Before the draft, he and Lindsey delivered a car to a teenager in a single-parent household. He called his aunt the next day to ask, "What are we doing next?"

For Campbell and his family, the outpouring of support for the Tarver Braddock Foundation has been uplifting. After the draft, donations from Patriots fans poured in.

"I feel really super blessed that Will has this platform to speak out about it," Lindsey said. "And the fact that he chooses to talk about Tarver, I think, is healing for him, instead of burying it and just hiding the pain."

"I think it would be really easy for a young person to just mask it and pretend and not talk about it, but Will's heart is like that. He's very giving. He's very loving, and he adored and cared so much about Tarver, I think he realizes and knows that he can make a real difference to carry his legacy on. It means the world to all of us in our family."

A fitting reminder

Leading up to the NFL Draft, Campbell lived with Louisiana native Jack Bech. The TCU wide receiver lost his brother, Tiger, on New Year's Day in the terrorist attack in New Orleans.

Campbell talked to his friend about grief and the little things that would give him joy. Every so often, Campbell was reminded of Tarver in some form.

"It's just so crazy, because I lost my brother (Tarver) the year before, and then he had lost his throughout this process," Campbell said. "I was able to kind of be there and walk him through what it's going to be like, and he also shared stuff that he sees, or his family has seen that reminds them of the one that they lost."

"Seeing the smallest little thing that will remind you of them, it's so cool. It's like them being there."

Little did Campbell know, it would happen on draft night.

When Lindsey arrived at the green room, she saw Will and Thomas in their similar pinstripe suits. With Will wearing green and Thomas blue, she envisioned Tarver donning one just like them but in a different color. He would've relished the moment and celebrated as Campbell's phone rang with the Patriots on the other line.

Instead, his picture sat inside a pocket in their custom-made jackets. It's the same wallet-sized photo that Lindsey gives to everyone who receives a gift in their son's honor. Her husband, Brett, explains to the recipient who Tarver is and how he's blessing them with this donation.

The Tarver Braddock Foundation's logo is a rising sun, symbolizing Tarver's light and his family's goal to keep it shining in his memory. As the Patriots called Campbell on draft night and his green room phone rang, the family was in awe as meaningful lyrics echoed from above.

As Justin Timberlake flowed from the speakers, Campbell walked to the stage. In that moment, that photo and Tarver Braddock was the "Sunshine in his pocket" making a great moment even more meaningful. Just like always.

The Athletic

Whoever drafts Will Campbell can expect a huge left tackle with an even bigger heart

By Steve Buckley

For anyone driving along Cypress Street in West Monroe, La., a few weeks back, it was hard not to notice the giant billboard with Will Campbell's face on it. Of course. Civic displays of affection like this are not uncommon when a local football star is about to be selected in the first round of the NFL Draft.

And make no mistake: The good people of Monroe, a city of some 46,000 located across the Ouachita River from West Monroe in northeast Louisiana, are popping their buttons over Campbell.

It was at Neville High that Campbell honed his skills as a member of the powerhouse Tigers football team, after which he gained national prominence as an offensive lineman at LSU. Campbell's next stop appears to be the New England Patriots, who will pick fourth at the NFL Draft Thursday night and are looking for a left tackle to protect franchise quarterback Drake Maye.

Yet the billboard makes no mention of Campbell's NFL prospects, or his exploits at LSU. It's just a photo of Campbell in his LSU uniform, and these words: "JOIN WILL & FAMILY HELP SUPPORT THE TARVER BRADDOCK FOUNDATION."

Tarver Braddock and Will Campbell were cousins. In every other respect, they were brothers. Tarver was four years younger than Will, but they were a pair, always laughing and horsing around in that way that brothers do. During weekly services at St. Paul's United Methodist Church on South Monroe Street, things could get out of hand.

"They had to be separated at church," said Brett Braddock, Tarver's father. "We couldn't put them next to each other. Not for being bad, but for being funny."

Oh, yes, Tarver was a funny kid. Everyone agrees on that point. "But nobody thought Tarver was funnier than Will did," said Tarver's mom, Lindsey Braddock.

"That's it, that's a good quote," agreed Brett Braddock. "Will laughed at everything Tarver said or did. Everything."

Tarver Braddock was just 16 when he perished in an accidental fire on Jan. 5, 2024, while at a hunting camp in Mississippi. He was a junior at Neville High, involved in football and baseball, was a member of the Interact Club and Student Council, loved participating in the shop program. As noted in his obituary, "The number one thing he loved in life was making people laugh." Small wonder, then, that the family requested that anyone planning to attend the funeral "... dress in your happy clothes to celebrate his life. He would want us all to be more like him; smile a lot and spread sunshine wherever you go."

Will Campbell poses with his cousin Tarver Braddock in 2023. (Courtesy of the Tarver Braddock Foundation)
In that spirit, the family established the Tarver Braddock Foundation. Mission statement: "To spread love, laughter, and happiness through random acts of kindness." As recently as February, according to Fox8 television in New Orleans, the foundation delivered an act of kindness in the form of paying a year's rent for a single parent who'd been having a hard time making ends meet.

Which brings us to last weekend, and to a pickleball tournament in Monroe to raise money for the foundation. Will Campbell arrived early and he left late. Memo to the New England Patriots or any other team that might be interested in drafting Campbell: Fear not, as he did not play in the tournament.

"He did all the hustling around and hauling ice chests, that kind of stuff," said Neville High football coach Mike Collins, who was defensive coordinator during Campbell's high school days. "He was doing Will stuff. Being a servant. That's what he is."

Will stuff.

"He always knew if he was able to make it to the next level, being in the NFL, that he would want to start a foundation and give back," Brett Braddock said. "But he had been doing stuff before, like with the Salvation Army and food banks. This isn't new."

Much has been said and written about Campbell's arm length of 32 5/8 inches, as measured at the NFL scouting combine. His wingspan was measured at 77 3/8 inches. Plenty of experts are suggesting these numbers fall short of

ideal for an NFL left tackle, even if the rest of Campbell is exactly what you want if you're in the market for someone to protect your quarterback: 6-foot-6, 319 pounds. And anyway, others maintain that solid footwork, among other intangibles, can make the questions about arm length and wingspan go away.

And then there's heart. Team medics have the equipment to measure the beat, blood pressure, circulation, and so on. There's also that other heart, the kind that sturdy football coaches such as Collins are experts at talking about. Such as when he says, "Let me put it in a word for you. Whatever it is, Will's got it. It's the way he approaches everything he does. No matter how big the mountain is, he's gonna climb it."

And then there's the heart that gets broken, if only symbolically, when a loved one dies. Yes, Campbell adhered to protocol and climbed into some happy clothes for Tarver's funeral — a bright plaid shirt and jeans — but make no mistake: Like all members of the Campbell and Braddock families, like most of Monroe, West Monroe and the surrounding communities, Campbell felt this incalculable loss.

And so it is that when Campbell traveled to Green Bay, Wis., this week for the NFL Draft, he was not alone. His parents, Brian and Holly Campbell, and his younger brother, Thomas, were with him. And right along with them were Tarver's parents, Brett and Lindsey, and Tarver's sister, Stella. These two families have always vacationed as one family. The NFL Draft is merely the latest outing on the schedule.

"Will's always had the ambition and desire to play football, but he has this great, big heart," Brett Braddock said. "His heart shows, especially in times like this. We're just so glad our families are so close. That's what has helped carry us through this terrible time."

In Green Bay Thursday night, the Campbells and Braddocks will get to do some smiling.

Tarver Braddock would have loved that.

Boston Herald

The inside story of how Will Campbell became the Patriots' 1st-round pick

By Andrew Callahan

Minutes before the last job interview of his life, Will Campbell ran.

He pumped his arms in a white hooded sweatshirt and pounded his cleats into green, artificial turf. Sweat slipped from his dark walnut curls, down his 6-foot-6 frame, soaking the hoodie. Then, he stopped.

Campbell scanned the white domed ceiling above and the familiar football field stretched out ahead. A glare accented his thin goatee; the first sign of many this 21-year-old is an old soul.

A hundred yards away, out-of-town visitors entered through the opposite end of LSU's practice facility ready to start the interview. Campbell walked over in a froth, dripping with a confidence that said he knew he belonged.

He has always belonged here. Be it a football field, the LSU campus, virtually anywhere in his home state. Campbell, all 310 pounds of him, is a breathing testament to the belief geography is destiny.

Campbell hails from northeastern Louisiana, a city called Monroe where his mother, Holly, sat in the same seats watching high school football games as her mother and her mother before her. Holly's game-day parking pass is older than both her sons. She runs a sporting goods store that's been in the family since 1937 and sits less than two miles from their church.

Campbell's father farms and cooks, sometimes Cajun seafood stews like étouffée. He played football in college after begging his parents to move closer to Monroe, where he could play at Neville High School and where he eventually met his wife. Today, he works in agriculture retail and grows soybeans, corn and cotton on his own time. They call him Bull.

Bull is a natural storyteller, especially tales like the LSU-Georgia game he and Holly attended months before Will was born. Late in the game, the marching band played LSU's fight song, and a future Tiger started kicking inside the womb.

"You could see him jumping up and down in there," Bull says.

To know Will is to reckon with his home. The soil beneath his family tree is the same he's walked since he was born; it's the dirt where he laid irrigation pipes at his father's farm; the backyard earth his cleats sank into before Neville High School and Tiger Stadium; the land he spilt blood for sport, hunting ducks, deer and alligators.

Yet with days left before the NFL Draft last month, the Patriots believed there was still fresh ground to cover.

On April 16, coach Mike Vrabel led a contingent of a half-dozen Patriots evaluators into LSU's facility to meet Campbell. Vrabel had heard from his scouts and read their reports on this three-year starter, two-time captain and consensus All-American. He'd met Campbell at the NFL scouting combine in late February and again during a March visit in Foxboro.

Still, Vrabel wanted more. Something he could not see, nor hear.

Vrabel wanted to feel Campbell. His violence and grit. To learn what drives a man beyond destiny, and to find out if he could break it. To determine whether Campbell can help power the Patriots back to the place he believes they belong.

So Vrabel, still around the 6-foot-4 and 261 pounds he was listed during his days as an outside linebacker, wrapped a yellow blocking pad with black straps around his torso. After some pleasantries, he ordered Campbell to hit him. Block him. Fight him.

A crowd of curious, fresh-faced LSU players gathered 20 yards away with Campbell's former position coach, Brad Davis. More than anyone standing in that group, Davis understood what was coming.

"It was like watching a prize fighter walk out of the tunnel and into the ring," he remembered. "Will had this look on his face that I had seen so many times pregame. It didn't matter who lined up across from him. He was going to battle."

No spectator said a word in a silence of reverence.

"Everybody understood what was at stake," Davis said.

Vrabel beckoned.

"Let's go."

Monroe made

A young Will Campbell kneels for a photo before a new football season. (Courtesy of the Campbell family)

Three weeks after the workout, Eric Herndon took a Saturday morning stroll around Monroe.

Herndon is 49, built, bald, bearded and the longtime strength and conditioning coach at Neville High. He likes to open conversations by joking he feels better than he deserves, but today Herndon deserved to soak in a pleasant day, knowing summer humidity will soon swallow Louisiana whole.

Herndon strolled past the Campbells' house, a white ranch with black shutters and a large oak tree out front looming over a small yard. The tree branches shade trimmed grass and tidy bushes and a flag holder jutting out of its trunk often flying LSU purple and gold. A driveway runs roughly 20 yards up the right side of the property, with a basketball hoop at the top.

A few minutes and blocks later, Herndon stared out at the Ouachita River that snakes through town and wondered what's in the water; how and why greatness seems to sprout here every generation or so.

Bill Russell was born in Monroe. Delta Airlines first took flight here, as did the careers of famous musicians, politicians and a few Major League Baseball all-stars. Herndon's mind next drifted to Campbell, and the time he first showed up in his weight room.

Greatness was nowhere in sight.

"He was just like all the other freshmen," Herndon says. "He was bigger, but he wasn't 6-foot-6 and 300 pounds yet, either."

Campbell, of course, has always been big. He was an infant who used to reach above the kitchen counter before age 2 to snatch a snack. Then he became a Little Leaguer who had to bring his bat, glove and birth certificate to tournaments so he could play. Come football season, parents begged Bull his son not play so their boys could be spared from the violent, devastating runs of little "Jerome Bettis Jr."

Sometime in those PeeWee years, Campbell also began smearing eye black all over his face before games, a tradition that lives on today.

"When he steps on the football field, it's like a different human being," Bull said. "Football Will is different from Thursday afternoon Will."

A few years later, after Will moved to offensive line, started as a freshman at Neville, and angrily cried on the three-and-a-half-hour drive home from his first LSU recruiting camp when he wasn't offered a scholarship, then returned two weeks later and secured it, he took on another new position: coach.

An assistant on Neville's staff named Chad Johnson had flipped from coaching linebackers to offensive line before Campbell's junior season of 2020. His background in offensive coaching was minimal, so an arrangement formed: Campbell would coach the tackles, while Johnson kept his focus on the centers and guards.

"He was just so smart and just so mature," Johnson said. "I figured out pretty quickly that he knew what he was doing."

Campbell applied lessons he'd learned from Roddrell Stewart, his personal trainer of more than a year. Stewart, another son of Louisiana who goes by the nickname Burger, speaks like Campbell is never too far from mind. He was among his first clients, a 15-year-old boy who changed how Stewart ran his business, forcing him to realize individualized coaching is the best coaching he could provide.

No other client, Stewart believes, could have pushed through a particular 2020 summer session when temperatures neared 100 degrees, a day that now lives seared into his memory. How they locked eyes as Campbell labored through his fatigue. His best guess is Campbell survived because of Bull and his farm.

"Where you've got to do manual labor, it gives you a different type of grit," Stewart said. "Man, he didn't cower. No matter how difficult it was, no matter how hot it was, no matter what it was, he was always willing to work."

At Neville football practices, Campbell's words still echo across the field, though this time it's not a 16-year-old barking them. It's Johnson.

"Sit on a stool! Sit on a stool!" he commands.

The phrase is a reminder for offensive linemen to keep their backs straight while jumping out of their stance. Johnson jokes his fondest memory of Campbell is when he jumped out of his chair to kick his senior captain out of a meeting for goofing off. The real answer is a famous story about Neville.

The quarterfinal state playoff game in 2021, Campbell's senior year. A serious groin strain had sidelined him for the start of a game Neville expected to win, but trailed at halftime. So Campbell ducked under the stands and began to undress. Civilian clothes off, uniform on.

"What are you doing?" his coaches asked.

"I'm going in the damn game," Campbell shot back. He played the rest of the night. Neville won.

None of this surprised Davis, who had recruited him for years. Campbell looked the part of a starting left tackle, save for his short arms. But the ferocity and strain on his film attracted Davis more than anything.

"This kid went out there and exhausted himself," Davis said. "You were watching the game from the opening kickoff until the last snap, and this kid was playing full tilt."

Oklahoma was the only school that tugged at Campbell hard enough to give him pause during his recruitment. But the beckon of Baton Rouge proved too strong.

He was off to LSU. Destiny called.

An uncommon captain

In March 2022, LSU's football team paused its winter workouts for the greatest week on the academic calendar.

Spring break.

Davis watched every player leave campus to bask on beaches in Florida or Texas or the simple quiet of home. That is, except for one lineman — his freshman left tackle from Monroe.

Campbell had enrolled in January, a semester early, and was in the process of packing on 17 pounds of muscle to push himself over 300 pounds for the summer. That week, inside an empty facility, he asked Davis and a graduate assistant to log almost a full work day with him and him alone.

For six to seven hours a day, they studied film. They walked through plays. They sharpened his techniques and conditioning. Campbell wanted to start as a freshman, something Davis knew from the first time they met and entertained even though LSU's history said 18-year-old linemen wait their turn.

But by the time Campbell's chief competition, a fourth-year senior with game experience, returned to resume their position battle in practice, the war was over. It took Campbell less than a month to graduate from third-string backup to undisputed starter.

"By the 12th or 13th practice, it was a consensus as a staff that he was our best tackle," Davis said. "It wasn't even close."

Campbell finished the season a freshman All-American. He started every game but the one he missed because he had been hospitalized the day before due to what the team announced as dehydration. That season, Davis remembered, a few teammates remained skeptical of his rise, claiming Campbell was a coach's pet. They ridiculed him.

But the following summer, even the agnostics had seen too much not to believe.

"Everything Will does is about work. Hard work," said former LSU edge rusher and fifth-round Patriots draft pick Bradyn Swinson. "That's a guy that's going to do everything right."

As a sophomore, Campbell became a captain and earned a unique LSU honor: the jersey No. 7, which according to the program reflects the "most impactful player on the roster from the state of Louisiana." Indeed, his early arrivals to meetings and exhaustive film study were as real as the pancake blocks he delivered on Saturdays.

Underneath all of his achievements and accolades, Davis discovered something new. Campbell is a pleaser at heart, especially for those closest to him.

"If he felt like he let me or his teammates down, it absolutely crushed him," Davis said. "Absolutely crushed him. I mean, almost to a point where it was a detriment, because you could just see his entire demeanor change."

Late in Campbell's sophomore season, as LSU traded touchdowns every quarter in a shoot-out with Florida, Davis poked at his pleasing nature, hoping to stoke a fire within the captain and his team.

After one drive, Davis went down the bench addressing his offensive linemen. He complimented the right tackle, then slapped the shoulder pads of the right guard and praised the center. Finally, he reached Campbell.

Davis said nothing, and walked away.

His silent scorn lit a fire of frustration in Campbell. He barked at his coach as he walked away, ironically toward a scoreboard that proved LSU's offense had already done its job and done it well. Davis ignored him, fueling the blaze he had left behind.

"I knew that I made him feel like he wasn't living up to my expectation or his," Davis remembered. "He went out the rest of that game, and when I tell you, he f— these kids up he was playing against, he went out there and tried to annihilate them."

LSU rolled, 52-35.

Immediately after the game, Campbell bee-lined for Davis at midfield. He knew what his coach had done.

"Oh, is that good enough for you now? Are you satisfied?" Campbell asked.

Davis smiled, promising never to withhold his affection again. LSU eventually finished 9-3 that season, while Campbell clinched All-SEC honors. The Tigers capped their season by edging Wisconsin, 35-31, in a bowl game on New Year's Day, a time to celebrate, if there ever was one.

But four days after the bowl game, the Campbells' phone rang early in the morning.

All celebrating stopped, and so did life as they knew it.

Pain to pride

Shortly before dawn broke on Jan. 5, 2024, a fire broke out at a hunting camp in Jefferson County, Mississippi.

It started on the porch of a trailer, then consumed everything around the six friends housed inside. Five were left burned or lacerated upon their escape, including Campbell's younger brother, Thomas. The other, Tarver Braddock, passed away.

Tarver was 16 years old. He was handsome. Funny. Athletic. A light in the lives of those around him.

A cousin by blood, Will considered Tarver a brother because their mothers, sisters Holly Campbell and Lindsey Braddock, wanted it that way from the beginning. They raised all of their children together, including Tarver's older sister, Stella, in a unit that grew, loved and learned together in Monroe.

Five days after the fire, the family held services for Tarver, where Will and Thomas served as pallbearers. His death came three months after the loss of their shared grandfather, Holly and Lindsey's father Billy Husted; a pain Will silently held onto through the season.

But after Tarver's death, Campbell chose to broadcast his latest loss to the world.

"Today has officially been the hardest day of my life," he wrote on Instagram. "You were my heart."

Not long after, Campbell began pouring his pain into the field.

"Will dove into his football even more than he already was," Holly said, "and just kind of used that as his avenue to deal with everything."

He aimed to become the No. 1 overall pick in the upcoming NFL Draft, a new goal for his widely expected final season at LSU. According to Davis, Campbell pulled a freshman teammate along for the ride; a player who showed up late to meetings and never grabbed the right equipment in the weight room.

Campbell committed to calling him around 5 a.m. most days during the season, ensuring he arrived early enough for breakfast and treatment. Then he sat with him in meetings and confirmed his feet and hands were properly taped before practice.

"He probably saved this kid's career, to be honest," said Davis, who declined to reveal the young player's identity. "One day, that kid will call Will and thank him for caring about him as a person. And it was, it was one of the coolest things I've ever seen in my life."

Every morning before LSU games, Campbell and Davis broke bread at the team hotel. Without fail, their talks started with the score of the Neville football game the night before. Most times, Campbell would later address the offense at his offensive coordinator's request, rousing his teammates ahead of kickoff. In quiet moments, between the fiery speeches and personal chats, two questions often surfaced in Davis' mind.

What drives Will?

What does he want?

After the season and careful thought, Davis turned to Tarver's memory.

"It's almost like he feels like he has to fulfill his cousin's legacy by going out and having success," Davis said. "It's amazing."

Since Tarver's passing, Campbell has run football camps and pickleball tournaments in his cousin's memory. He's posed for billboards around town to draw attention to the Tarver Braddock Foundation. He's spoken about Tarver in the media countless times.

Herndon, who dealt with Tarver's passing every day back at Neville High, pondered the same questions Davis did. But he landed on a different answer.

"I think everybody wants to be remembered for something. And the first thing that comes to my mind, I think Will wants to be remembered as being a really, really good teammate," Herndon said. "Of having the ability to motivate everybody around him and get everybody moving in the same direction."

Meanwhile, almost 3,000 miles to the north, the Patriots found their own answers to these questions. The front office considered Campbell a viable option for their No. 4 pick throughout the entire pre-draft process, even after Vrabel and new vice president of player personnel Ryan Cowden shook up the pecking order upon arriving in mid-January.

Two months later, during his March visit to Foxboro, Campbell sat inside a Gillette Stadium conference room for a vital pre-draft test. Roughly a dozen Patriots staffers introduced themselves around the same table, each for 30 seconds or so. They shared their names and background information, involving their families, hometowns or work histories. By the time all introductions had completed, Vrabel asked Campbell to repeat what he had learned.

Campbell spat back answers on every staffer.

Which left only one question: the significance, or lack thereof, of Campbell's short arms. His arms measured 33 inches at LSU's Pro Day, considered the bare minimum for NFL offensive tackles, and he recorded the shortest wingspan of any offensive tackle to attend the combine since 2011. Since then, no player at his position has made the Pro Bowl or All-Pro team with such measurements.

Campbell also allowed two sacks in his final season. His film showed a small tendency to set aggressively to his left in pass protection, perhaps in efforts to compensate for his lack of length, which let wily opponents slip inside and generate pressure. Some evaluators believed Campbell was best suited as an NFL guard.

Not that he, nor those close to him, agreed.

"An issue (the media) created," Davis said of the arm length. "We never even thought about it here. His film speaks for itself."

"Whatever doubt people may have had, he's gonna shut that up," Stewart answered. "I guarantee it."

"For two years, nobody had any measurements on me, and nobody said anything about my play. So now all of a sudden arm length decides if I'm a good player or not?" Campbell said at his Pro Day. "I think it's BS."

With days left until the draft, there was one way to find out.

Running no more
So, there they were.

Vrabel, 49 and the son of a coach and northeast Ohio, across from a kindred football spirit less than half his age. Two men born into a life they chose to run with, now colliding.

The punches Campbell delivered were less muscles contracting than generations of Louisiana firing. Because legacy means inheriting a shared past, and the obligation to move it forward.

"He shoulders that every time he goes on the field," Herndon said. "He knows exactly who he represents."

This was for Monroe. For Bull. For Holly. For Thomas.

For Tarver.

Vrabel opened with run-blocking drills. Then he went after Campbell's arm length, testing his ability to recover in pass protection. Vrabel offered feedback after every rep, sometimes about his hand placement or footwork.

Campbell sweated throughout the workout next to Miles Frazier, an LSU teammate and future third-round pick of the Lions. Some reps were purely technical, others more of a brawl. Campbell even put Vrabel on the ground.

At last, the head coach slipped his blocking pad off. He got what he wanted: a decisive, yet sanctioned, defeat. The workout ended.

Campbell took the Patriots out to lunch at Phil's, one of his favorite local joints. Officially, it's a Baton Rouge oyster bar and seafood restaurant. Unofficially, it's a shrine to campus heroes past and present, with LSU memorabilia draped all over the walls.

The lunch lasted two hours in a back room. Once the Patriots left, Campbell still had eight days to wait for the draft. He called his dad.

"What's your gut telling you?" Bull asked.

"My gut says I'm going to New England," he replied.

On April 24, the Patriots selected Campbell with the No. 4 overall pick. The decision had been made days earlier, settled by Campbell's performance in the workout.

"We coveted this player," Vrabel admitted on draft night.

Two weeks later, on a drive to uproot their son in Baton Rouge and begin his move to New England, Holly and Bull retold the story of draft night in Green Bay.

How they had huddled backstage in the green room with Will, Thomas, the Braddocks, more family and LSU coaches. How they roared after the phone call, a release after years of Neville football games and Louisiana dreams. The moment of a lifetime paid for by lifetimes working for a moment.

A minute passed between the time Will's phone lit up, and his selection was announced. Holly said it felt like 30.

The celebration rolled off stage and back to the Marriott hotel where they were staying. The next morning, Patriots staffers met the Campbells in the lobby at 7. The family was escorted to a nearby airport, where a private jet waited to rush them to Foxboro.

The Campbells climbed aboard. Will could finally stop running.

It was time to fly.



Patriots rookie Will Campbell loves being a "Boston sports guy"

By Matt Geagan

Patriots rookie left tackle Will Campbell may be the new kid in town, but he is loving life in New England. And he's not just enamored with what's been going on in Foxboro on the football field.

The Monroe, Louisiana native is all-in on becoming a New Englander. He was out at Great Wolf Lodge in Fitchburg on Wednesday to host a ribbon cutting ceremony for a new water park, where he used his big frame and agile moves to make some money for the local Boys & Girls Club.

Campbell teamed up with kids from the Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg, Leominster and Gardner inside the new Otter Cave Waterworks play zone at Great Wolf Lodge. Campbell and the kids had to fill a big bucket in under 20 minutes using only the park's splash features, like water cannons and tipping buckets.

Campbell did most of the heavy lifting -- and running -- using smaller buckets to fill the bigger one. He and the crew were able to beat the 20-minute buzzer, which earned the Boys & Girls Club a cool \$7,500 donation from Great Wolf Lodge.

He also made sure to douse the kids as much as he could so they'd be also be dripping fun well after the event ending. A soaking wet Campbell spoke with WBZ-TV's Dan Roche after showing his moves on the splash pad.

"It was intense. They were pouring water all over me and I had to get them back. I told them I'm not the only one who is going to get soaking wet today," joked Campbell.

Campbell is a big kid himself, and will never turn down an opportunity to give back to his new community.

"Being able to come out here and interact with kids -- I was the little kid who used to love doing stuff with older athletes. To be in that position, it's something I'll do every time I can because I was once that little kid," he said.

Will Campbell is now a "Boston sports guy"

Shortly after the Patriots drafted Campbell fourth overall in the 2025 NFL Draft, he created some chuckles around New England when he expressed how surprised he was over the amount of trees in the area. As a southern boy, he thought Foxboro was part of Boston, and didn't think he'd see many trees when heading to practice.

"People took that the wrong way, talking about my LSU education," Campbell explained of his tree observation. "Before I got drafted, the furthest north and east I had ever been was Atlanta. I thought the whole time this was in the city of Boston. It was a little different for me."

Campbell has been doing some exploring to understand New England better, and will enjoy some time in Boston this weekend. If he thinks he's experienced traffic before, he's in for a surprise.

While the traffic might be a nightmare, the sports scene and the region's pride for their teams is unlike anywhere else. Campbell and the Patriots recently met up with the Boston Celtics at their practice facilities, where they got to meet with head coach Joe Mazzulla and the Celtics brass.

Campbell is most excited to become part of the Boston sports fraternity. Or as he put it, he's excited to become a "Boston sports guy."

"I'm super excited to be a Boston sports guy now. Looking forward to going to a [Celtics] game next year; I've never been to an NBA game before," he said. "For that to be my first one next year, it would be hard to top that."



How Will Campbell 'Changed the Culture' in Baton Rouge En Route to Patriots First-Round Pick

By Evan Lazar

Spring break for college students is usually for spending time with family or friends before returning to school for the second half of the spring semester.

However, for Will Campbell, his first spring break on campus in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was a time to get to work. The then-true freshman spent his vacation week preparing to win the starting left tackle job against a four-year starter on LSU's offensive line. While his friends were off campus, Campbell was watching film and doing drill work to hit the ground running when the Tigers returned to practice as a team.

The 19-year-old went on to win the starting left tackle job from an upperclassman, a job he never relinquished in his three seasons at LSU. Forgoing his spring break to focus on football is one of many stories that encapsulate the fourth-overall pick's competitive drive, along with inserting himself into a high school despite an injury and delivering a blow to Mike Vrabel's chest during a pre-draft workout that put the Patriots head coach on the ground.

"You guys have had some unbelievable players come through your franchise. I mean, Hall of Famers. This kid has the makings to be another one of those legendary guys," LSU offensive line coach Brad Davis told Patriots.com. "He is as conscientious of a human being as I've been around. He doesn't want to let people down, and he has a level of pride in his work that is unmatched.

"He spent countless hours in our weight room and with our nutritionist enhancing and evolving his body. As impressive as he is physically, when you talk about his work ethic, the things that you guys would not see, getting in the building at 5 am and starting to work on his body. On Sundays, after games, he would drive down to New Orleans and work with a physical therapist who would help him stretch and get himself realigned. This kid put in hours upon hours and invested his own money from NIL. Those are the things you guys would not see," Davis said.

After focusing inward to win the starting left tackle job for a big-time college football program, Campbell was instrumental in rebuilding an offensive line that had hit tough times. In 2019, the Tigers offensive line won the Joe Moore Award as the best offensive line in college football. However, LSU's trenches took a step back for a few years until Campbell arrived on campus.

The Patriots are in a similar position where their offensive line has struggled over the last two seasons. In 2024, New England ranked last in run-blocking win rate and 31st in pass-blocking win rate while having a glaring need at left tackle, which is why Campbell was a no-brainer selection in the first round to protect second-year QB Drake Maye's blindside. As he did in Baton Rouge, Campbell will now hopefully set the tone for the Patriots offensive line.

"He changed the culture the day he walked in the room," Davis said. "It was his commitment and devotion to his craft, but also pouring into his teammates as well. When you see this kid out there on the practice field, he's your best player, but he's practicing and pushing himself harder than anybody else around him. He re-established the standard in the room.

"Your O-Line culture, I'm excited to see where it goes. If you surround him with other individuals who aren't afraid of putting work in and breathe life into him, he's going to be an All-Pro for a long time," Davis said.

Although the intangible qualities that Campbell brings to the football team are outstanding, he still needs to pull his weight as the Patriots projected starting left tackle. From a playing style perspective, the LSU product has the athleticism and finishing ability to be a high-end starter in the NFL. That said, pundits poke holes in Campbell's scouting profile by pointing to his lack of ideal arm length, with the 21-year-old measuring in with 32 5/8-33 inch arms. To those detractors, Davis had a very matter-of-fact response.

"Will Anderson, Jared Verse, Dallas Turner, Dylan Stewart, Walter Nolan, Jalen Carter, Princely Umanmielen, Jared Ivy, Shamar Stewart," Davis said, listing the top defenders that Campbell has faced in his time at LSU. "He's played perhaps 15 first or second-round defensive ends. He's played the best players in America every Saturday, and he dominated.

"I understand the value of metrics and historical data. Those things matter, but you can't overlook or discount the amount of toughness and grit that this kid has to overcome what other people may consider a shortcoming. Any challenge that somebody places on this kid, he's gonna work his ass off to absolutely destroy it. There's nothing this kid can't do."

Pro Outlook with Duke Manyweather (Founder and CEO of OL Masterminds)

As his offensive line coach for the last three seasons, one would expect Davis to be highly complimentary of Campbell given the success the Patriots first-rounder had at LSU.

To project forward, Patriots.com also spoke to the Founder and CEO of OL Masterminds, Duke Manyweather. Manyweather is a leading offensive line expert with over a decade of experience training NFL athletes, including over 40 veterans several of whom have been named All-Pro and Pro Bowlers. OL Masterminds was created to solve a problem: a lack of "continuity with development in the offseason for offensive linemen." During the offseason, OL Masterminds hosts a summit where offensive linemen congregate to meet and exchange tricks of the trade.

While understanding that playing along the offensive line is a technique-based position with limited in-season practice reps, Manyweather wanted to give offensive linemen expert training in the offseason so they could continue working on their craft, much like a private coach does for quarterbacks. Last offseason, Campbell began working with Manyweather to improve his game for his final collegiate season and has continued to train at OL Masterminds this offseason.

"When the season was over, [Campbell] got to work almost immediately. We started in early December and really identified some things that we want to work on," Manyweather said. "[Campbell is] very coachable. He is a guy who shows up every single day ready to work."

Starting with pass protection, Manyweather explained that Campbell excels due to his explosive movement skills and excellent hand usage. Although he might have shorter arms, Manyweather believes Campbell makes up for his arm length by using his hands and recovery talent.

"Just how explosive his set is, and the amount of range he plays with. There was a lot of talk about the arm length, but when he's so effective and almost surgical with his hands with the way he latches on the guys—the independent hand usage, and sometimes the double hand usage. When you get a guy that good with his hands, sometimes it mitigates having a lack of length," Manyweather stated. "I've seen a lot of guys that rely too much on their length. It gets them in trouble because they don't know how to use their hands. Will knows how to use his hands really well."

As a run blocker, Manyweather broke down several areas that stand out while evaluating Campbell's tape. Campbell, who registered a combine-best among tackles 9.91 relative athletic score at the NFL Scouting Combine, uses his elite athleticism and great play strength to be a high-impact run blocker.

"In the run game, he's able to do a lot of different things. He's able to physically come off the ball and close space on defenders, which gets them displaced. He's able to reach on the front side of any type of zone plays and really press defenders up the field. He has the agility and then also body control to cut off the backside, while also showing the athleticism and the tracking skills to climb up to the second level," said Manyweather. "Technique and consistency. That's really the model of his game that allowed him to be the fourth overall pick."

Although he believes in Campbell's talent, Manyweather pointed to one area of the first-round pick's game that they're working to improve. In pass protection, Campbell tends to drift or overset to the outside, allowing pass-rushers to beat the Pats rookie with inside moves to pressure the quarterback. Manyweather identified that area of improvement early on in his work with Campbell, and believes it can be corrected.

"When you see guys start to drift, they're trying to adjust to the rusher. I tell guys don't necessarily try to adjust to the rusher. Take your set, stay square as long as possible, and then you want to get him to move off his rush path, so start to expand him," Manyweather said. "As soon as you expand the set point and get him to even take one step off his rush path, you've done your job. That was the biggest area I wanted to work with Will on."

The follow-up to Manyweather's assertion is does Campbell drift outside in his pass set to compensate for his arm length? Some believe that Campbell is drifting out to rushers because he doesn't have the long reach to stay square, but Manyweather doesn't believe that's the case.

"Nah, nah, nah," Manyweather responded when asked if Campbell's drifting is related to his arm length. "It's just adjusting your relationship to understand when you need to widen a rusher. I've got All-Pro guys that come in that I'm still continuing to work on with them. It's just getting that timing of what we call readjusting your positional leverage against a defender."

Moving forward, Campbell will be working with the Patriots coaching staff beginning with rookie minicamp (May 9-11) through mandatory minicamp (June 9-11). Then, the plan is for Campbell to continue working on his craft with Manyweather in his time off between the offseason workout program and the start of Patriots training camp in July. Manyweather has also worked with Patriots third-rounder Jared Wilson this offseason.

"Both these guys are just really consistent players and tireless workers that I think are going to have a tremendous upside in New England," Manyweather said.

Between the two early draft selections and free-agent additions, New England has significantly upgraded the talent level of the offensive line this offseason. After where it ranked statistically last season, it was an obvious need that the Patriots addressed with two top-100 draft picks and notable veteran signings in OT Morgan Moses and C Garrett Bradbury.

Along with being an upgrade at left tackle on the field, Campbell projects as a potential future team captain, given his high football character. Head coach Mike Vrabel emphasized targeting players who will rebuild a winning culture in Foxboro. With Campbell, the Patriots are getting the complete package of high-end ability and excellent leadership.

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 wows 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."

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.

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

'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 an 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."

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 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."

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 has evolved into the leader the Patriots need

By Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Drake Maye stood outside the New England Patriots locker room before a late-November practice, pondering what makes a great leader.

Then, after a 20-second pause, he came up with an answer that put him back on the campus of Nicholls State University at the Manning Passing Academy in 2023.

The quarterback attended the camp and watched Peyton and Eli Manning closely. Maye liked the unassuming way the Mannings handled themselves despite their decorated résumés, and how genuinely invested they seemed to be in everyone's lives.

It was some of the most exemplary leadership he's been around -- paired with the lifelong influence of his father, Mark, whom he describes as "one of the most humble guys I know." Maye, 22, has leaned on those experiences during the Patriots' 3-10 season. The No. 3 pick arrived from the University of North Carolina in April with the expectation of becoming a franchise quarterback. After taking over as the starter in October, Maye's empathic leadership and play have sparked hope in an otherwise frustrating season.

The Patriots replaced veteran quarterback Jacoby Brissett, 31, after five games, passing the torch to Maye quicker than even some of the team's high-ranking officials anticipated. One of the first teammates to check on Brissett after the move was Maye. That impressed Brissett, who has developed a close bond with Maye, as their lockers are next to each other.

But Brissett reminded Maye, "If you're worried about me, you're worried about the wrong thing right now!"

Despite the way the season has gone in the standings, Maye has elevated the offense. On the field, he's showcased a big arm with 1,696 passing yards and 11 touchdowns, as well as flashing the ability to escape the pocket, ringing up 345 rushing yards and one touchdown. Limiting turnovers has been a work in progress -- his eight interceptions are tied for the most of any rookie quarterback and he's lost four fumbles.

Off the field, he's displayed self-awareness and understanding since Day 1 that has resonated with teammates and coaches.

"It's very easy to forget that he's a rookie quarterback," first-year head coach Jerod Mayo said.

"You see him walking around with that Drake smile," rookie offensive lineman Layden Robinson said. "He always has that confidence about him and how he takes control of the huddle -- he gets in there and says 'Let's go to work.' We rally behind him."

LONGTIME NFL QUARTERBACK Matt Hasselbeck was impressed with Maye when he first met him in February at a breakfast with top quarterback prospects during the 2024 NFL combine. He recalled how Maye was focused as much on the environment he was entering as the X's and O's on the field.

Few other prospects were asking the same questions of Hasselbeck.

"He said, 'What's expected of me if I'm the starting quarterback and I have a veteran established backup behind me?'" Hasselbeck said. "I took the question to mean in all areas. Like, 'Am I paying for O-line dinner? Am I doing anything special for him? Am I giving him a task to do? Tell me what that role is like, because he's the veteran.' And then he said, 'What's expected of me if that guy is named the starter?'"

Thus, once Maye arrived in New England, he had a game plan for handling the dynamics with Brissett named starter.

"One of the best things about a leader is earning the guys' respect; being a follower before you become a leader is one of the coolest things," Maye said. "I was waiting my turn. I wanted to soak up as much information as I could from Jacoby and be a follower of his ways. Repeat his cadence. How he does things in the locker room. Handles people. Stuff he does in the community."

"I think that goes a long way into shaping it into my own form and becoming the leader I want to be in my own way."

Longtime Patriots, such as eight-year veteran defensive lineman Deatrich Wise Jr., took note of the evolution.

"Having a very poised and humble demeanor, I like that about him, because he doesn't come in like a hotshot," he said. "I'm not saying he's bashful. He's humble. But he's confident. And on the field, he demands respect with his actions and his words."

Maye has followed in his father's footsteps. Mark played quarterback at the University of North Carolina and briefly with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and later served as a coach for each of his four sons' athletic teams. He declined an interview request for this story, preferring to stay in the background.

"My dad just kind of gets it," Maye said. "Me and my brothers always talk about having feel, and feeling personal situations and different people. He has good self-awareness and situational awareness and I think that comes with being a leader -- when to step up, when to say things, when not to."

"He would bring us into the team huddle and say, 'Hey Drake, give the team some words.' If I was the quarterback of the team, or the point guard -- just having me at a young age be in uncomfortable situations, he was showing the leadership he was trying to instill in me."

IN THE FIRST quarter of a Week 10 game vs. the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field, Maye made a play that left himself in disbelief.

Rolling to his right, he wanted to throw the ball out of bounds around midfield on a first-and-10 play. Instead, the floating throwaway attempt landed directly in the waiting arms of Bears linebacker T.J. Edwards.

Maye's two hands gripped the top of his helmet in frustration. The message on the sideline from offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt was straightforward: If no one is open, the tuba player in Row 4 always is, so make sure you get it there.

Maye's performance wasn't exemplary -- 15 of 25 for 184 yards, with one touchdown and one interception -- but his response to adversity, overall command and poise stood out. Mayo said Maye's knack for not repeating the same error twice is "a great trait for a quarterback to have."

The Patriots had their best team win of the season that day, by a score of 19-3. And it wasn't a coincidence that it came after a big step in Maye's journey as the team's young leader in the days leading up to the game.

After observing sloppiness at a Wednesday practice, Maye asked Van Pelt if he could address the offense. Teammates recall him matter-of-factly standing in the front of the offensive meeting room. He first pointed the finger at himself for mishandling a snap, and then said "mistakes and details bleed over to Sunday."

Maye was demanding more of himself and teammates at the same time.

"To have enough courage to stand in front of the whole offense and let us know, 'This stuff is going to get us beat if we don't fix it', that speaks volumes of who he is," first-year offensive tackle Demontrey Jacobs said. "I remember thinking, 'This kid is taking ownership of the details that are going to help us win.'"

At that point, Maye, the NFL's youngest quarterback, had started four games and was growing more comfortable asserting himself.

"That was a big step for him," Van Pelt said. "I think he's starting to get a little more comfortable with the guys. More talkative in meetings. He's a genuine leader. He cares about the guys, and I think they'll respond when he says something."

Maye has also learned that food can help, too. He took his offensive linemen out to Grill 23, which proudly proclaims itself as Boston's premier steakhouse, the day after the win over the Bears -- the team's last victory. His brother, Luke, also attended.

Players met in a back room, away from the crowd. Steaks filled the table. There was a relaxed vibe.

Left tackle Vederian Lowe said it was a "big thing" toward building more continuity with Maye, full of good conversation. "It makes our relationship stronger," he said.

"Breaking bread with your brothers," Jacobs added.

Van Pelt and his staff have also attempted to create space for those connections to happen on a more regular basis. On some days, coaches leave the meeting room and players watch 7-on-7 and 1-on-1 practice drills together.

Maye is often leading the discussion.

"He is coming into his own. Becoming the starting quarterback, that allows you to be a little more outgoing in his leadership style," quarterbacks coach T.C. McCartney said. "But I think he just relates to the guys well; I don't think he has to try really hard to do it. The better you play early on, the easier it is."

MAYE'S GROWTH IN his rookie season has sparked hope.

One of the top characteristics Patriots scouts liked about Maye at UNC was his accountability, and how he never blamed teammates for miscues while speaking with the media, even when he might have good reason.

That has carried over to the NFL. In the aftermath of the team's 28-22 loss to the Rams on Nov. 17, when Maye threw an interception on the final drive as receiver DeMario "Pop" Douglas never looked back for the ball, Maye provided cover for him immediately after the game.

"I think Pop did the right thing," Maye said. "Just goes back to me, during the week, doing more [and] talking through different situations: 'Hey, I may put this one on you versus let it rip.'"

Likewise, in Week 13 after a 25-24 last-second home loss to the Colts in arguably his best performance of the season, Maye arrived for his postgame news conference in a red shirt with cut-off sleeves and referred to the result as "heartbreaking."

"Proud of the way the guys fought. It's a bummer," he said. "I hate it for these guys and these coaches."

Maye's performance included a 41-yard run, which reflected his willingness to take off when the defense opens a lane and defensive backs are in man coverage downfield. The run tied for the third longest by a Patriots quarterback in the history of the franchise (since 1960), topped only by Cam Newton's 49-yarder in 2021 and Tom Yewcic's 46-yarder in 1963.

Maye also hit tight end Austin Hooper on a 16-yard touchdown that receiver Kendrick Bourne described as a "one of one" throw because of its pinpoint placement in a tight window near the goal line.

Maye's first 10 touchdown passes this season were to 10 different pass catchers, tying former Broncos quarterback Steve Ramsey (1971-73) for the most consecutive touchdowns to a different player to start a career. His knack for spreading the wealth has endeared him to teammates.

"I'm glad to be playing with him," Bourne said, "and can't wait to see his future growth."

Opposing NFL coaches have also taken note. Rams head coach Sean McVay raved about the 6-foot-4, 225-pound Maye.

"He looks like a stud," he said. "You can just see the impact he has on his teammates. He looks like he's going to be a special player for a long time."

Dolphins defensive coordinator Anthony Weaver said Maye's confidence was obvious, as was the trust he has in his arm. He added that Maye's knack for scrambling for yards, or to extend a passing play, puts defenses in a bind similar to facing Bills quarterback Josh Allen.

"This is not me saying he's Josh Allen, but you've kind of got to approach him like Josh Allen a little bit," Weaver said.

The possibility that Maye could be an Allen-like presence in New England would be welcome for a franchise that hasn't won a playoff game since its 13-3 victory over the Rams in Super Bowl LIII on Feb. 3, 2019.

Tom Brady departed as a free agent after the next season, leaving a gaping hole for a franchise QB. Following Newton's one-year stint as the starter in 2020, the Patriots initially thought they had their long-term answer at the position in 2021 first-round pick Mac Jones. But Jones struggled under former coach Bill Belichick and, as a result, the Patriots moved on from both Belichick and Jones this past offseason.

In a season of few wins, Maye's energy and humble approach has helped uplift the team, while teaching him more about himself in a reminder that he's come a long way since his time at the Manning Passing Academy.

"Starting the season, obviously you plan on wanting to be the starter. Then, handling adversity when I'm actually in there playing," he said.

"So it's handling the difficult times, bouncing back, and knowing at this position that these guys look to me. I've got to keep an upbeat mindset and personality because these guys follow me, listen to me and respect me."



How Patriots QB Drake Maye's deep-rooted leadership can continue to evolve

By Chris Mason

By early November, Drake Maye knew it was time.

The 22-year-old had been thrust into a tricky leadership position. An NFL locker room is a delicate ecosystem. Respect is earned over time.

As the No. 3 overall pick, Maye was New England's quarterback of the future, but he began the season behind Jacoby Brissett on the depth chart. In addition to being a rookie, he was backing up a Patriots captain, who continued to hold that title after Maye became the starter.

So Maye chose to bide his time until Week 10.

A month after taking over for Brissett, Maye was ready to assert himself. Following a sloppy practice, the rookie asked coordinator Alex Van Pelt if he could address the entire offense as a group.

In front of a room of older peers, Maye sought accountability from everybody, including himself. He'd dropped a snap during practice, the offensive line struggled in pass protection, and there were too many mental mistakes from the entire unit. Maye contended lack of attention to detail on Wednesdays was killing them on Sundays. Fellow rookie Ja'Lynn Polk dubbed the speech a "10 out of 10" and the veterans approved, too.

"It's really great for Drake," guard Mike Onwenu said. "He's beyond his years."
The following Sunday, the Patriots rolled the Bears, 19-3, for their lone double-digit win of the season.

In that moment, Maye felt his teammates needed to hear his voice. It was a glimpse of the leader he could become, rooted in a lesson he learned as an elementary schooler walking into a huddle in Huntersville, North Carolina.

'When we get in the huddle, encourage them'
For 5-year-old Drake Maye, flag football wasn't cutting it.

His older brothers were already tackling in the Junior Eagles Football Association, so at 6, Maye talked his way into a helmet and shoulder pads. His parents were leery given his age, but there was no keeping the youngest of their four boys off the field any longer.

Fortunately, Maye's first peewee football coach was also his father, so Mark Maye could keep a close watch on his son.

The elder Maye knows far more football than the run-of-the-mill coach. A standout quarterback and captain at North Carolina in the 1980s, he spent a season with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, too. His love for sports was mirrored by his sons, so when the weekend rolled around, the Maye family was far more apt to be at a field than away on a camping trip.

Drake Maye gravitated toward natural leadership positions, playing point guard and shortstop. So, before he took the field as a young quarterback, his father had a message for him.

"Listen Drake, you've got 'em. When we get in the huddle, encourage them,'" Mark Maye said. "Say some things.' Nothing earth-shattering, but always really encouraged him be a leader."

Though he's graduated from running the huddle for the Junior Eagles to quarterbacking the New England Patriots, Maye still models his leadership after his father and those early teachings.

"Just watching him, not only a leader in the household, but a leader in sports in general," Maye said in November. "The way that he approached forcing me at a young age to get in the huddle, and say something to the team, or break the team down... He introduced to his boys about how to lead and what it takes."

And then he got out of the public eye. In season, Mark Maye is content being a quiet football father, declining interview requests to leave the spotlight to his son.

"That's really neat that Drake said something like that," he texted at the time. "Very proud of him!! It's about him. Not an old fat guy like me."

The throughlines between father and son are easy to spot.

Amidst a 4-13 season, Maye was often the Patriots' lone bright spot, but didn't carry himself as such. The rookie deflected praise to his teammates for successes and took ownership of failures, even when the blame necessarily didn't lie with him.

Maye tried to pump up his teammates up with positive reinforcement and was rarely critical of others — especially publicly — a trait which can also be traced back to his father.

"Sometimes you have to maybe get on guys, but I never really was a big proponent of a lot of yelling," the elder Maye said. "I know when I was coming along I always appreciated guys really being positive with me and encouraging me. So I've always tried to pass that along simply because that's what I liked as a player."

"I know that there are certainly some times (to yell if players) aren't putting out the effort, but listen, we're all trying to catch the ball. We're all trying to hang onto the ball. We're all trying to throw a complete pass. We aren't trying not to do those things. But sometimes you're going to miss a throw. Sometimes a ball might be dropped. Those things happen."

Watching him for 17 seasons, the patriarch has seen his son's leadership style take shape. He believes it is rooted in gaining the trust and respect of his teammates, and then going from there. He'll lead by example first, and speak up when the situation calls for it.

"He likes to get to know the guys," Mark Maye said. "He likes to feel like he has a pretty good relationship. He encourages them. He could be a little more vocal sometimes maybe, but he's gotten a lot better with that, and I think that will continue to come as he gets older, as he gets more comfortable in his role.

"I do think Drake is pretty genuine," he added.

Maye was mindful of those relationships as a rookie. He wanted to build bonds around the locker room, so he made a conscious effort to sit with different teammates during lunch and send texts when they were away from Gillette Stadium.

"Little things like that can go a long way," Drake Maye said. "Trying to get each guy on a personal level, then they feel like, 'Hey, I know Drake and he cares about me.'"

'It's something I felt like Tom did'
Heading into the 2025 season, this is Drake Maye's offense.

Brissett is gone — the veteran signed with Arizona — and when Week 1 rolls around, fans in Foxborough will look to Maye to lift the Patriots back toward prosperity in the wake of two 4-13 seasons.

In Mike Vrabel, New England hired a no-bones-about-it leader at the top of their organization. But to step forward as contenders, Maye will need to keep growing in his leadership role, too. The quarterback knows this. On Radio Row at the Super Bowl, he repeatedly said he wants to sharpen those leadership skills in a crucial Year 2.

Vrabel returns to New England with 14 years of experience as an NFL player and another 12 years as a coach. He's seen how different quarterbacks can lift a locker room. So in one of his first meetings with Maye, Vrabel made a point to deliver a message to his young quarterback.

"You just have to invest time," Vrabel said. "The biggest thing is being able to include everybody. When you include everybody, you get to know them. Quarterbacks are afforded a lot of privilege around town. They go to restaurants, they go to games, and I said, 'Hey, always remember that you can always invite other people that may be outside of your immediate group and use those as experiences and get to know players you may not know right now. I think that was a good example I tried to give him.'"

Vrabel cited his own time with the most decorated quarterback in NFL history as proof.

"It's something I felt like Tom (Brady) did, and I don't want to be like, 'Oh be Tom Brady,'" Vrabel said. "I'm just saying players that I've been around were like, 'Hey let's go to this game. Let's go to the Celtics. Let's go to the Red Sox. You can use those avenues...' he has to lead in his own way. But again, the better you know somebody, the better you can hold him accountable."

With a roster overhaul coming, Maye will need accountability from plenty of new faces in the coming months. He'll also need to foster a relationship with Josh McDaniels and learn his offense, which is a notoriously demanding task.

Mark Maye doesn't think that'll be a problem.

"Fortunately, he takes after his mom: He's a pretty smart guy," he said. "He's used to learning a new system. He'll work at it. He'll be fine with what Coach McDaniels and also Coach Vrabel want to do, I believe, fairly quickly ... He's always really picked up things well."

Maye showed that during his early November speech, and with a more sure-footed place in the team's leadership hierarchy, his teammates will need to hear even more of that voice moving forward.

"I was just trying to get through to them and probably fumbled some words trying to do it," Drake Maye said. "But I think those guys respected it."

The Athletic

From driveway 'King of the Court' to Patriots' future, Drake Maye was built to compete

By Chad Graff

HUNTERSVILLE, N.C. — The driveway at the end of this cul-de-sac in suburban Charlotte was widened a few years back, a project deemed necessary by Dad. He was sick of seeing his four boys put dents in the garage during pickup basketball.

On clear summer nights, the kind where the heat sticks to you even as the sun sets, the driveway used to be packed. Certainly by the boys. Maybe some friends too. Open door policy. Come when you want, leave when you must.

"King of the Court" was the house game. One-on-one, stay until you lose, rotate who defends. Fouls weren't called unless they were egregious. They played until their shadows were long. Plenty of games were settled in front of the headlights on Dad's truck.

Over time, the participants changed. The oldest went off to win a national championship for the beloved blue blood a couple of hours away. The second went off to play baseball at Florida, where he helped pitch the school to its second national title.

The two youngest remained. They were the feistiest of the bunch, often ending driveway games with elbows swinging. Eventually, Dad needed to referee, settling disputes and trying to end things before noses were bloodied and eyes were blackened. The boys called him "Buzzkill" for stepping in, but he insisted.

The hoop atop the driveway is still now. The parents are empty nesters. Earlier this summer, the youngest boy packed up his belongings in his old, white truck and headed out on his own.

Drake Maye, 21, signed a four-year deal with the New England Patriots worth more than \$36 million, the benefits of being the NFL's No. 3 draft pick this offseason. It's certainly enough money to ship his truck north. Maybe even buy a new one. But he wanted to take his truck up himself. So he backed out of the driveway and began the task of resurrecting a franchise whose glory days feel like they're in the rearview mirror.

After New England selected Maye, Patriots owner Robert Kraft sent his jet down to Carolina to pick up the team's new quarterback. Drake insisted on bringing his three brothers. He brought Luke, 27, and Cole, 26, and Beau, 23, on stage that afternoon, too, when he was officially introduced at Gillette Stadium.

"If you're getting me," Drake said on the podium that day, "you're getting them."

Mark Maye, 59, sits at breakfast and scoops some scrambled eggs to go with his toast. He drinks orange juice. He's lived in this area his whole life. Grew up in Charlotte. Played down the road at Independence High School. He was a stud quarterback at the University of North Carolina. Those who know him say he could've stuck in the NFL if not for a pesky shoulder.

Seemingly everyone in this town knows him and stops by the table to say hi. There's a football coach he's been helping out, a school administrator and a longtime friend at various restaurant booths, all eager to check in about his recent hip surgery and hear how the boys are doing.

Mark just got back from visiting Foxboro, Mass. It was his first time there since going as a freshman quarterback with UNC and watching Doug Flutie kick off his 1984 Heisman campaign at the old Sullivan Stadium by hanging six touchdowns and 52 points on the Tar Heels.

Mark and his wife, Aimee, didn't have much on the agenda for the visit to New England. Just wanted to check out Drake's new apartment and get a feel for the place that will become his home. They went on a search for the best burger and ice cream cone in the small towns surrounding Foxboro and were surprised Drake was already getting stopped for pictures.

Drake told his dad about a recent visit to Fenway Park where he sat atop the Green Monster and marveled at its height. He went to Bruins and Celtics playoff games and raved to his dad about the atmosphere. For a sports-obsessed kid, the chance to go to games and venues like those was a dream.

Drake had a Cam Newton Fathead on the wall of his childhood bedroom and made his dad promise him a Super Bowl trip if his beloved Carolina Panthers made it in 2015. Four months later, they were in the stands as Newton led the Panthers onto the field in Super Bowl 50. He went to the NCAA Tournament in 2017 and watched Luke knock down the game-winner to send UNC to the Final Four.

As a kid, he was often in the backseat of the family car being whisked off to another brother's game or practice, shooting hoops with other kids his age during halftime or playing pickup football in foul territory. At home, he wanted nothing more than to beat his older brothers, no matter the cost and no matter how often his dad pleaded with them not to get too physical.

When Drake was 8, they installed a Nerf mini hoop in the foyer. Mark told the kids to be careful. He was headed to the other room for a couple of minutes and didn't want to have to take anyone to the hospital. "Then as soon as I turn the corner, I hear bang!" Mark said. "Drake cut his head on the banister."

Drake was the runt of the litter. Even at 6-foot-4, he's a few inches shorter than his brothers today. But he was the biggest yapper, constantly talking trash. When Roy Williams came to the house to recruit Luke, Drake said he was going to tell the legendary coach to come back in a few years to recruit an even better player.

With parents Mark and Aimee presiding, Drake Maye (second from right) grew up constantly competing with older brothers Luke, (left), Cole (right) and Beau (second from left). (Courtesy of Aimee Maye)
The football stadium at Myers Park High School is perched on a hill, with tall trees behind the bleachers and an old-school feel on Friday nights. This is where Maye became a can't-miss prospect in front of standing-room-only crowds. He transferred here before his sophomore year, when he was blocked from playing time by an older quarterback at Hough High School, where his three other brothers went. That first season at Myers Park, Maye threw for 3,201 yards in 13 games to go with 36 touchdowns and five interceptions. He quickly became one of the top prospects in the country.

The school put together a tougher schedule to showcase its star quarterback ahead of his junior year, but Drake had a favor to ask before the season began. He wanted to play against Hough, where he had so many friends (and where Beau still went) — and where he hadn't become the starting quarterback.

His coach, Scott Chadwick, initially said no. Myers Park already had a brutal schedule. And Hough was routinely a top-five team in the state. It would be silly to add them. But Maye insisted, so for the fourth game of that season, Myers Park traveled north to Hough. Maye threw for six touchdowns. He ran for another.

"It was video-game numbers," Chadwick said. "I took him out at the start of the fourth quarter and he was mad at me. And I was like, 'Dude, it's 68-7.'"

Myers Park was the top team in the state, nationally ranked. The Mustangs averaged 50 points per game — and that was with starters generally on the sideline in the fourth quarter. Maye threw for 50 touchdowns that season against just two interceptions. Myers Park scheduled a 2020 game against Deion Sanders' Trinity Christian High School that had to be canceled during the pandemic.

When Maye's recruitment started to take off after his sophomore season, he was concerned schools might not pursue him, convinced he'd simply head off to Chapel Hill like his dad and oldest brother had. But UNC was in the middle of a tough stretch. The Tar Heels went 3-9 in 2017 and 2-9 the next year.

Maye had watched two of his brothers win national titles. He wanted to win, too. So he told Chadwick to make it known that he wasn't going to UNC. After that, offers flooded in from every big-time school. In July 2019, ahead of his junior year, Maye chose Alabama over Ohio State and Clemson.

The next day, he spoke on the phone with Mack Brown, the recently re-hired coach at North Carolina. Brown had known the Maye family forever. Mark worked for Brown in the late 1980s and first met Aimee while serving as a graduate assistant.

"We're going to win," Brown said he told Drake. "So you watch, and I want you not to give up on this and keep thinking about it." Less than a year later, Drake called Brown back. He flipped his commitment to stay home and play at North Carolina.

"He called and said, 'Coach, you're so right. This is who I am. This is my place. This is my school,'" Brown said.

College coaches aren't allowed at the informal summer practices players put together on their own, but they're aware of them. After Sam Howell left UNC in 2022, the Tar Heels had an open competition for their starting quarterback position. Brown individually called 10 players he trusted most into his office to hear how the practices went. He asked a simple question: Who's your quarterback?

"They all said Drake," Brown said.

Maye shattered school records. He led the nation in total offense (5,019 yards), setting a school record with 4,321 passing yards and tying a Tar Heels record with 38 touchdowns. He was named ACC player of the year as a redshirt freshman. After that, with new rules in place about transferring and NIL deals, bigger football programs circled.

"He was tampered (with) at the highest level," Brown said.

There were rumors about seven-figure offers to lure Maye elsewhere. So he went into Brown's office for a chat.

"He came in and he said, 'Coach, listen. There's a lot of rumors out there, but I'm not going anywhere. I'm not in it for money. I just want to play and play here,'" Brown said.

Maye had another rule that season as firms sought his endorsement. If you wanted him for an NIL deal, you had to include the offensive linemen, too.

The 2023 season didn't go as well. The Tar Heels changed their offensive scheme and focused more on running the ball. The offensive line wasn't as good and their top receiver, Tez Walker, was ineligible to play at the start of the season. The losses started to mount.

Coaches typically worry in situations like that. Are the NFL-bound players still going to give their all in relatively meaningless games when they have draft positioning to worry about and potentially millions of dollars on the line?

Several days after Thanksgiving, North Carolina was already eliminated from contention for the conference title and getting smoked at halftime by rival NC State. Nothing was working. If there was ever a time to throw in the towel and start worrying about the bigger picture, this was it.

"But then I go see (Maye) at halftime, and he's like, 'Coach, I like this and this and let's go back to this,'" said offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey. "He never had any inkling that he wasn't going to compete all the way to the end. In fact, he tweaked his ankle a little bit, and trainers told me he was probably going to be out. And then he jogs back onto the field."

Even at 6-4, Drake Maye (second from right) is the shortest of the four brothers. (Courtesy of Aimee Maye) The night before games last season, Maye sat at team dinners with Clyde Christensen, who currently works as a consultant for Brown. Christensen spent a decade with Peyton Manning and the Colts as an offensive assistant. He spent four years as Andrew Luck's quarterbacks coach and three years as Tom Brady's.

Each Friday night, Maye would bug Christensen with various questions. How'd Manning handle this formation? What did Brady do against this coverage? Maye loved the chance to pick Christensen's brain, so he spent the final weeks before his first NFL training camp with Christensen, prepping for what was to come.

What that looks like in 2024 remains to be seen. Maye has played with the second-team offense throughout training camp. Veteran journeyman Jacoby Brissett will likely be the Patriots' starting quarterback when the season begins in four weeks. But after that, the question is how long until Maye takes over.

What made Manning and Brady different, Christensen told Maye, wasn't just what they could do with their arms. They wanted to be coached, to be pushed harder. They competed at everything. "Drake has that," Christensen said. "You've got a loyal, good man. That would be the banner over everything. That's what Peyton and Tom had. They had the traits, but they were good men who wanted to be great and wanted to be coached and wanted to work hard and wanted to see their teammates succeed. And that's what the Patriots just got."

Before the draft, NFL teams poke around a prospect's past to get a sense of what he's like. Those who know Maye best painted a boring picture. He likes to drive his truck. He likes to watch sports and play pickup basketball. And he likes to throw the football around. "One of the teams asked me how he was going to handle being in a big city and a big market," Chadwick said. "And I'm like, 'If you have a Chick-Fil-A, you're good.' Trust me, he's not going to be Googling the best clubs in the city."

"I've said often, I would adopt him — he's that perfect a kid," Brown said. "It sounds kind of corny, but it's true. He dates his seventh-grade girlfriend, which is unusual. He's not going to cuss, he's not going to drink, he's not going to be out — but he can lead a room."

In June, Maye moved into his new apartment not far from Gillette Stadium. He called his parents, a bit frustrated while putting together new furniture and feeling like he ended up with too few screws. He turns 22 on Aug. 30. The pressures of the NFL await.

Maye knew they were coming. That's why, the night before the NFL Draft changed his world forever, he rented a court at the Detroit Athletic Center right across from Ford Field. He wanted one more pickup game after dinner. All four boys were there. A bunch of buddies, too. They played full court.

It might as well have been a summer night with truck lights illuminating the driveway hoop. The next day he'd be a quarterback chosen to revive an NFL dynasty. But for one more night, he was playing pickup hoops with his brothers, the youngest of four proving he could keep up.



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 Mayo 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 Mayo 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 Mayo at the NFL combine in late February. Mayo called it a "fantastic interview," in part because of the composure the 21-year-old Mayo 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 Mayo'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."

Mayo 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 Mayo came April 5 at Gillette Stadium. That provided Van Pelt, among others, an extended opportunity to connect with Mayo.

Van Pelt and Mayo watched old tape of Aaron Rodgers from the Packers, when Van Pelt had been on the Green Bay coaching staff. Van Pelt detailed to Mayo 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 Mayo envisioned what it would be like to play in Van Pelt's offense, the coaches also were assessing how Mayo's footwork and fundamentals might look in the scheme, as that was an area Mayo sometimes struggled in 2023. With Patriots coaches gaining more comfort, it strengthened Mayo'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 Mayo 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 hoopsters 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 measureables 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.

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.

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, "Jabril, 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.

WR Ja'Lynn Polk



Inside the rise of promising Patriots WR Ja'Lynn Polk

By Mark Daniels

FOXBOROUGH – With his father in and out of jail and his mother working long hours, a young Ja'Lynn Polk needed a role model.

So he followed his uncle everywhere.

When Jacob Fredieu played middle school football, his nephew was running up and down the sideline. In high school, the boy followed him to offseason workouts and ran drills. When he learned to box at the local Boys and Girls Club, Polk did, too.

Then there was that one morning before school.

Polk adored uncle Jacob, who is eight years older. He tried to follow him everywhere and one morning, that included school. Standing at the bus stop, Polk watched Fredieu walk up the steps and followed him in without anyone noticing.

"I think he fell asleep and ended up waking up in the area where they had all the buses stored. The bus driver thankfully saw him," Fredieu said. "Oh, that was a panic. They called my mom at work. I remember that. They were like, 'Hey, they're not sure your grandbaby is here at the bus stop.' It was a whole thing."

With his mother tirelessly working and his father absent, Polk sought guidance. He found that in his uncle. They bonded over sports and their desire for more for themselves and their family.

"I just remember being super active as a kid. He pretty much raised me," Polk said. "I had to be around him a lot with my mom working, so he watched me a lot. Everything he did, I was trying to do. Any chance I had to get away and sneak with him, I did."

The upbringing forced both to work hard. If they wanted to improve their situation, they had to earn it. Between seeing a hardworking mother and leaning on his uncle, Polk had a foundation that put him on the right path.

Polk applied those seared-in principles even on the football field.

Perfect role models

Jennifer Fredieu fought to provide for her children.

The main goal was to put food on the table for Ja'Lynn and her daughter, Jada. As a younger single mother, it wasn't easy to find work. When she did, it didn't pay nearly enough.

That's why she wasn't always around. She worked up to three jobs to pay for food and rent. When Polk was in middle school, she worked at Taco Bell, Denny's and as a waitress.

"It just showed me sacrifice," Polk said. "You have to make sacrifices for the ones you love for the things that you want. That might take time. Seeing that growing up, played a huge role in knowing you have to put the work in without making excuses."

This is why his mother leaned on Jacob, her younger brother. He was just a teenager when Ja'Lynn started to shadow him around the community.

Jacob didn't grasp it initially. He loved his nephew, but he was so young that he didn't realize Polk looked at him like a father figure. When he was a teenager, his mother (Polk's grandmother), sat him down and explained the situation. She told him he needed to look at his nephew and it opened his eyes.

'Look at him when he's around you,' she said.

"I realized, man, this kid is trying to walk the way I walk. He tries to talk the way I talk. He tries to do a lot of the things I do," Fredieu said. "I was like, man if that's the case I want to set a good example for him because I want him to be better than me."

Seeing the family struggle motivated both to do better.

Although he briefly played football in high school, Fredieu stopped during his junior year to focus on academics. After high school, he went to Lamar University where he earned a degree in industrial engineering and science. He's now an industrial engineer at Boeing where he works on the executive fleet in San Antonio.

Considering how and where he grew up, Fredieu knows his life could've been different.

"It would've been easier to go that (wrong) path, but if you grew up seeing that, you kind of know the end result. Everyone I've seen go that way ended up in prison or dead," Fredieu said. "I don't want to go that way. That's definitely not in the cards for me. I was like, 'I've got to figure something out.' I think Ja'Lynn had the same mentality."

As Polk got older, he took that attitude to heart. He used to sneak into his high school gym to work out. He'd watch extra film after practice. Polk needed to work harder than everyone else. He became addicted to the grind because he wanted to provide a better life for his family.

He also had a great lead to follow.

"He was a figure in my life that I needed," Polk said. "Just having somebody in your life be able to set an example for the family, that's somebody you want to look up to. What he's been able to do for himself, living life the right way and me being able to see it all, played a huge role."

A way out

The apartments weren't nice, but it was home. The exterior of the buildings was covered in a brick-layered façade. Some might call this place low-income housing. The people who lived there used two words to describe it:

'The Bricks.'

It's the site of Polk's earliest memories. It's where he learned about sports and learned about life. His family resided here in Center, Texas for five years. That included his mother, Jennifer, grandmother, Charlotte, uncle, Jacob, and sister, Jada.

"A lot of less fortunate families. A smaller community. Everybody knows everybody," Polk said. "Everybody's related. It's in the country. In the middle of nowhere. All my family lived close."

The family moved around East Texas a lot. When Polk was 6, they went to San Augustine where they lived near the projects. Before he went to high school, he lived in five different towns within the state. That included stops in Nacogdoches, La Porte, Baytown, and finally, Lufkin.

Fredieu describes it as "country ghetto." It's a place where people commonly still ride horses. High school football is the main event. Polk was 13 when he moved here and it's where his mother still resides.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," Lufkin High School coach Todd Quick said. "We're right about the halfway point between Tyler and Houston. You play football here and people go to the games because there's nothing else to do. Not a lot of industry here. It's just simple folks."

Life wasn't easy for Polk and his family. They didn't have much, but they had each other. As he got older, Polk had sports. His first memory of the sport was watching his uncle play. As he grew older, he realized how hard his mom worked to keep the family afloat. When he looked at where he lived, he knew he needed to work just as hard as she did.

He had special gifts but stayed steadfast in maximizing his abilities. It helped that he had a role model who stayed out of trouble.

"I was gifted in a way that was different than a lot of people. I just had this different type of shield over me," Polk said. "Being a young kid and having a good understanding of my surroundings and support system like my uncle. He was in my corner all the time. Just leading me through to the right path."

By the time he was in high school, Polk understood what was at stake. Hard work could lead to a scholarship. If he pressed forward, his dreams of being in the NFL could be realized.

He saw a ticket out for him and his family.

"I will say that we made the most out of our situation," Fredieu said. "I feel like Ja'Lynn and myself had the mentality to overcome and get through it all. It was good to see that in him. Even back then he had the mentality of 'I'm not going to let this define me. I'm going to overcome my odds and I'm going to be a better person because of it.'"

A greater purpose

Polk drove across Texas with a purpose. He was days away from seeing his dream become a reality. He knew his life was about to change.

Following a great career at Washington, the receiver was headed to Houston for the 2024 NFL Draft. Before he met with his friends and family for the watch party, he had a stop he needed to make.

Polk picked up his phone and called his high school coach, Quick. He explained he was coming to the school and wanted to meet with players on the football team. The soon-to-be NFL receiver had some things he needed to say.

Quick looked up the students' schedules and found a handful who would be free. He told the players to come with him and led them to a room inside Lufkin High School.

"We get about 25 kids who are in lunch because we can't pull them out of class," Quick said. "We put them in a classroom and he talks to them for about an hour - on his way to Houston for the draft. We walked out of the room, shut the door, and let him have them because we trust him with everybody. He told them just like it is. The day before the biggest day of his career, he's still giving back to the kids."

Polk talked about his life. He explained how it wasn't perfect at home but told the students how he persevered. He explained he worked hard and stayed out of trouble. Good things happened for him, and could for them, too.

He explained he was proof there was a way out. If anyone was in a similar situation, they didn't have to be bound by their surroundings.

"One conversation can change a kid's whole perspective on life and whatever they're going through in that moment," Polk said. "I'm always looking forward to going back and giving words of encouragement. I wish sometimes I would've had that — somebody who's in those shoes that's actually doing it and has been in that same predicament and trying to help them find ways to get through it."

Life has changed for the 22-year-old. The 37th overall pick signed a four-year contract worth up to \$9.69 million this spring. However, he knows that this is only the start. Those lessons he learned while growing up remain. His goal — to help his family — is still the same.

His family is going to get a little larger. In the same week that Leonard, his father was at Gillette Stadium to see him catch his first NFL touchdown, he found out that a son of his own is on the way.

"Growing up, my pop had a lot of trouble. In and out of jail," Polk said. "I feel like, then, it was something we didn't want but now, it made us closer. Just being able to make up for that time and continue to build that relationship. For him to be here and also him to experience that he has a grandson on the way. Making up for that time, it's been really important. He's doing everything now that he can."

Polk will never forget how he got here. The rookie receiver still 'sneaks' into the gym and often works out inside Gillette. in the early morning hours. He's living his dream but will never forget his 'why' and how he got here.

"Growing up, seeing all that work ethic around him and knowing the odds are already stacked against you, you've got to work extra hard to really make it," Fredieu said. "Even when you get to the top, it don't stop. You've got to keep working. That separates one person from another – hard work, determination. That's what gets you to where you want to go."

Ja'Lynn Polk is on his way.

DB Brenden Schooler



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."

LB Robert Spillane

The Athletic

Robert Spillane's unorthodox NFL training regimen: Blindfolded hikes and falling into pools

By Chad Graff

FOXBORO, Mass. — This whole story was supposed to be a paragraph. Maybe two.

Follow up on what seemed like a throwaway line from a press conference five months ago. Tack that onto the bottom of some training camp observations, and call it a day.

Back in March, when Robert Spillane was one of four players introduced as part of the New England Patriots' free-agent spending spree, the linebacker mentioned that he does "a lot of eyes-closed training." But it's hard to ask follow-up questions in formal press conferences, so the tidbit went unpursued. So on the first day of training camp, it was time to finally get an explanation.

"Oh, there are many layers to this program I've developed over the years," Spillane said.

Program? Layers? Self-developed?

"Yeah, that's one of the many unorthodox things that I do that has helped me get to where I'm at," Spillane said.

Robert Spillane has 306 tackles over the last two seasons, including 17 tackles for loss. The first walk up a small mountain probably looked normal to passersby. Just a dude in his late 20s on a hike.

But for Spillane, there was more to it than meets the eye. Notice where the rocks are, which way the ground tilts, which branches could leave a black eye.

The next day, Spillane returned — this time, to do it with his eyes shut. After that, another trip — this time, backward and blindfolded.

He'd done plenty of eyes-closed training in the past. He's a middle linebacker praised for always being in the right spot.

For years, Spillane has believed his blind training was the reason for this.

It started by simply walking forward with his eyes closed. Then backward. Then barefoot, forward and back again.

Eventually, he took it to a football field. In a defensive playbook, he'd be told as the middle linebacker to drop to a certain landmark depending on the play. So he tried it with his eyes closed. Drop 4 yards in coverage, then 5 yards to the left. Do that successfully, then try jumping on one leg with his eyes closed.

"I didn't really learn it from anybody, so it's from the ground up, self-taught," Spillane said. "It's basically just a confidence drill. As a middle linebacker, you want to know where you are on the field at all times — within the positioning of the field, understanding the schematics, where the other players are around you. So you close your eyes and take away the most basic thing you use to understand that. You've really got to rely on your instincts and your trust."

That takes us back to the woods. All the on-field, eyes-closed training was complete. It was time to take it to the next level. So Spillane, fresh off the three-year, \$33 million contract he signed with the Patriots that changed his life, stood at the trailhead, shut his eyes and started walking.

It's at this point in the interview that I had to pause. Is this real? You really shut your eyes and walk through the woods? You really developed this yourself and believe it makes you a better linebacker?

Even his new teammates had a hard time believing they weren't being punked.

"When he told me that, I was like, 'This has to be a joke,'" fellow linebacker Christian Elliss said. "There's no way you're walking backward up a mountain with a blindfold. But in his words, he was like, 'I trust my body enough, and I trust my memory enough that I'll make it up that mountain.' And he did it, so what am I supposed to say to that?"

So, yeah, he insists it's all real.

"Look, there are a lot of ways to be a successful football player," Spillane said, "but I found trusting myself has been the best way to go forward."

So he made up more ... ahem ... drills to prep for football during the offseason. He stood at the edge of a pool and fell in awkwardly to prepare his body for the contact in tackling. Then he upped the ante. Fall into the pool at a weird angle, then re-adjust his body, fall into a single-leg squat at the bottom of the pool and try to jump off of that. (He said he's still searching for a pool in the area in which to conduct those drills.)

"Football is won with strong football positioning, and being able to get back to that when you're out of position is really helpful," Spillane said. "It's a super explosive training without having to worry about impacts."

Spillane is into Eastern medicinal practices. He has tried self-hypnosis. He meditates. Alternative medications. He leans on basketball for conditioning. He runs routes as if he were a wide receiver. ("If you can run the route, you can cover the route," he said.) He joins wide receivers and cornerbacks for pass-catching drills.

It's all part of a self-developed plan for the 29-year-old father of two daughters, who has forged an unlikely path to the NFL. After four years at Western Michigan, he tested poorly at his pro day, which tanked his draft stock. He went undrafted, as teams were convinced his lack of athleticism would keep him off an NFL roster.

But a tryout with the Tennessee Titans in 2018 impressed then-head coach Mike Vrabel and earned him a training camp invite. Then the practice squad. Then some NFL games. Two as a rookie, eight the year after, 12 after that.

He's not the biggest, fastest or strongest. But coaches loved that he was always where he was supposed to be.

Finally, his breakout came in the last two seasons with the Las Vegas Raiders. He ranked 10th in the NFL in tackles in 2023 (148), then fourth last season (158). Pro Football Focus graded him as the eighth-best run defender among 189 linebackers. The big contract from the Patriots followed — a full-circle moment with the coach who first put him on a roster. He's still the guy who does everything asked of him and is always in the right spot.

That's why Spillane was back at the base of that trail this offseason, ready to embark blindfolded. He succeeded, of course, journeying through the woods without seeing, left to use his other senses and his memory from the day before, even if the journey came with a stubbed toe or two.

"That is part of it, part of building those calluses — literally," Spillane said. "Playing through pain, learning how to practice through pain, that's all part of being a successful football player."

Sure, it's unorthodox. It draws confused looks and some snickers from teammates who hear about it. But maybe there's something to the blind training. Maybe it's what constantly puts him in the right spot on the football field. Or maybe it's just a confidence thing, a boost for a player who has been doubted so often throughout his career.

Its efficacy might not be the point, though. What matters is that it helped an overlooked guy from a small college, long labeled unathletic, become one of the best tacklers in the NFL.

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 Jahlan Tava

The Boston Globe

Jahlan Tava has traveled a long way to find a home with Patriots

By Jim McBride

FOXBOROUGH — Jahlan Tava 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 Tava, 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," Tava said to nobody in particular while still staring at the souvenir.

Tava 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."

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

INDIANAPOLIS — 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.

DT Milton Williams

The Boston Globe

Inspired by his father's work ethic and dedication, Milton Williams is ready to be a cornerstone for the Patriots

By Nicole Yang

During a multi-team video interview as part of the pre-draft process in 2021, Jon Gruden, then coach of the Las Vegas Raiders, asked defensive end Milton Williams a simple question: "Who's your role model?"

It didn't take Williams very long to answer.

"My dad," he told the group.

The choice was easy. Williams grew up watching his father, Milton Sr., work late nights as a truck driver in Texas. Williams Sr. chose the overnight shift to ensure he could be present for his three children during the day. He usually took the road around 11 p.m., sometimes as late as 1 a.m., and drove double-digit hours.

Williams Sr. never accepted an "over-the-road" job. That would require him to stay out of town, and his family remained his top priority.

For the nearly three decades that Williams Sr. followed that schedule, he still dropped his kids off at school; supported their extracurriculars; enjoyed breakfast with his wife, Willamette; mowed the lawn, and worked out in the neighborhood. All the stereotypical dad things.

"Me seeing that, like, 'Man, I know he's tired,' " Williams said. "I'm getting a full night's rest and I'm tired, but he's consistently getting up every day and making sure we had everything we did. Me seeing that meant I ain't got no excuses. Ain't nobody going to feel sorry for you."

After growing up with a single mother, Williams Sr. always intended on maintaining an active role in his children's lives. No matter what.

"I was tired going to work sometimes, but I knew what I had to do for my children," Williams Sr. said. "I said, 'When I get children, I'm going to be there 24/7.' "

After that interview, Williams's agent called Williams Sr. to tell him what his son had told the group of coaches and executives.

"I had to pull over on the side of the road for about 45 minutes because my eyes watered up," Williams Sr. said. "I teared up.

"You don't think the kids watch you, but they watch everything you do. I'm the role model for my son? I thought he was going to say Aaron Donald or Lawrence Taylor or someone like that. He said, 'My dad.' That broke me down."

A father's plan in motion

When Williams and his twin sister, Mia, turned 3 years old, their father started kicking a soccer ball with them in the backyard. It was all part of his plan.

Williams Sr. wanted to introduce the concepts of coordination and begin conditioning their muscles at a young age, in order to prepare them for organized sports. A few years later, the family added shooting hoops in the driveway.

Even after the twins formally enrolled in team sports in grade school, Williams Sr. kept them on his own regimen. At 12 years old, they did push-ups and other calisthenics. At 13, they began gradually lifting weights.

"You don't want to do it before then because you don't want to stunt their growth," said Williams Sr.

The emphasis on strength and conditioning dates to his childhood in Pahokee, Fla., a small town that has produced a handful of NFL players. Williams Sr. connected with the late Andre Waters, a longtime hard-hitting safety for the Eagles, and asked him one day why he'd see him outside jogging.

"A coach would rather have a player play the game four quarters at 80 percent than have a player play one quarter at 100 percent," Waters said.

That perspective resonated. Williams Sr. effectively served as his children's first trainer. He took them to a nearby hill to run sprints, obtained a dip machine to target the upper body, and designed workouts with weighted vests, jump ropes, and parachutes.

During the summer, Williams and his sisters would lift weights in the morning before hitting the hills in the afternoon. Williams Sr. would sometimes do it with them.

"I feel like that's where I got a lot of my speed from. Even though I put on some size, I still kept my speed, agility, and quickness," Williams said. "My dad always talked about building your fast-twitch fibers from running those hills. He was from Florida. They're out there in the sugarcane fields, chasing rabbits, running hills, and all that stuff."

When Williams was a teenager, there was a stretch when he didn't finish his workouts because he was instead playing video games on his PlayStation. What did Williams Sr. do?

"I took the PlayStation from him," he recalled. "I said, 'Listen, I didn't have my dad to push me like I'm trying to get y'all.' I did everything on my own."

In order to earn his PlayStation back, Williams would have to do 100 reps on the dips machine.

"One time I tried to lie and tell him that I did them," Williams said. "I don't know how he knew, but he knew."

Williams Sr. kept a close eye on his children, whether at home, at school, or on the field. He paid attention to everything — friends, grades, football.

At first, Williams didn't understand why, but he gained an appreciation for his dad's watchful nature.

"The older you get, the more you realize everybody doesn't have that growing up," Williams said. "They don't have a father figure that's hard on them, that's teaching them how the world works and how life's going to go. It took me a while to figure out why. I understand why now. He knew what he wanted to instill in me."

The proof is in the numbers

At Louisiana Tech's pro day in 2021, Williams dominated the testing.

He ran the 40-yard dash in 4.67 seconds, the three-cone drill in 6.96 seconds, and the 20-yard shuttle run in 4.33 seconds. He registered a vertical of 38½ inches and a broad jump of 121 inches. He logged 34 reps of 225 pounds on the bench press.

At 6 feet 3 inches and 284 pounds, those numbers reflected elite athleticism and explosiveness.

"I knew that I was going to be the fastest defensive tackle in this draft class. No question about it," Williams said at the time. "No defensive tackle anywhere was going to run faster than me."

Had the NFL not canceled its annual scouting combine that year amid the COVID-19 pandemic, many in Williams's camp are convinced those stats would have elevated his draft stock.

"I've always been overlooked and underrated, so I had to go above and beyond to show what I'm capable of," Williams said. "That just made me build up my work ethic and my consistency of making sure I show up every day and just get better."

Williams knows his football pedigree isn't eye-catching. Coming out of Crowley (Texas) High School, he earned defensive MVP in District 5A-Region II for his impact as a pass rusher, but Williams is one of just two Crowley alumni to make it to the NFL. The other, linebacker Gary Reasons, was drafted in 1984.

As a two-star recruit, Williams nabbed offers only from nearby schools: Tulane, University of Texas at San Antonio, Stephen F. Austin, and Louisiana Tech. He committed to the Bulldogs, where he played three seasons after redshirting his freshman year and earned first-team all-conference honors in 2020.

During his college career, Williams continued to focus on strength and conditioning, putting on more than 20 pounds of muscle. Whenever he came home to Texas for a school break, he would be back running hills and doing dips with his dad.

Throughout his son's football journey, Williams Sr. would often reference a popular saying: "Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard."

"Nothing was given to him," Williams Sr. said. "Nothing."

"I didn't go to the biggest college. I didn't go to the top high school. I didn't go to all the camps and all that stuff," Williams said. "But if you give me an opportunity, I'm going to take advantage of it. I tried to do that at every level."

When the Eagles drafted Williams in the third round with the 73rd pick, Williams Sr. immediately had a message for general manager Howie Roseman: "Nobody on this team is going to outwork Milton Williams."

Williams served as a rotational piece in Philadelphia, as the Eagles spent their first-round picks in both 2022 (Jordan Davis) and 2023 (Jalen Carter) on defensive tackles. Williams missed only one game in four seasons, because of a concussion in 2023, but was never on the field for more than 50 percent of the defense's snaps each season.

Taking care of his body remained a top priority in the pros. He started integrating acupuncture and massages into his routine. He spent a summer working with famed defensive line coach Pete Jenkins. Most recently, he added boxing as a cross-training activity.

While his son longed for a bigger role, Williams Sr. would tell him the same message: "When you're on the field, make them call your name."

During Philadelphia's Super Bowl LIX win, Williams did just that — and broke out for two sacks as well as a forced fumble and recovery. His performance capped his best statistical season, in which he registered five sacks and 10 quarterback hits.

Investment and expectations

In March, Williams sat in his agent's house stunned. He had just signed a four-year, \$104 million contract with the Patriots, the richest deal in franchise history.

"Everything I had been through, all the extra work I had to put in, all the late nights and early mornings that nobody sees, all the days where you don't feel like doing and you still get up and do it, I was just thinking about all that," Williams said. "I was stunned."

Not only are they expecting him to play significant snaps, the Patriots are turning to Williams as a cornerstone amid their rebuild under new coach Mike Vrabel.

"He's very mature," Vrabel said. "There's zero reservation about his leadership ability. He's here a lot, he's here all the time, he shows up early, he gets plenty of work in, he takes care of his body, and he's a true pro."

Williams has totally embraced his opportunity.

"In Philly, I was never the starter or never looked at as the guy that was going to lead the group," Williams said. "Now, I finally get the opportunity that I always felt like I had in me. To get the opportunity now, I just want to make sure I'm ready for it. I really can't be slacking off because the young guys are going to be looking at me. I just want to show them a good example."

Just like the one he had.
