2025
New England Patriots

Feature Clips

Table of Contents

Chairman and CEO Robert Kraft **4**
Executive Vice President of Player Personnel Eliot Wolf **13**
Head Coach Mike Vrabel **20**
Quarterbacks Coach Ashton Grant **58**
Inside Linebackers Coach Zak Kuhr **59**
Offensive Coordinator Josh McDaniels **65**
Vice President of Football Operations and Strategy John Streicher **68**
LS Julian Ashby **81**
CB Alex Austin **85**
P Bryce Baringer **87**
DL Christian Barmore **91**
K Andy Borregales **93**
WR Kayshon Boutte **103**
T Marcus Bryant **106**
OL Will Campbell **109**
LB K'Lavon Chaisson **127**
WR Efton Chism III **132**
CB Carlton Davis III **136**
WR Stefon Diggs **137**
QB Joshua Dobbs **140**
WR DeMario Douglas **153**
S Kyle Dugger **156**
DT Joshua Farmer **160**
LB Jack Gibbens **165**
RB Antonio Gibson **168**
CB Christian Gonzalez **176**
RB TreVeyon Henderson **184**
TE Hunter Henry **190**
WR Mack Hollins **194**
TE Austin Hooper **196**
LB Anfernee Jennings **201**
RB Terrell Jennings **202**
CB Marcus Jones **205**
LB Harold Landry III **207**
T Vederian Lowe **210**
LB Marte Mapu **215**
QB Drake Maye **216**
DB Kobee Minor **251**
T Morgan Moses **256**
OL Michael Onwenu **258**
DB Brenden Schooler **265**
LB Robert Spillane **267**
RB Rhamondre Stevenson **272**
LB Jahlani Tavai **279**
DE Keion White **281**

WR Kyle Williams 285
DT Milton Williams 287

Chairman and CEO Robert Kraft

Patriots owner Robert Kraft dives deep into why he chose Jerod Mayo
By Karen Guregian

When making the most important decisions of his life, Patriots owner Robert Kraft has relied on his gut.

He's trusted his instincts when it came to picking a spouse. He stood by his intuition when he surrendered a first-round pick to the New York Jets to land Bill Belichick as his head coach in 2000.

And, he withstood the initial slings and arrows from people questioning his sanity over giving up draft capital for an unproven coach.

That scenario has played out again with Jerod Mayo, who he chose to succeed the six-time Super Bowl-winning coach.

Why would he choose to have an inexperienced coach follow a legend? Why did he go with Mayo, who readily admits he's learning on the job with Week 1 against the Cincinnati Bengals on tap?

In short, Kraft's instincts have rarely failed him. Not in love, and not in business.

"What I've learned in my businesses, and my career, I go with my instinct. I try to see things that other people don't see and have the courage to live up to my convictions. I'm always thinking what's the right thing for the long term," Kraft told MassLive Wednesday. "The most important decisions of my life are judgments I make. I go with my instincts and my notes. Whether it's the women I marry, or the head coaches I choose."

What kind of notes had he kept on Mayo?

Over time, Kraft had put together quite the book on the new Patriots coach. From his observations of Mayo as a player, as a businessman and then an assistant coach, he's kept track.

Then came the trip to Israel in 2019. Mayo and other current and former Patriots went with Kraft to Israel, and given what played out there, the owner knew he would eventually tab Jerod to lead the team.

There's a common thread that binds all of the experiences Kraft has shared with him.

From start to finish, Mayo has always exuded leadership skills and commanded the respect of others.

It started his rookie year after the Patriots selected Mayo 10th overall out of Tennessee in the 2008 draft.

"What I noticed his rookie year, the veteran players used to use him as a vehicle to communicate with Bill (Belichick)," Kraft said.

Mayo was often the go-between, conveying messages from the players to Belichick or asking all of the questions that needed to be answered. In turn, Mayo proved a valuable interpreter for the head coach. He understood what defensive genius Belichick was trying to convey with his various schemes, and how to properly disguise formations.

"In Year 2, they elected him a captain," Kraft said. "These are guys who had won Super Bowls. And for the next seven years, they elected a guy coming off his rookie year. So it made me pay attention."

Kraft also paid attention when Mayo retired in 2016 and pursued a career in business, landing a job with Optum where he served as the senior vice president of business development before returning to the Patriots to start his coaching career as inside linebackers coach in 2019.

“We stayed in touch. He reached out to me. We had dinners. It’s just a unique relationship,” Kraft said. “I didn’t know of anyone else who had gone in that type of private industry. He would talk to me about investments, so I knew he had an inquiring mind and he obviously had leadership skills. I just thought that was pretty cool for a young man from the south who grew up without a dad that had adjusted and could command respect of people in that way. It really made an impression.”

When Mayo returned to football, Kraft once again took a keen interest in watching how he interacted with the players, and how they related to him.

“How you motivate players today is different than 25 years ago or 15 years ago,” Kraft said. “These young players coming into the locker room are a lot different in who they relate to.”

Even with six rings, players questioned Belichick about his methods. They wanted to know ‘why’ it was important to do certain drills, run certain plays.

“Because I said so,” which was a common Belichick retort, didn’t always work as a sufficient answer in recent years. Mayo, meanwhile, was always happy to take time and explain things, make sure everyone understood and felt good about what they were doing.

The clincher for Kraft came in Israel. The Patriots owner has made 27 missions there, and Mayo, along with many other Patriots — Vince Wilfork, Stephon Gilmore, Ty Law, Drew Bledsoe and David Andrews among them — went along for the spiritual journey.

Kraft was being honored that year, receiving the Genesis Prize for his contribution to humanity and raising awareness and funds to fight antisemitism. It was during this sojourn to the Holy Land that the Patriot owner’s convictions about Mayo were strengthened.

“We went to a lot of special places. I remember his reaction when he got baptized in the Jordan River. I saw a sign of spirituality,” Kraft said. “I could tell that moment was special.”

Even more special was what happened prior to returning home. The flight was delayed. That’s when Mayo rose to the occasion.

“The main thing, we’re at the airport getting ready to leave, and there was a big delay. So we had all of these guys sitting around,” Kraft explained. “Then Jerod organized a meeting with a forum and held a discussion on the trip. He did it all on his own.

“And at that moment, I saw the initiative and the way people respected him. And I said to myself: ‘He’s going to be our next head coach.’"

Mayo, who spent one-on-one time with Kraft on the trip, cherished both spending time with the diverse group and experiencing Jerusalem, especially praying at the Western Wall.

Did Mayo pray he’d be the head coach of the Patriots one day?

The question was initially met with laughter.

“Honestly, I’ve thought about that for a while,” Mayo finally answered. “I always thought I could do it. I just had to put my mind to it. And we’re here.”

Kraft told MassLive he thought long and hard about bringing in someone with more experience, after parting with Belichick. But he kept coming back to Mayo.

“I just thought having him and Eliot (Wolf) and Matt Groh, they’re all sort of green now. They’ve all been here,” Kraft said of his rookie braintrust. “But the responsibilities, at least on Eliot, and especially Jerod, are huge.

“I’m always thinking about what’s right for the long term. Our businesses are private. I don’t need to make reports to Wall Street every 90 days. I do what the right thing is strategically long term. And I think I’ve done that with Jerod. I’m going to do what my gut tells me, and stay with it until I’m convinced it’s not right.”

Of course, Kraft vividly remembers what happened during Belichick’s first year. He remembered all the pushback, and pundits writing about his huge mistake.

“(Belichick) went 5-11 that first year, and they were killing me,” Kraft said of his critics. “But I’m not going to let (doubters) influence my life. I’m going to do what’s right for this team and our fan base. It’s very important that I think we have a management group — I don’t know how we’re going to do this year — but we have a management group I feel is right for the future.

“We’re moving on.”

The Patriots are moving into the unknown.

As Kraft said, he doesn’t know what this year will bring, but the revival starts now. The foundation is being built for what the Patriots owner believes will be a bright future.

At least, that’s what his gut is telling him.

ESPN BOSTON

Robert Kraft steady at the helm

Patriots' owner has navigated franchise through 20 years of highs and lows

By Jackie MacMullan
January 15, 2014

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Robert Kraft is having company and he's got some tidying up to do. The owner has been away, and just days before his Patriots were to host the Indianapolis Colts at Gillette Stadium, his office is littered with unopened mail, gifts, items earmarked for charity and a stack of business correspondence.

The room is already cluttered with mementos and framed photographs of his extraordinary run as owner of the New England Patriots.

There's the framed picture of Tom Brady in the Tuck Rule Game, personalized by former Raiders coach Jon Gruden with the inscription, "It was a fumble!" ("I'm going to auction that off," Kraft says). There are shots of Kraft with various dignitaries, including his friend, former President George H.W. Bush, who, Kraft says, plans to continue his birthday tradition of jumping out of an airplane when he turns 90 in June.

The most prominently displayed photographs are those of his four sons and his wife, Myra, who lost her battle with ovarian cancer in July 2011.

Her death left him disconsolate, lonely and dispirited. His sons, who were initially deeply concerned about their father, say while the sadness of losing his wife of 48 years lingers, the veil of grief is finally lifting. Kraft, who will turn 73 in June, gives no indication he has any immediate plans to retire.

Two Decades Of Dominance

In the 20 years since Robert Kraft purchased the team, the Patriots are near the top of nearly every category associated with sustained success.

"After the love of my family," said Kraft, "there's nothing more important to me than winning football games. And I will do whatever I have to do to put this team in position to do that."

Next week will mark the 20th anniversary of Kraft purchasing of the Patriots, providing an occasion to sort through two decades of memories that began when he paid James Orthwein $172 million for a franchise that had posted a dismal 19-61 mark (worst in the NFL) over the previous five years. At the time, the purchase price was the highest of any franchise in sports history.

Today, according to Forbes Magazine, the net worth of the Patriots is more than $1.8 billion, second in the NFL only to the Dallas Cowboys ($2.3 billion). Kraft has deftly molded the New England Patriots brand into an empire that includes the open-air shopping center Patriot Place, and he has done it with private funds.

He is one of the most powerful men in football, viewed as both a tender philanthropist and a ruthless businessman. In the past 20 years, he has been lauded as the man who saved the NFL and denigrated as the man who eviscerated the city of Hartford, Conn.

The success of his football team under his watch is indisputable. Since Kraft purchased the team in 1994, the Patriots have won more Super Bowls (3), more conference (6) and division (13) championships and more playoff games (33) than any other NFL team. Their sellout streak is at 216 and counting, with a lengthy waiting list of eager consumers raring to buy into the action.

While the team has reached dizzying heights, there have been some numbing lows, including the Spygate scandal and the incarceration of former Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez on murder charges.

True to the "Patriot Way" of leaving the past in the past, the team has successfully scrubbed itself clean of any Hernandez remnants. The Patriots initiated a program in which anyone could turn in a No. 81 Hernandez jersey for a different team jersey for free. It was a clever public relations maneuver that cost the team almost $250,000.

Players have been ordered to refrain from speaking about their former teammate, who was one of Brady's favorite receiving targets.

The current Patriots roster, set to play the Denver Broncos for the AFC championship on Sunday, has earned its moniker as a plucky team that has defied odds as one significant player after another -- Vince Wilfork, Jerod Mayo, Rob Gronkowski, Tommy Kelly -- was lost for the season.

"This is a team with real mental toughness," Kraft noted. "I don't know what's going to happen, but it reminds me of our '01 group. We didn't have the best players, but there was a sense of togetherness that was special."

That team won the first Super Bowl in franchise history in surprising fashion. The 2013 team may or may not bookend that feat. So what has Kraft learned about the business in between?

"I've learned not to be surprised when unexpected negative things come along," Kraft answered in a wide-ranging interview last week. "Everyone is there for the good times. It's how you handle the difficult times that will separate you.

"It's like keeping a family together. Let's be honest: This is a sick business. [The NFL] is going for parity. Your games get scheduled in terms of how well you did. You draft according to how well you did. You're punished for excellence, in a sense.

"You all have the same household budget you can spend, so you have to be wise. You have physical injuries that happen that are acts of God beyond anyone's ability to predict. You have to be very, very artful in how you design the team.

"It's like managing a business portfolio. And in the bottom third of that portfolio, the bottom third of your team, you need to be looking for specials that other people don't know about. Players like [defensive tackles] Chris Jones and Sealver Siliga.

"We've had a lot of those. Our football people have done a great job. But you can't rest. Once you think you've got it knocked, look out."

Kraft was blindsided by the charges levied against Hernandez, who, upon signing a five-year, $40 million extension in August 2012, kissed his team's owner, vowed to be a role model, then donated $50,000 of his new contract to the Myra H. Kraft Giving Back Fund.

"It's the saddest, most unfortunate part of our history with the team," Kraft said solemnly.

It is one of the lone blemishes on an otherwise brilliant success story in which Kraft transformed a football doormat into a juggernaut.

Resuscitating a franchise

Kraft had his sights on purchasing the Patriots as far back as 1985, when he bought an option on a parcel of land adjacent to the team's stadium. Three years later he bought the stadium out of bankruptcy for $25 million, which included the stadium's lease to the Patriots.

In 1994, Orthwein offered Kraft a $75 million buyout of his lease so he could move the team to St. Louis. Kraft, who had tried in vain to purchase the Red Sox, refused.

He was among a who's who of groups interested in buying the Patriots that included Walter Payton, Donald Trump, Paul Newman, author Tom Clancy and Robert Tisch.

"I told Myra I was going to buy the team," Kraft recalled. "She asked, 'How much?' I told her, 'It's $115 million, but it might go as high as $120 or 125 million.

"Then I got out there and it was a take-it-or-leave-it price of $172 million. I had to do it. You don't always get a second chance.

"Myra went cuckoo on me when I got back.

"It was one of the few times that we had conflict over a business decision of mine."

Kraft inherited coach Bill Parcells, quarterback Drew Bledsoe and 23 pieces of pending litigation against the team.

"I had trouble finding a Boston law firm that wasn't representing someone who had complaints against us," Kraft said.

Parcells era: 'Division within'

Parcells was a dynamic leader, but he resented Kraft's interference in his personnel decisions. He was enraged when Kraft and vice president of player personnel Bobby Grier drafted Terry Glenn in 1996 over his objections. That sparked Parcells' famous utterance, "They want you to cook the dinner, at least they should let you shop for the groceries."

Parcells and young Bledsoe led the Patriots to Super Bowl XXXI, but following the 35-21 loss to Green Bay, Parcells did not travel back to Massachusetts with the team and soon after was hired by the New York Jets.

"Sustaining success is so hard, and the one thing I learned you can't have is division from within," Kraft said. Both men have since expressed regret on how they handled their tenure together. "We have a great relationship now," Kraft said. "It wasn't so much Bill Parcells, but how he operated.

"We can only deal with people who are thinking long term. Bill was day to day. He'd go down to Jupiter [Fla.] and play his doo-wop music and decide whether he wanted to come back the next year.

"Well, we have a salary cap and we have [a cornerback] Ricky Reynolds and these other people who are waiting for answers and we need to know.

"Bill had already won his Super Bowl. He had his reputation, to be honest.

"He did a lot for this franchise. He taught me a lot on how to get ready for the NFL. I'm lucky I had him.

"But I learned you can't be good in this business continuously unless you are thinking long term. Most football coaches are only thinking about what they have to do this Sunday."

Enter Belichick and Brady

Kraft has tried to balance the all-business-no-sentiment approach of coach Bill Belichick by investing in personal relationships with his stars. When former linebacker Tedy Bruschi awoke in the hospital after suffering a stroke, Kraft was there, waiting.

One of the more emotional days of Kraft's tenure was when Belichick permanently replaced Bledsoe, a Kraft favorite, with an untested Tom Brady.

Robert Kraft stayed out of the way when Bill Belichick traded one of his favorite players, Drew Bledsoe, but made it clear the coach would be held accountable for the decision.

"I stayed out of it, but I weighed in," Kraft said. "When the head coach says, 'Tell me what you want me to do,' I say, 'I want to hold you accountable for this decision.'

"When we traded Drew, I wanted to make sure it was a place where he'd get his full contract value. I valued his loyalty. He gave our franchise credibility."

Kraft promised Bledsoe he would one day be feted by the Patriots. Last winter, he was inducted into the team's Hall of Fame.

In the meantime, Brady quickly established himself as one of the greatest quarterbacks of his generation, leading the 2001 team to the Super Bowl against St. Louis and the Greatest Show on Turf.

The Patriots stunned the heavily favored Rams by building a 17-3 lead off turnovers. Late in the game, quarterback Kurt Warner fumbled at the Patriots' 3-yard line and safety Tebucky Jones scooped up the ball and ran 97 yards for a touchdown, but it was called back on a holding call against Willie McGinest.

"When Tebucky [recovered the fumble and ran to the end zone], I said, 'It's all over!'" Kraft said. "Then they called the penalty and it goes back to the Rams and they score, and I thought of the ball going through Bill Buckner's legs."

Warner scored a rushing touchdown, then tied the game 17-17 with a touchdown pass to Ricky Proehl with 1:30 left. Commentator John Madden suggested the young Patriots should run the clock out for overtime.

Instead, Brady marched the Patriots 53 yards down the field with no timeouts and Adam Vinatieri kicked the Super Bowl-winning 48-yard field goal as time expired.

"I wouldn't even allow myself to consider we might win until the kick went through," Kraft said. "Then we had to rush down to the field and I forgot what we were going to say."

With red, white and blue confetti settling on the Lombardi trophy, Kraft told the assembled crowd, which had witnessed the first Super Bowl since the Sept. 11 attacks, "At this time in this country, we are all Patriots."

Two Super Bowl losses and a scandal

New England won two more championships in the next three seasons, then lost two Super Bowls to the Giants in 2008 and 2012.

The first diminished a 2007 undefeated regular season. The key play in the game was a throw under pressure by Eli Manning (who was nearly yanked down by Jarvis Green) to David Tyree, who held on by pinning the ball against his helmet.

"They could have called that [Manning] was in the grasp," Kraft said. "And if Asante [Samuel] holds on to the ball before that [on a potential interception], we take a knee, and it's ours.

"It hurt so bad. I'm into history and legacy, and if we had won that one we would have accomplished something that I think would be almost impossible to happen again. But for some reason it wasn't meant to be."

The 2007 season was also marred by Spygate, the scandal that cost Belichick a record $500,000 fine after his team was caught videotaping the signals of Jets coaches. The team also was fined $250,000 and docked a draft pick. It opened up the Patriots' franchise to an avalanche of scorn and ridicule.

"I asked Bill, 'On a scale of 1 to 100, how much did it help?' and he told me, '1'" Kraft said. "That was a tough time. I was mad. It could have ripped this organization apart. But we got through it."

Because of Spygate, the Patriots must endure criticism that they haven't won a Super Bowl without cheating. It is, Kraft said, a ludicrous notion.

"Spygate meant nothing," Kraft said. "Look how we've done. We've had the best record in the league since then. We've been to the Super Bowl twice since then."

Kraft said the loss to the Giants in Super Bowl XLVI is the one that still haunts him, in part because Myra had passed away before the 2011 season.

"That one was even harder," he admitted. "The team was wearing Myra's initials on their uniforms. I wanted that one more than '07. I wanted it for Myra."

Flirtation with Hartford

While Kraft is universally recognized as a shrewd businessman, there is one region in which his name will forever be mud. Kraft wanted a new stadium in 1999, preferably in downtown Boston, but the Massachusetts lawmakers were lukewarm in their support.

Kraft brokered a deal to move the team to Hartford which included a $374 million waterfront stadium that would leave him debt free.

The tentative agreement fell apart when Massachusetts pledged $70 million toward the infrastructure surrounding a new stadium in Foxborough. Kraft, citing concerns the Hartford group could not construct a new stadium in a timely manner, extricated himself from the agreement.

The backlash was venomous. When the Patriots went to the Super Bowl in 2002, the Hartford Courant's Jim Shea wrote, "The team is owned by Robert Kraft, the ethically challenged, double-dealing greedy little white rat -- no offense to rats -- who played us all in Hartford for fools."

Kraft likely would have experienced similar backlash from Massachusetts fans had he moved his team to Connecticut. The NFL, unwilling to lose its Boston market, also stepped in to ensure that didn't happen.

"If we moved to Hartford, according to our research, 97 percent of our fans still would have gone to the games," Kraft said. "They wouldn't have been happy, but they would have gone.

"People don't understand. I walked away from what would be $1.2 billion present value. There was no risk for me. No debt. I would have been much wealthier with no financial risk if I had done it.

"It wouldn't have been like the Boston Braves moving to Milwaukee. Our stadium would have been a 1 hour and 15 minute drive from here. Most of the people who come and tailgate drive that far anyhow. But, it didn't feel right, so we didn't do it."

Unprecedented stability

Although many in Connecticut have never forgiven him, Kraft has stockpiled reservoirs of goodwill throughout the rest of country for his role in settling the NFL labor dispute in 2011. Former Colts center Jeff Saturday publicly thanked Kraft for brokering the agreement while Myra was battling cancer.

"Without [Robert] this deal does not get done," said Saturday, whose bear hug of the owner went viral. "He is a man who helped us save football, and we're so grateful for that."

Kraft is most grateful for the continuity that has become the hallmark of his franchise. During his tenure, he's hired only two coaches (Pete Carroll and Belichick), and had two starting quarterbacks in Bledsoe and Brady (Matt Cassel filled in following Brady's knee injury in 2008).

Kraft's son Jonathan is the heir apparent to this NFL jewel, but the father is not quite ready to abdicate his football throne. He is energized and excited about the Patriots' future.

"I love our locker room," he said. "When I lost Myra, they saved me. I spent a lot of time there. You can walk through on game day and feel the camaraderie."

He does not know if this New England team can win a fourth Super Bowl. He's not sure how much longer Brady will play, but predicts, "It's longer than you think."

By the looks of his cluttered office, Robert Kraft plans on sticking around to find out.

Kraftwork

Three bold decisions by Robert Kraft transformed the Patriots from league laughingstock into the NFL's model franchise
By Peter King
February 1, 2012

On the last day of the 1993 NFL regular season, Patriots players and die-hard fans seemed resigned to losing their team. Absentee owner James Orthwein, a Missouri native who had bought the club two years earlier, intended to move it to St. Louis, which had lost the Cardinals in '88. "We were as good as gone," said Patriots linebacker Andre Tippett. But the fans wouldn't go down without a fight. Though they had the league's worst team (13--50 over four seasons heading into that game, against playoff-contending Miami) and worst venue (dumpy, no-frills Foxboro Stadium), damn it, this was still their bad team and their crappy stadium. Before the game they burned empty cases of Budweiser in the windswept parking lots. (Orthwein was a great-grandson of brewing mogul Adolphus Busch and sat on the board of the St. Louis--based brewing company.) And once the game ended, victoriously, on a Drew Bledsoe overtime touchdown pass to Michael Timpson, the fans wouldn't leave. "Don't take our team!" they chanted. "Don't take our team!"

Robert Kraft, the owner of Foxboro Stadium, was getting in an elevator when he heard the crowd. It had been a frenzied time for Kraft and his family, as they watched Orthwein shop the Patriots to prospective owners who would take the team to St. Louis. Kraft was a potential buyer, but he felt the deck was stacked against him because he would keep the Patriots in New England. As the elevator door closed, he turned to his son Jonathan and said, "There's no way we're not winning this."

There are decisions people make—often emotional, often against the wishes of those they trust most—that radically shape their future. Robert Kraft has made three of them involving the Patriots. And if any of those had gone the other way, chances are very good that the Patriots would not be the winningest team in the NFL since 1994, and would not be playing in their fifth Super Bowl in the last 11 seasons on Sunday in Indianapolis.

The Patriots morphed from laughingstock to the best franchise in football because at three critical junctures Kraft didn't do the logical thing. He did what something inside him said to do. "I've been around Mr. Kraft a lot when he's got all these spreadsheets and data in front of him," says quarterback Tom Brady. "But it's his instincts that he really trusts. He goes with his gut. And look at his track record—he's always right."

DECISION 1: Overspending for a bad team

A native of the tony Boston suburb of Brookline, Kraft took his four sons to countless Patriots games over the years. He had built a fortune in the paper and packaging business, and with that money came the ability to indulge a dream: He wanted to own his hometown football team. Kraft first tried to buy the Patriots in 1986, but the cash-strapped Sullivan family eventually sold to Victor Kiam. In 1989, however, Kraft bought the lease to Foxboro Stadium out of bankruptcy.

As it became more clear that Orthwein, who had little interest in owning and running a football team, would steer the club to St. Louis, Kraft broke the news to his wife, Myra, in the summer of 1993 on a walk on the beach in Cape Cod. "I told her, 'I'm going to put a bid in for the team,'" Kraft recalled in a three-hour interview with SI at his Brookline home in January. "She didn't think it was a very good business idea. To put it mildly."

But Kraft plowed forward with a seven-man team led by Jonathan, a Harvard Business School grad, that would determine how much they'd bid. The committee came to the conclusion that the Patriots—not including the stadium or lease—were worth about $115 million. "But," Kraft said, "I figured I'd go to 120 or 125 million if I had to." Summoned to St. Louis to make a final offer with other suitors three weeks after the 1993 season finale, Kraft bid $125 million. When Orthwein and his advisers declared that none of the bids were sufficient, Kraft said, in essence, tell us what you want for the team. Orthwein's advisers came back with a number: $172 million.

"Was I scared?" Kraft said. "Yes, I was scared. But this was my shot. How many times in life do you get your shot to do something you desperately want to do? Logic said no. Instinct said yes. Also, things kept flashing through my mind. The Boston Braves had left, and no team ever replaced them. My sons were getting to an age where smart sons move to take good business opportunities [elsewhere], and I wanted my family to stay intact here. I figured this could be a good family business."

After gulping hard at the figure he was quoted, Kraft said yes. For the highest price in the history of American sports, he now owned a bad football team that played in an el cheapo stadium. The tough part—telling Myra—was still to come.

Over the past six months Kraft's anguish over the death in July of his wife of 48 years has been continually evident. In his interview with SI he had to stop to compose himself four times when Myra's name came up—including in the discussion about his decision to buy the team.

"When I told her, she thought I was crazy," Kraft recalled, sitting at his kitchen table. "Angry? Yeah. She couldn't believe I'd done that. It was a ridiculous number. It's the only time she questioned my business judgment in all the years we were married. Every marriage has some hard times, and I can tell you that was a tough night."

Pause. Fifteen seconds.

"That night, to tell you the kind of person my sweetheart was, she said to me ..."

Pause. Five seconds.

" ...'You have to promise me our charitable donations will not be reduced.' I promised her that, and we moved on. Now, today, it's so tough, still. This thing with Myra—everything else is paper clips. Her perspective on what was important in life was such an inspiration."

There were fits and starts to be sure: In 1999 Kraft, seeking a new stadium, announced he would move the team to Hartford, then reversed course. And in the downturn after 9/11, funding for a privately constructed new stadium in Foxborough nearly collapsed. But Kraft weathered the storms and saw the project to completion. Gillette Stadium opened for football in the fall of 2002, when the Patriots were—thanks largely to another gutsy call Kraft had made nearly three years earlier—the reigning Super Bowl champs.

DECISION 2: Hiring Belichick

It's no secret that Kraft and Bill Parcells, the coach he inherited when he bought the team, had their moments of hostility. Parcells wanted authority to draft players, while Kraft preferred a team approach, with the personnel department having final say. That eventually led to an ugly breakup after the 1996 season. But something else good came out of that season, beyond the team's first Super Bowl appearance: Kraft got to know Belichick.

"Bill Parcells came to me and said there was someone he wanted to add to the staff, Bill Belichick, and he wanted me to meet him," said Kraft. "We were already over our coaching budget, but I met him and liked him right away. I drilled him with questions, and I liked what I heard."

Things turned bitter when Kraft learned that Parcells wanted to leave after the season to coach the Jets. After the Super Bowl loss to the Packers, when the Patriots' staff was dissolving, Kraft had a choice: keep Belichick, perhaps even as head coach, or hire new blood. "I wrestled with it," Kraft said. "But I had lost the trust with Parcells, and he and Bill were tied at the hip. They were together for so long. Could I trust [Belichick]? I decided I couldn't, at the time. Everything in life is timing. Myra and I went out to lunch with him and Debby [Belichick's then wife], and I explained it. When I left there, I thought maybe there'd be a time we might work together in the future."

Belichick followed Parcells to the Meadowlands, and the Jets signed him to a contract with an "heir clause" that would give him the head coaching job whenever Parcells stepped down. As an additional reward—and, some within the Jets' organization thought, a ploy to ensure Belichick stayed on—owner Leon Hess gave Belichick a $1 million bonus, unprompted, in January '99. But Hess died in May of that year, and the ownership situation with the Jets became muddled. When Parcells announced on Jan. 3, 2000, that he was resigning, Belichick took over—for one day. On Jan. 4 he sent his infamous letter to club management: "I resign as HC of the NYJ."

In New England, Kraft had fired coach Pete Carroll on Jan. 3, but before the Parcells announcement. "I made sure we faxed in a request for permission that day to interview Belichick—when Parcells was still the coach," says Jonathan Kraft. When the Patriots' interest in Belichick surfaced, friends around the league called Robert Kraft unprompted to ask him what in the world he was thinking in pursuing the diffident Belichick, who'd made more than his share of enemies in a five-year 37--45 run with the Browns a decade earlier. One associate sent Kraft a tape of memorable and/or monosyllabic moments from Belichick's press conferences in Cleveland.

Kraft was undeterred. Though he felt the Patriots had the right to freely hire Belichick because they'd requested permission before it was announced that Parcells was quitting, commissioner Paul Tagliabue ruled that the Patriots would have to pay the Jets compensation. Irony of ironies: Parcells, who stayed on to run the Jets' front office, and Kraft were the ones who had to hammer out the deal. "When [Parcells] called to discuss it," Kraft said, "my secretary walked into my office and said, 'Darth Vader's on the phone.' I knew exactly who she meant." Finally they agreed. Belichick cost New England its first-round draft choice in 2000.

That wasn't the only first-round pick Belichick cost New England. Commissioner Roger Goodell docked the Pats a 2008 first-rounder as partial sanction for the Spygate scandal. But those two first-rounders were small price to pay for a coach who has averaged 12.9 wins a year, including playoffs, and led the Patriots to five Super Bowls in his 12 seasons. Belichick, a latter-day Monty Hall when it comes to dealing current draft picks for better ones down the road, has ensured that the flow of quality talent won't be stemmed anytime soon. And friends say he has no plans to quit coaching. (Belichick declined to be interviewed for this story.)

"The key to life," said Kraft, "is you try to see things other people can't see. This league is set up for everyone to go 8--8. How do you differentiate? You have to be bold in any business and do things you take a lot of criticism for but you believe are right."

Which brings us to Tom Brady.

DECISION 3: Jettisoning the highest-paid player in football, in his prime

This call is less tough—though it isn't exactly an easy move to trade a prolific quarterback within the division in favor of a sixth-rounder who still had question marks. But a year after Belichick took Brady with the 199th pick in 2000, Kraft could tell that the coach was smitten with Brady and not thrilled with Bledsoe, who improvised too much for the liking of Belichick and offensive coordinator Charlie Weis during a 5--11 season in 2000. Meanwhile, Belichick found Brady to be a sponge, and it was becoming apparent that his arm was stronger than scouts had seen during the predraft process. Brady lived for the game, twice winning a parking space awarded to the player with the best off-season workout effort. And the kid was confident. He was walking out of the old stadium to his car one day shortly after the draft, pizza box (that evening's dinner) under one arm, when he encountered the owner for the first time.

"He looked me right in the eye," Robert Kraft recalled, "and said to me, 'Mr. Kraft, hi, I'm Tom Brady. I just wanted to tell you I'm the best decision your franchise has ever made.'"

In 2001 Brady replaced the injured Bledsoe with the Patriots 0--2 and quarterbacked an underdog team to a stunning Super Bowl victory over St. Louis. The next spring Belichick wanted Brady to play over Bledsoe. "You'd better be right," Kraft told him in a staff meeting. When the Bills offered a first-round pick for Bledsoe, Kraft had to okay it—and he did. "I love the guy," Kraft said of Bledsoe. "That was a tough one. But you've got to back your key managers when they make a decision."

Bledsoe lasted three unspectacular seasons in Buffalo, winning 23 games, none in the playoffs, with a plus-12 touchdown-to-interception differential. Brady in those three years: 43 wins, two Super Bowl victories and 47 more touchdown passes than interceptions.

This past year Kraft was one of 10 owners who helped negotiate the decade-long labor agreement that was hammered out in July. As chair of the league's broadcast committee he took the lead in extending the NFL's network deals through 2022. Those jobs helped him fill his time as he coped with Myra's death. "The way he does business," said Patriots union rep Matt Light, "is it's never a pissing contest. In the labor deal he said the commonsense thing: 'Let's get the lawyers out of the room.' And they did, and it got done."

While difficult, those CBA and TV deals were, in many ways, logical business developments emanating from the sport that laps all others in popularity today. Buying the Patriots? Hiring Belichick? Those were tougher calls, the kind it's become Kraft's business to make. "In this game," he said on Sunday night, after the Patriots had arrived in Indianapolis for their sixth Super Bowl under Kraft, "you better take some risks—or you'll have a nice team, and once every 10 or 20 years you'll be good. That's not what I want to be about."

Executive Vice President of Player Personnel Eliot Wolf

ESPN BOSTON

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

SI

The Secret to Mike Vrabel's Success

By Albert Breer

The saying that encapsulates all of this for Patriots coach Mike Vrabel is scribbled in blue marker at the bottom of a giant greaseboard, otherwise covered in football jargon, to the right of the desk in his windowless office.

"We Treat You The Way You Treat The Team!"

It was his Northstar in September as his program was getting off the ground, and his bellcow running back, Rhamondre Stevenson, fought through a ball-security problem. The 27-year-old had a history of putting the ball on the ground, and did so twice in a loss to the Steelers. His first lost fumble was on the game's fourth snap, the other at the Pittsburgh 2-yard line.

The day after that 21–14 defeat, plenty of coaches, including the one Vrabel once sat before in that same meeting room, might've played a lowlight reel of Stevenson's miscues. Instead, the first-year New England boss showed everything else that went wrong on the plays. He showed offensive linemen failing to finish their blocks, and receivers laying off their blocks, leaving defenders clean shots that jarred the ball loose.

"You guys, everyone on TV, radio, Twitter, thinks it's all on this one guy," he said, pointing at Stevenson. "Ball security is on all 11 of us. Not just one guy."

Vrabel was, to be sure, driving home a message to his players—that everyone on the field has a hand in the outcome of every play, good or bad—that reinforced his guiding principle on play style. That one is to "finish longer than the guy with the ball."

But beyond that, it showed Stevenson who had his back.

By Vrabel's estimation, Stevenson had treated the team incredibly well over the new staff's first eight months, proving to be a top-shelf worker, teammate, student and player. Vrabel was returning the favor. He publicly defended Stevenson, too, steadfastly refusing to criticize him as the media prodded, just as he took up for him privately in front of his teammates.

So four months later, with a trip to the Super Bowl on the line, it was the coach leaning on Stevenson as he might have leaned on Derrick Henry years earlier. Stevenson carried the ball nine times in the fourth quarter in the Denver snow, accounting for every offensive gain the Patriots had in the game's final 15 minutes, leading up to Drake Maye's game-clinching naked bootleg. The Patriots won 10–7. And it was on the back of these kinds of bonds.

"He's going to treat players like they treat the team," Stevenson said. "And I've said it before; I think I treat the team pretty well. That's why he had my back the way he did. And I was intentional about fixing the problem. I come in, work hard every time and try not to make that mistake again. I think he realizes that about me."

In the bigger picture, Vrabel knew how Stevenson felt. He knew his mistakes were obvious, and that his tailback didn't need the reminder, and that it would get fixed.

He knew because he'd been a player, having made the mistakes that didn't need to be called out, and those that did—the less obvious ones, like a receiver whiffing on a block that leads to a turnover. It's Vrabel's feel, for Stevenson and all his teammates, that made it easy to buy into what he was trying to build. And paved the way for all that's come since.

There are plenty of football elements that explain why and how the Patriots have pulled off pro football's most stunning turnaround in years. But simple relationships like these, ones intentionally and carefully built by the head coach, are at the heart of it.

An aggregation of his own experiences

Vrabel, now 50, vividly remembers how he first landed in New England half his life ago—after his coach, Bill Cowher, served him a cold dose of reality. A free agent considering his options, Vrabel was weighing a measured overture from Bill Belichick's Patriots.

Cowher told him the truth.

"Free agency started, and the Patriots offered a $225,000 signing bonus, which was less than my third-round signing bonus four years earlier," Vrabel said, leaning back in his office chair, a generation later. "And Bill [Cowher] said, 'We could pay you that, but I can't give you the opportunity that they have.' That was his way of saying you should probably take the opportunity."

Cowher, a former player himself, had Pro Bowler Jason Gildon and Pro Bowler-to-be Joey Porter at Vrabel's position. Gildon was 28, and Porter was 23. Vrabel moved on. He wound up making more than $20 million as a player, winning three Super Bowls over a 14-year career, before going into coaching. All of that may have gone differently had Cowher not been looking out for him the way he was in March of 2001.

Interestingly enough, in 2018, before the Titans hired him, Vrabel interviewed for the Colts job, and Indianapolis GM Chris Ballard left the meeting telling people he believed he'd sat down with the "next Bill Cowher."

But reducing what Vrabel's become to some knockoff of anyone he played for or coached with would minimize what's gone into how he's built his program.

Instead of trying to be Cowher or Belichick, what he's built in New England is in so many ways an aggregation of his own experiences, which start with his upbringing as an only child raised by a dad, Chuck Vrabel, who coached high school basketball.

I think my dad, as a basketball coach, taught me to value the importance of being part of a team. And so with that comes all the other stuff—the good stuff, the bad stuff, the arguing, the disagreeing on things. But, yeah, growing up, I could probably get with any group that I needed to."

Mike Vrabel

"You're always looking for somebody to hang out with," he said. "You're always looking for some group to be attached to. I think my dad, as a basketball coach, taught me to value the importance of being part of a team. And so with that comes all the other stuff—the good stuff, the bad stuff, the arguing, the disagreeing on things. But, yeah, growing up, I could probably get with any group that I needed to."

There were other influences, of course. He credits Fred Pagac, the linebackers coach when he got to Ohio State and defensive coordinator there as he became a star, for showing him the value of connectivity between players and coaches at an early age—"He did a great job of being noticeable with the entire team, on both sides of the ball"—helping elevate a program. Belichick was different than Cowher, Todd Haley was different than either of them.

And so through high school and college, four years as a Steeler, eight as a Patriot, and two as a Chief, Vrabel went into coaching plenty comfortable in his own skin. Authentically himself, he also had a pretty good idea of how he'd wanted to be coached as an NFL player.

Which is how he'd coach others.

Signs of becoming a head coach

Vrabel returned to Ohio State in 2011, with Luke Fickell, one of his best friends, asking him if he'd retire from the NFL and come aboard in a fire-drill situation—Vrabel had been serving on the NFLPA's executive committee through that spring and summer's lockout, and legendary coach Jim Tressel had just been fired at their alma mater.

The signs of what Vrabel would become as a head coach surfaced early.

One came on the Fourth of July during Vrabel's three years as a Buckeye assistant. He'd started to recognize the work (and potential) of John Streicher, a young student assistant who would be around for the holiday without much to do after working through Ohio State's summer camps. Vrabel invited him to his pool party in the Columbus

suburbs, and Streicher wound up sitting shotgun on Vrabel's ATV, criss-crossing the property with the ex-NFL linebacker, drinking beers and setting up, then lighting off fireworks for the crowd.

That was a little thing, sure, but it made a younger guy feel like he was in, and it was a pattern that'd spread like the sparks off a roman candle when Vrabel got the Titans job.

The stories of how Vrabel would look out for others are now everywhere.

Shane Bowen, like Streicher, was part of Vrabel's crew at Ohio State, and Vrabel got him on at the Texans under Bill O'Brien, then took him to Tennessee in 2018. In their first year in Nashville, Bowen's mother-in-law was diagnosed with breast cancer. She lived in Chattanooga. Bowen, in the middle of the season, was buried in his work. Vrabel kicked him out of the building and told him not to come back until he spent time with her.

The following year was Arthur Smith's first as offensive coordinator of the Titans, and he'd get the same treatment when Vrabel found out that Smith's wife, Allison, was going into labor with their third child. Smith was working through red zone tape. "Get the hell out of here," the head coach said to his OC, assuring him that, even on a Wednesday, he needed to go.

There's also Todd Downing's story. In 2022, his second year as Smith's replacement as OC, Downing was arrested for driving under the influence after a November win. He was driving home after the team flew back from Green Bay. The story turned into a public-relations mess for the team.

Yet, as was the case with Stevenson, Vrabel knew the guy working for him well enough to know that he didn't need any more reprimanding to understand he'd done wrong.

"Because it's him and because it's important to me, I'll share it with you," Downing says now. "It's no secret. I went through a tough time my last year in Tennessee. And after my off-the-field mishap, I think some people would be pissed at that coach or make life harder on that coach. Mike walked with me pre-practice every day and made sure that I was good mentally and focused. He found ways to help me through that, as opposed to making me feel shame or guilt for it. And I'll never forget that."

Vrabel fired Downing at the end of that year, as the team tried to dig itself out after the season ended with seven consecutive losses. But, Downing says, Vrabel was intentional in staying in touch with him. And, the now-Patriot assistant continues, "When he called me to join him again, I thought, 'Why wouldn't I? That guy had my back when not many would.'"

There are dozens more examples of that.

Some are on the football side—part of Smith's loyalty to Vrabel comes from Vrabel's steadiness in sticking with him in 2019, as Smith replaced Matt LaFleur, and the offense scuffled through a 2–4 start. In three of those four losses, the Titans scored seven or fewer points. Yet, Smith never felt like he was on an island. The Titans turned to Ryan Tannehill in Week 7 and ended up in the AFC title game three months later.

On the personal side, the Patriots players got a very early look at who Vrabel is through his handling of defensive coordinator Terrell Williams, his support for Williams after Williams's prostate cancer diagnosis, and his handling of linebacker Jahlani Tavai's family tragedy. In November, Tavai's partner, Kalei, sustained a rare blood infection that put her into a six-day coma and led to the loss of their daughter, Ka ua.

Vrabel gave Tavai all the time he needed, and, with Tavai's blessing, would regularly sent mass text updates on Kalei's progress so the team could celebrate the steps she was taking.

The message was received
A few months ago, Patriots equipment manager Preston "Stick" Rogers came to Vrabel with a problem. Players had been coming out of the showers and throwing their washcloths on the floor, rather than in the laundry bin. By then, Vrabel had already told the guys that support staff wasn't there to be, in his words, "your personal chef, maid or butler."

"I said, 'I can get that fixed quick,'" Vrabel said. "I told the team, 'Every washcloth that's on the floor, I've told Stick to just throw in the dryer and put back on the shelf, and then you guys can use them, and you can decide whether they've been used and not cleaned and just been dried.' We haven't had an issue with the washcloths ever since."

The story, which has become legend in the Patriots' facility, does have a little more colorful piece of Vrabel's demeanor to it—a couple of guys said that he told the team, "If you guys want to take a chance with getting somebody's balls on your face the next time you're cleaning yourself, go ahead."

Regardless of delivery, the message was received—Treat people and this place with respect—and illustrates how the above acts of kindness are earned by those who get them. And where that message on the towels was Vrabel looking out for Rogers, there are folks way further down the totem pole that get the same treatment.

When Vrabel was playing, Belichick was known for asking players random football questions in the halls to test their knowledge of the opponent. As a coach, Vrabel has adapted it to ensure his players are acting appropriately.

In Tennessee, he'd come into a team meeting, pick a young player out, and ask, Who is cleaning the tables at lunch? "His name is Chris." Vrabel would then say, "Get to know Chris and say hello to Chris." Then, he'd ask who takes care of the coffee station. "Her name is Miss Marilyn." And he's carried that over to New England, coming into the room with $100 bills in his pocket, ready to find a rookie who can tell him, say, who served them breakfast that day.

"I want to make sure they, one, respect everybody here, and make sure they understand their job is just as important as the players," Vrabel says. "Those are the little things. And the more that you focus on the little things, the less they turn into big things. You just let something slide because somebody you know didn't make your eggs right, and you treat them poorly; that doesn't sit well with me. I'm not going to sit there and watch that."

Vrabel puts his money where his mouth is, too.

Instead of a traditional fine system, the Patriots have adopted a cash-based system—money that goes to what they call the "treatment bank." Players know that if they walk into a meeting late, rather than incurring hefty monetary penalties withdrawn from their paychecks, they'll incur more minor fines that come in cash. That cash is then handed over to lunch ladies, equipment guys or intern trainers as bonuses.

And Vrabel's own money is part of the rewards for supporting people, too.

As Streicher was working his way up in Tennessee, every offseason, Vrabel would hand him his credit card and tell him to book a spring break trip for him and his wife. Streicher tried to refuse at first. Vrabel wouldn't let him. Just the same, Vrabel noticed in January that I.T. manager Brianna Avedisian's sister had come to a game without Patriots gear on. Last week, Vrabel handed Avedisian his card and insisted she go to the pro shop to outfit her sibling for the Super Bowl.

'Coach Vrabel is who he is'

The payoff for the players, as Vrabel sees it, is in the resources that are created for them if all those supporting them are working at the highest level they can.

As such, he's pushed to get as many of those kinds of resources in as he can.

He brought Titans team chaplain James "Mitch" Mitchell with him to the Patriots, knowing the 63-year-old former football coach could give the players a lot of wisdom, and someone to confide in who wouldn't run to Vrabel with their problems. He inherited Richie Armand in player development, and has empowered him. He's put Halle Ross in position to help with families, giving wives and girlfriends a resource for gamedays and road trips.

The idea is to take as many issues and worries off the players' plates as he can, so they can perform at their highest level. So if, for example, a player needs to be late, because there's something off the field he needs to take care of, so long as it's communicated, it's allowable. Because Vrabel would rather the player be locked in mentally for eight hours than with his mind elsewhere for 10. And because he does actually care.

"Coach Vrabel is who he is," says Patriot captain Robert Spillane, who was with Vrabel in Tennessee in 2018. "If anything, he's really taken relationships to the next level. He's really focused on connecting with each and every player as an individual. He makes himself available to the team. He really wants the players to know that he has our back and he's willing to be there for whatever we have going on."

And that doesn't mean coddling them. It means treating them the way Cowher once treated him—giving them opportunities as they're earned, and being real with them when needed.

Spillane himself is an example of it, having made the Titans roster in Vrabel's first year as an undrafted free agent. Receiver Nick Westbrook-Ikhine was another from Tennessee. As was center Aaron Brewer, who came in

undersized, worked to put on weight, did all the classroom and field work, earned a spot on the practice squad, then 53-man roster as a fourth interior lineman, became a starter, then landed a deal with Miami. This year, Brewer was a second-team All-Pro. And one more, a favorite of Vrabel's, would be tight end MyCole Pruitt.

"I knew Pru in Houston, and we were short a couple guys, got him off the practice squad [in Tennessee]," Vrabel remembers. "He'd been frustrated in Houston because he was on our show team. I would say, 'Hey, we need you to do this, block like this, run the route.' And guys get frustrated, everybody wants to play. And I just tried to talk to him [about that], and he came and helped us out.

"And again, it's a two-way street. Guys are helping us out, but I'm happy for them when they turn that into something else and get another contract, as Brew did, or like Nick Westbrook did. And Pruitt went on to Atlanta [with Smith] and played a few more years."

Stories like that are materializing now in New England, with guys such as Elijah Ponder, Efton Chism III, Cory Durden and Leonard Taylor III, who was on the practice squad in the fall, and blocked a field goal against Denver in the fourth quarter that would've tied the game.

It's hard to say, of course, how far those guys will go with the Patriots over the next few years. But they know, like Vrabel once did with Cowher, their coach will look out for them.

Vrabel's program evolution

Even those closest to Vrabel will tell you they're surprised all of this has come together as quickly as it has, with the Patriots 17–3 and in the Super Bowl.

In Tennessee, it didn't. It really clicked there toward the end of Year 1. When I asked Vrabel why it has happened faster in Foxborough, he answered, matter-of-factly, that "We have good quarterback play. We got better every week. There was a lot of turnover, but guys, I think, really believed in each other. And we played good defense in the playoffs when we needed to."

All of that, of course, is true. So, too, is that in Tennessee, Vrabel inherited a team that had been in the playoffs the year before, and had a strong leadership core, and vets such as Jurrell Casey, Brian Orakpo, Ben Jones and Delanie Walker that might've taken a little longer to sell. In New England, conversely, he, Streicher, EVP of player personnel Eliot Wolf and VP of player personnel Ryan Cowden have imported a raft of guys connected to the coaching staff, like Spillane and Harold Landry III, that could be instant torchbearers for the program.

But there's also been an evolution of the program.

Some came through Vrabel's firing in Tennessee and the work he did for Kevin Stefanski in Cleveland. More was refinement; he and Streicher have worked through it, with stuff borrowed from Streicher, spending 2024 with Sean McVay in Los Angeles. One example of that is McVay's saying, "A player can never meet the enemy on the sideline," a simple way to crystallize how Vrabel handled Stevenson. Another is heeding "decision fatigue," where a head coach shouldn't treat every decision like it's fourth-and-1 in the Super Bowl—that's where the idea of changing the fine system originated.

There was also an added intentionality that grew from Vrabel's experiences.

It started after his introductory press conference last January, when Vrabel, still in his suit, burst into a free-agent film session during a break in his media obligations. The personnel guys in the meeting room were a little taken aback. Vrabel disarmed them quickly, and went through what he would look for in offensive players, then asked if he could come back the next day to repeat the exercise with the scouts on the defensive side.

Within weeks, that extra effort was reciprocated with Wolf going to Streicher to ask for Titans games that best exemplified the play style Vrabel was looking for. Which was the precursor to a home-run offseason of player acquisition, during which the Patriots hit on just about every free agent they signed and drafted four guys who'd start as rookies.

Which, in the end, is the concept behind all of this. Everyone, from the equipment guy to the cafeteria worker to the starting quarterback, is doing their best to bring out the best in the next guy. Everyone judged the same way.

"It's just a good reminder that you treat them how they treat the team. And if they treat the team well, then I'm doing everything I can to help them."

Vrabel
“If you’re someone who shows up, does your job, works hard, knows what to do, is accountable, and communicates, I’ll listen to you and do whatever we can to help you,” Vrabel says. “If you’re somebody that doesn’t do those things, one, we don’t want you, and if we have to keep you, then we’re certainly not going to take into account what your opinion is. And that’s never been a problem.

“It’s just a good reminder that you treat them how they treat the team. And if they treat the team well, then I’m doing everything I can to help them.”

That approach has taken Vrabel to a lot of places in the past few years. It’s meant going to Williams’s son’s hockey games, and inviting Bowen to a Patriots walkthrough after he was fired by the Giants in December, and then surprising him by appearing at Bowen’s daughter’s dance competition later that day. It’s led him to run up his own credit card bill and to push owner Robert Kraft to create new departments at his old place of work.

And five months after a moment with Stevenson that resonated with everyone else in the room, it’s gotten him here, to the precipice of the sport’s biggest stage and grandest prize.

Yes, it’s all happened faster than anyone thought it would.

But how Vrabel’s gotten the Patriots here has been no accident.

The Athletic

Mike Vrabel’s coaching in the Super Bowl, and he’s still learning not to sweat the small stuff

By Mike Silver

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Mike Vrabel remembers the moment with vivid clarity. He does not recall it fondly.

Nearly 29 years ago, on the first day of the 1997 NFL Draft, the Ohio State All-American defensive lineman was sitting in his childhood home near Akron, nervously waiting to find out where his pro football journey would begin. Late in the first round, Vrabel’s phone rang. It was from someone in the Detroit Lions’ draft room, who posed a question to the two-time Big Ten Defensive Lineman of the Year.

“Hey, we’re thinking about taking Jerry Wunsch or Juan Roque. Can you tell us which one’s better?”

Blood rose to Vrabel’s head. He had played against both offensive tackles — Wisconsin’s Wunsch and Arizona State’s Roque — during his collegiate career. The Lions, who held the fifth pick of the second round, merely wanted his opinion before turning in the card.

“If you’re not gonna draft me,” Vrabel snapped, “don’t f—ing call me.”

Vrabel slammed down the phone. The Lions took Roque. The mood at the house, packed with family members and friends, grew darker. Vrabel eventually retreated to the basement, too bitter to socialize.

Finally, late in the third round, the Pittsburgh Steelers called: They were selecting Vrabel and converting him to outside linebacker. Everyone in the house celebrated — except for the guy who’d just been drafted.

“I was mad that day, and it’s probably something I carried with me during my time in Pittsburgh,” Vrabel recalled Monday night as he dined at an upscale Mexican restaurant in the heart of Silicon Valley. “There were guys getting picked ahead of me that I knew weren’t as good as I was. I had a lot of faith in my abilities, but not everyone saw it that way. And it was hard.”

Eventually, Vrabel — who’ll complete a phenomenal first season as the New England Patriots’ coach on Super Bowl Sunday at Levi’s Stadium — channeled that chip on his shoulder and propelled himself into prominence.

After four years as a Steelers backup, Vrabel signed a modest free-agent deal with the New England Patriots in March 2001, becoming one of the “Discount Dudes” who helped spur a shocking Super Bowl upset of the St. Louis Rams in 2002. He burgeoned into an ultra-versatile star — at outside and inside linebacker, and as a moonlighting

red-zone tight end — while helping the Pats win two more Super Bowls (and reach a third) before being traded to the Kansas City Chiefs in 2009.

Two years later, Vrabel imported that salty streak into a coaching career that has been similarly striking. His first four seasons as the head coach of the Tennessee Titans, who hired him in 2018, included four winning records, three playoff appearances, two AFC South titles, one AFC Championship Game trip and an AP Coach of the Year award.

Fired by the Titans after consecutive losing seasons, Vrabel, following a one-year sabbatical as a Cleveland Browns coaching and personnel consultant, was hired by Patriots owner Robert Kraft in January 2025 to revive the franchise in the wake of consecutive 4-13 campaigns.

The turnaround has been sudden and conspicuous. New England went 14-3 in the regular season to win the AFC East, making Vrabel the prohibitive favorite to win a second Coach of the Year award on Thursday night.

In three days, the Patriots will face the NFC champion Seattle Seahawks in the Super Bowl — and Vrabel, while still harboring the edge he has carried for the better part of three decades, will appreciate the moment, relish his players' passion and try harder than ever before not to sweat the small stuff.

"It's been a journey," Vrabel said as he slow-sipped a Mexican lager and reflected upon his playing and coaching careers. I got it, having covered much of it, on some of the sport's biggest stages. When Vrabel, after catching a pivotal touchdown in the Patriots' Super Bowl victory over the Carolina Panthers in 2004, told me, "I held it like it was my third child," it spoke to a clarity of purpose that bordered on the maniacal.

In recent months, I've noticed a man who has made a concerted effort to inject some balance into his thoughts and actions.

"I don't know if it's decision fatigue," Vrabel continued, "or not getting caught up in the small stuff, but I'm trying to focus on not obsessing over some of the little things that either I can't control or just aren't that important.

"Maybe I did do that before, but you can't let one little thing affect your whole day. But I fight it constantly."

Vrabel's internal battle has translated into a unique leadership style that has brought out the best in his underestimated team. For all his brashness, intensity and unyielding quest for detailed excellence, his presence is far from the detached authoritarian persona of the man who coached him in New England, six-time Super Bowl winner Bill Belichick.

For one thing, Vrabel knows what it's like to be on the other side. That was clear 22 years ago when, at a postgame party celebrating the Pats' AFC Championship Game victory over the Indianapolis Colts, Vrabel saw that Belichick had called me, seized my phone, impersonated my voice and asked a highly technical question about his alignment on a specific play.

When Belichick started to answer, Vrabel exclaimed, "F—, Bill, this is Vrabel!"

"He played the game," said Morgan Moses, the Patriots' veteran right tackle. "So when he does all that, you know it's real."

For Vrabel, all that includes inserting himself into tackling drills by serving as "an extra blocking sled" who is sometimes knocked on his butt by hyped-up Patriots defenders. He loves it, by the way.

"Sometimes my neck is sore the next day in training camp," he said. "But I enjoy it. If that's the end result, then great. But sometimes I tell them, 'Maybe in games you can hit the other guys as hard as you hit me.'"

Last summer, during joint workouts with the Washington Commanders, Vrabel took the term "peacemaker" to a new level, diving into a pile to break up a post-play scrum and emerging with a bloody cheek.

He found levity in that moment, too, using it as material to chide one of the Patriots players in the fray: rookie left tackle Will Campbell.

"Now it's like a joke, because I'm always like, 'Yeah, I had to go save Will,'" Vrabel said. "He says, 'I beat you there,' and I say, 'Well, I was just getting in there because I didn't think you could handle yourself.' I don't want anybody fighting. I'm going in there to break them up. I'm a bouncer."

Campbell not only can take a joke, but also can dish one out — another testament to Vrabel's evolved approach to coaching. Before the season opener, the coach tabbed the first-round draft pick to be the "news anchor" who clowns various teammates during Friday morning meetings in a format reminiscent of Saturday Night Live's "Weekend Update."

With Vrabel's right-hand man, vice president of football operations and strategy John (Stretch) Streicher, serving as the lead joke writer, Campbell's dry, droll delivery regularly cracks up the room. Running gags include Moses' age, certain players' penchant for forgetfulness and star receiver Stefon Diggs' proclivity for procreation. Everyone is fair game, and everyone refrains from taking it personally.

"I'm catching strays left and right," said cornerback Carlton Davis, a free-agent signee last March. "It's cool, though. It's fun."

Davis also describes Vrabel as "chill — (though) not too chill to the point where we're not productive. He tells us all the time, 'We'll treat you how you treat the team.' And if you treat the team right, he'll treat you not just like another employee, but like family."

Vrabel's own family dynamic has affected his coaching style. He admittedly was hard on sons Tyler (who played offensive line at Boston College) and Carter (who played baseball at Tennessee Tech) when they competed in youth sports. Inspired by his wife, Jennifer, he has tried harder to accentuate the positive since becoming the Pats' coach.

One of Vrabel's frequent pregame statements to the men he coaches: "I can't wait to watch you play." After games, he regularly stands in the tunnel and exchanges bro-hugs and hand slaps with Patriots players as they head to the locker room.

Many of those same players, of course, drive him crazy on a frequent basis. As someone who swallowed an unwanted dose of humility before he even entered the league, and who waited until his fifth season to find his groove, Vrabel has little patience for those who don't treat their opportunities with the proper degree of seriousness. He cares deeply about the details and wants his players to do the same.

"We focus on the little things," he said. "Like, I think being on time is something that is important."

At various times during the season, Vrabel has had to curb his impulse to snap. Whether it's a player showing up late to a meeting, wearing ripped jeans on the team plane or simply not overtly exuding the type of competitive fire he craves, the coach has experienced plenty of moments that make the blood begin to rise to his head, only to take a beat and save his ire for more important occasions.

Recounting some of those stories Monday night as he finished his meal, Vrabel smiled at his restraint. A few minutes later, after having excused himself to use the restroom, the coach returned, practically beaming. He'd seen about 20 Patriots players at a table on the other side of the restaurant, and what he'd witnessed had been oddly wholesome.

"It's Monday night of Super Bowl week, and they're all sitting there eating ice cream," Vrabel said. "I mean, you've got to love that."

It was a sweet moment — on more than one level — for a dude whose saltiness once defined him.

The Athletic

What was Mike Vrabel like in high school? A legendary competitor and 'genuine as hell'

By Chad Graff

CUYAHOGA FALLS, Ohio — The stadium lights tower above the trees, the first sign of what's on the horizon. Otherwise, the drive down Wyoga Lake Road offers no signs of what resides on this patch of farmland, donated in the 1960s to build an all-boys high school.

So much has changed here since those days. But the football stadium looks the same. You see it before you even see the school, Walsh Jesuit. Those words are written in yellow paint over a maroon backdrop on the side of the stadium.

Northeast Ohio is a football-mad sliver of the country, and inside the school, there are plenty of tributes to the Super Bowl coach who once called this place home. Mike Vrabel. In the cafeteria, his name is still on the wall of athletic records thanks to his track and field prowess in the shot put and discus. His New England Patriots jersey is signed and framed, a Reebok throwback to the days when he was an intimidating linebacker playing for Bill Belichick. There's a mural of him that spans 30 feet in a weight room. A photo commemorating his spot in the school's Hall of Fame. A football in a trophy case celebrating the four Super Bowls in which he played.

It's gray, cold and snowy outside on this afternoon, a little over a week before Vrabel leads the Patriots into Super Bowl 60. But the townspeople are abuzz about one of their own.

This is where Vrabel grew up. The only child of a middle school principal (his mom, Elaine) and a high school principal (his dad, Chuck). Mike went to middle school in nearby Stow. Became a three-sport athlete at Walsh Jesuit. Went south to play at Ohio State in college. Cheered on the Cleveland Browns until they inevitably let him down. "Then I started rooting for the Cowboys, and they made it (to the Super Bowl) a lot more than the Browns did," Vrabel said.

Now he's the one headed back to the Super Bowl. A kid from this area, north of Akron and south of Cleveland, who has revived the Patriots and has them one win away from a seventh Lombardi Trophy.

"No," Vrabel admitted, "I never envisioned this."

During Mike's early years, Chuck was a high school basketball coach. So Mike tagged along to various games and tournaments. He'd shoot hoops at halftime and sweep the court between games.

"I always teased Mike that it was the best deal we ever made: two jelly donuts and a soda, and he was good for the day," Frank Lupica, who became Mike's basketball coach at Walsh Jesuit, said. "Though sometimes it cost us three donuts."

When Mike enrolled at Walsh Jesuit, the school didn't allow freshmen to play on the varsity football team. But with a game against powerhouse Massillon on the horizon, Mike pestered coach Gerry Rardin for weeks. If he couldn't play, he at least wanted to be the water boy. Anything to get him on the sideline with the guys.

But Rardin said no. They didn't need any more water boys.

Rardin was also Mike's Spanish teacher that year. Mike sat in the front row in class. That created more chances to bring up the water boy gig ahead of the big game. Over and over, he pestered Rardin. "Every single day," Rardin said.

Finally, the coach relented. "Mike always got his way," he joked.

The next year, Vrabel was the rare sophomore who played varsity on a good team.

College recruiters stopped by the school often when swinging through the area. Coaches from Ohio State came for one practice. They were there to watch one of the team's wide receivers.

"But I noticed the recruiters kept looking down at the other end of the field," Rardin said. "And he goes, 'Who's that guy?'"

The coach was pointing at Vrabel.

"That kid is going to be playing on Sundays," the recruiter said, according to Rardin.

The coaches at Walsh Jesuit knew Vrabel was good. But he was just a sophomore. That's a long way from the NFL.

"He said, 'Look at the way he handles himself, look at the way he moves,'" Rardin said. "And three years later, he was the guy who got Mike to Ohio State."

At left, Mike Vrabel's name still sits atop the list of track and field records at Walsh Jesuit. On the right, there is a photo of Vrabel's plaque in the Walsh Jesuit Athletic Hall of Fame.
Mike Vrabel's name still sits atop the list of track and field records at Walsh Jesuit.Chad Graff / The Athletic
Even after that breakout sophomore season on the gridiron, Vrabel played junior varsity basketball, which impressed Lupica. A lot of guys aren't willing to go from starring on varsity in one sport to playing JV in another.

“But he just enjoyed his teammates,” Lupica said. “He enjoyed the competition.”

In track and field, the throwing competitions were usually held first. Vrabel competed in the shot put and discus. After finishing, most of the throwers would head home or to some other activity.

“But Mike was always there cheering on the two-milers who finished in the last event,” track coach John Hasenstab said. “He was the consummate team player in every sport.”

His football exploits were legendary. On one play, he bulldozed through a running back who was supposed to block him, crushed the quarterback, picked up the ensuing fumble and returned it for a touchdown.

By his junior year, the mailbox at the Vrabel household was stuffed with recruiting letters. But Vrabel took his time to make a decision.

At one point, Michigan head coach Gary Moeller came to Vrabel’s house for dinner as part of the Wolverines’ recruiting pitch. Ohio State got wind of the meeting and phoned Rardin.

The message from the Buckeyes was clear: You better not let Mike commit to Michigan tonight.

At dinner, Moeller was trying to close the deal. He told Vrabel that deep down, he probably already knew where he wanted to go.

Vrabel disagreed.

But the coach persisted. According to Rardin, “He goes, ‘No, I’ll bet you any money deep down you know where you want to go.”

Vrabel stood up and stuck out his hand. Rardin’s heart sank. Vrabel was about to commit to Michigan. Ohio State would be furious.

“But then Mike just laughed and said, ‘I’ll bet you $100 I don’t know yet,’” Rardin said. “And I took a deep breath like, ‘Oh, thank god.’”

(Left) Mike Vrabel's senior photo. (Right) Vrabel at work in the commons kitchen.
Left: Mike Vrabel’s senior photo. Right: Vrabel at work in the commons kitchen.Courtesy of Walsh Jesuit High School
Even after he eventually committed to Ohio State, Vrabel continued playing basketball and track, which was something of a rarity.

On the basketball court, he was a ferocious rebounder. He was surprisingly fast for his size and could run the entire game without needing a break.

The basketball court at Walsh Jesuit is a domed throwback of an arena with tall wooden ceilings. Coaches could always tell how prepared they were for a big game based on how long practices lasted the day before. With a big game looming against St. Vincent-St. Mary (the school LeBron James would attend six years later), practice was a breeze. The guys were ready. The coaches went back to their office in a festive mood.

Until they heard a knock on the door.

Vrabel was standing there. A basketball rim was in his hands. He explained that some of the guys were working on free throws, and he jumped up to dunk one of their misses. And while he hung on the rim, it snapped.

“So, we’ve got a problem,” Vrabel said.

“I said, ‘No, Mike, you have a problem,’” Lupica said, ordering Vrabel to get it fixed. “Now, I always knew Mike was fast. I just never realized how fast he really was until I said you better go fix that, and it better be fixed tonight. He took off to find the janitor and help him get the rim back up.”

Even as a teen, Vrabel had the same sarcastic sense of humor. He still likes to give Rardin a hard time about Spanish class holding too many taco parties.

Vrabel kept in touch with Rardin even as his playing career took him from Ohio State to the Pittsburgh Steelers, to winning three Super Bowls with the Patriots. When Vrabel landed the Tennessee Titans' head coaching job, he hosted Rardin for a joint practice with the Patriots in 2019. He insisted Rardin watch the practices with him, standing behind the offenses for the scrimmage.

Together, they watched Tom Brady go through drills.

"And then I just hear Mike yell to Brady, 'Oh my god, you have gotten slower!' And Brady just turns, like, 'Damn it, Vrabel, would you shut up?'" Rardin said. "So here he was, now an NFL head coach, but he was still acting like he did in high school and as a player.

"And I think that's something players always saw with Vrabel as a coach — this guy is genuine as hell."

The menu at Swensons is drilled onto the exterior of the building, 10 minutes south of Walsh Jesuit. It's a burger joint. The kind of place where you drive up and turn your headlights on when you're ready to order. There's no indoor dining. You eat in the car.

The place looks like it hasn't changed since Vrabel came here in the '80s and '90s. He and Chuck would come after games. It's a place to chat about sports and life and growing up. They'd order Galley Boy burgers, onion rings and fried mushrooms.

Last year, when Vrabel was out of a head coaching job, he came back here.

He spent the year as a consultant with the Browns. Professionally, it was a chance to learn from an analytically-driven organization and see how another head coach (Kevin Stefanski) ran things.

Personally, though, it was a chance to be close to home.

His parents still spend most of the year here. His old friends are still here. They'd get beers down the road at Panini's, where Walsh Jesuit football helmets serve as décor at the bar.

Vrabel went back to Walsh Jesuit in September of that year. They retired his jersey number. He wore No. 84 in those days.

They had a big party tent set up behind one end zone for Vrabel and his buddies from the Class of '93. When Walsh Jesuit later scored a touchdown in that end zone, Vrabel ran onto the field and picked the kid up to celebrate. (In these parts, the refs didn't dare throw a flag on Vrabel.)

Before the game, Vrabel walked through the school and relived his high school memories. He went through the locker room and swapped stories with former teammates.

He also spoke to the team, giving a classic, fired-up Vrabel pregame speech. Passionate, authentic, intense. The players were on one knee, captivated.

Vrabel told them that whichever team hit harder and ran faster would win the game. Don't overcomplicate it, he said. Be physical. Play for the guy next to you.

And he told them to appreciate it. Soak in these moments of high school football. That no matter what else happens and wherever life takes you, these are the games you'll always remember.

The Athletic

How Mike Vrabel sparked the Patriots' turnaround from 4-13 to AFC East champs

By Chad Graff

The drive from T.F. Green International Airport in Providence, R.I., presented a bit of an obstacle. The New England Patriots had just stomped the rival New York Jets on the road, but they needed a Buffalo Bills loss to secure their first division title since Tom Brady left town following the 2019 season.

On the buses from the airport back to Gillette Stadium, players tried to stream the ongoing Bills game. Many didn't have access to it on their phones. They turned to family group chats, seeking usernames and passwords, all in the interest of following the game live.

"I used my grandma's login," said safety Jaylinn Hawkins.

What the players didn't know, even as they cheered the clinching of their AFC East title after the Bills' failed two-point attempt, was a plan that head coach Mike Vrabel had set up earlier in the week.

Since he took over the Patriots and embarked on this historical turnaround, Vrabel, a former linebacker for the club, has insisted that everything would always be about the players. Now, he wanted to give them a proper celebration.

So he orchestrated a small party that awaited the Patriots back at the stadium. He got permission from Robert Kraft to use the owners' parking garage as a venue. Staffers were sent with hats and T-shirts to commemorate the completion of a goal Vrabel first mentioned back in April.

That way, when the buses made a surprise stop at the garage, everyone could properly celebrate.

"Obviously, we would rather it be in the stadium after a game," said backup quarterback Josh Dobbs, "but it was unique."

It was just one thoughtful moment in a season of shocking and uplifting ones that has the Patriots preparing for the playoffs on the heels of the most incredible turnaround the league has ever seen. Vrabel inherited a 4-13 mess. One year later, the team is 14-3 and set to host the Los Angeles Chargers in the wild-card round.

The path to this point required contributions from a number of people. Of course, the MVP-caliber play of quarterback Drake Maye. The improved performance from the offensive line. The perseverance of the defense.

But nothing was more central to the Patriots' sudden turnaround than Vrabel. With the 50-year-old coach at the helm, New England is about to host its first playoff game since a fateful night in early 2020 that bookended a remarkable fairytale run.

Kraft looked around him, perched in his suite above the 50-yard line, stunned at how swiftly things were ending. The 2019 Patriots season was over in the wild-card round, the end of the Brady era and the start of a difficult conclusion with Bill Belichick. On the opposite sideline was Vrabel, who brought an undermanned and overmatched Tennessee Titans team to New England and took down the league's bullies of two decades.

Kraft later called it a "magic moment" watching Vrabel beat his team that night. Years earlier, Vrabel and Kraft had sparred when Vrabel was a representative for the players' association. But now, Kraft was seeing the former Patriots linebacker in a different light.

"I looked over, and I thought, 'He's a guy who has been exposed to the greatest coach and greatest quarterback,'" Kraft later said of that playoff game. "He has knowledge intrinsic to being in this system and used it in a way to benefit his team."

In 2023, Kraft welcomed Vrabel back to New England when the franchise inducted him into its Hall of Fame. Vrabel was still the head coach of the Titans at the time and came up during his team's bye weekend. He watched the game from Kraft's suite and, during his on-field address to fans, said "we've got a game to win," which ruffled feathers in Tennessee. A few months later, Vrabel was fired by the Titans.

At that time, the Patriots were dealing with their divorce from Belichick, a split that came earlier than expected after Belichick's team bottomed out. Plans had already been put into motion for Jerod Mayo, another former New England linebacker, to take over.

Still, Kraft briefly thought back to that 2019 game and what Vrabel might bring to his team and considered blowing up a plan several years in the making. Instead, Kraft stuck with it, handing Mayo the reins of his franchise.

But that helps explain why, when Mayo's first season at the helm went so poorly, Kraft didn't hesitate in pivoting to Vrabel. He was criticized for seemingly thumbing his nose at the NFL's Rooney Rule and only interviewing four candidates before selecting Vrabel. But Kraft knew all along who he wanted to lead the team.

It's also why Kraft remained so confident throughout this past offseason. He said repeatedly the Patriots would be better than expected and that reaching the playoffs was a reasonable goal, even as those around him tried to temper expectations.

Teams, he was told, don't generally go from being among the worst in the league to the best.

But Kraft insisted. Vrabel, he felt, was different.

Even after a free-agent spending spree last March, the 2025 Patriots roster wasn't going to scare many teams. They filled some holes, added a bit more star power and hoped for growth from Maye, their young quarterback, but they weren't going to be able to win on talent alone.

So Vrabel upped the emphasis on culture. With a brand-new coaching staff and a vastly different lineup, he wanted to help his team get to know one another.

So in April, Vrabel brought in members of the Air Force to put the team through some bonding drills and friendly competition. They focused on communication and worked through drills blindfolded. Quietly, Vrabel made sure to pair up players who didn't normally work together. Offensive linemen were with defensive linemen. Wide receivers were with cornerbacks.

"I put a lot of thought into this, whether you guys believe it or not," Vrabel said. "I try to be intentional. I don't want to waste their time. With so many new faces, coaches, players, support staff, whatever that may be, I just felt like some of that stuff was critically important in the spring before we started dumping a bunch of plays on the guys."

With his new coaching staff, Vrabel often used a fable to stress the importance of developing good relationships with the players.

"If someone honks at you for driving too fast, you flip 'em off," he said. "But if someone you care about tells you you're driving like an idiot, you listen."

Vrabel's a trash-talker by nature. He tries to get under people's skin. He was one of the few former Patriots who talked smack to Brady as a player and celebrated the few mistakes the legendary quarterback made in practice.

But the secret to Vrabel's success is the way he counterbalances that with positivity and support. The way he meets players at the locker room door after games with a hug and a handshake, thanking them for their hard work. The way he jogs onto the field to check on every injured player, no matter how small the injury appears. During TV timeouts during games, a lot of coaches look over their call sheets and figure out the plan for what's to come. Vrabel usually spends those moments on a knee in front of the bench, coaching up his players. He's rarely just standing on the sideline watching the game.

"I don't know how he does it," veteran wide receiver Stefon Diggs said. "He got me to buy in, I'll tell you that."

The other secret is, as one player described it, Vrabel's "aggressive honesty."

"He's real transparent," Hawkins said. "You know exactly what's going on, what the expectations are of the team, what they are of you."

Vrabel's path to being a head coach was different from most. He spent several years as an assistant at Ohio State, his alma mater, but he was a coordinator in the NFL for just one season. From the outside, it's easy to say he's simply a program-builder. Or a culture-setter.

But what has impressed many of his new players is the way he's fluent in the techniques of every position.

Vrabel stands at the front of the room before Thursday team meetings and kicks off a quiz-like study hall of the team's game plan for that week. The questions are hyper-specific. He flips quickly from offense to special teams to defense, asking for details about each specific scheme, seeing which players know it. "It's similar to how Bill (Belichick) used to operate the week and make sure that we're prepared for the other team and our game plan," guard Mike Onwenu said.

Vrabel bounces around throughout the week in position meetings. He has told his confidants it's important for him to be able to teach any position, so he pops into each one to spend time with each group.

That carries over to the field, too. Most teams use backups and practice squad players to build a scout team that matches up against the starters in practice. Vrabel insists on putting on a red pinnie and playing on the scout team, talking trash to the starters like he did as a player. When the scout team needs an extra tight end, it's Vrabel. When they need an extra D-lineman, it's Vrabel. (That has led to wisecracks in the quarterback room about how none of them can throw a pass that gets intercepted by Vrabel for fear of the trash-talking that would ensue. "Just throw it down low," Dobbs joked.)

Members of the New England front office began to joke that they had an advantage. Whereas most teams get 16 players on the practice squad, the Patriots have an extra one in Vrabel. But it's about more than a former player showing he's still got it. The practice reps give Vrabel a chance to offer additional coaching points. When he's lined up as a defensive end, he can also give pointers to offensive linemen.

"I just feel like it is very rare to have a coach like him that can connect with so many different personalities on the team," rookie left tackle Will Campbell said. "I don't ever want to have to play for anybody else. I feel like that's the best way to sum it up."

In December, Vrabel went to Kraft with a request. The season is long, especially for coaches. And Vrabel wanted a way to say thank you for the hard work, not just to his assistants, but to his staffers' significant others, too. Vrabel is married with two kids and knows how tough it can be at home while coaches work long hours.

So Vrabel asked if Kraft would greenlight a trip for the spouses and significant others to tag along to New York for the Jets game, and the owner agreed.

When the team arrived at their hotel outside New York several days after Christmas, Kraft and his wife were there to welcome the significant others. Kraft offered a toast before dinner with the whole group.

The next day, the Patriots pummeled the Jets in an outcome everyone expected. Perhaps most amazing about this year-over-year transformation is the way Vrabel has made winning feel normal again.

A few hours later, the Bills lost, and the wheels were in motion for Vrabel's impromptu celebration of a division title.

The buses pulled up. Players and staffers hugged. Then Vrabel instructed everyone to pile in for a group photo.

"Big dudes in the back," Vrabel yelled. "Little dudes in the front."

Initially, much of the team's support staff, many of whom have been with the Patriots for more than a decade, stood off to the side.

But Vrabel stopped the photographer and hollered another directive.

"This is a team. So, no, you're not just standing off to the side. Everyone here played a role. And we're all division champs."

FOX SPORTS

Game Changers: Why the Patriots Thrive on Mike Vrabel's Brutal Honesty

By Henry McKenna

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — The more you speak to people who have known Mike Vrabel for a long time, the more you'll hear a particular word to describe him. It's … not exactly a nice word, at least not when you take it at face value. But you have to understand that, for football players, they're using it as a term of endearment.

He's my guy. He's so honest that it hurts. He's great, you'll love him. It's just that …

"Mike's kind of an asshole if you get to know him," Tom Brady said with a sarcastic smile back in 2021.

"The first thing that comes to mind is an asshole," Julian Edelman said this year.

And Larry Izzo, the former Patriots special teams ace and current Commanders assistant coach? Well, yes, the a-word came up during our conversation about New England's head coach.

"He can strike a nerve better than anybody," Izzo told me. "It's a gift that he has in terms of pushing buttons. At any level of s--t-talking that I've been around in my entire career — almost 30 years in the NFL going back to college — he is at an elite level in terms of being able to bust balls."

Added former Patriots quarterback Matt Cassel: "The verbal assault came with the physical assault."

Patriots coach Mike Vrabel may have a blunt approach, but his methods have helped the team change its losing culture in a matter of months. (Photo by Danielle Parhizkaran/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)

Let's be crystal clear: Every one of these former teammates loves Mike Vrabel. Izzo even lived at Vrabel's house for two months when they coached together for the Houston Texans in 2017. So that's the other word you'll hear a lot when talking to people about Vrabel: "Love."

It takes a special kind of person to bring people close while constantly challenging them.

"He's a uniter," Izzo said.

More specifically, Vrabel is a hands-on uniter. The 50-year-old, who played linebacker for 14 NFL seasons, is famous for putting on pads and getting into the fray during practices and even pre-draft workouts. He went all-out with left tackle Will Campbell before the Patriots drafted the LSU product with the fourth overall pick this year. Vrabel worked through backside blocks and countless other drills against a 21-year-old stud prospect — for 60 minutes.

More recently, Vrabel was cracking up as one of his 300-pound defensive linemen hit him repeatedly before a preseason game. His laugh sounded like pure joy, a tickled toddler.

It shows another side to Vrabel. The dude loves ball. It's part of who he is, and maybe that's why he cares so much about getting things right. And about winning.

"That's his style," Patriots defensive tackle Milton Williams told me. "He always tells us that he was an asshole [as a player]. He says he's still an asshole now. That's just how he coaches. He's gonna get the best out of us. He's really getting on you. He really just harps on the details."

Cassel, now an analyst for NBC, is one of Vrabel's friends who pushed back on the label, in part because it's reductive and incomplete.

"That's the easy way out — describing him, at times, as an asshole," Cassel said. "It's more of a joking way to say that he coaches the same way that he played. … He's going to try to push you to get the best out of yourself. He's also going to try to push you to the limit, to where you didn't think that you could go, and actually make you understand, 'Look, I pushed you because I believed in you and got you here, and then we'll show you that love when you get there.'"

Most of Vrabel's players aren't interested in parsing the nuances of his bristly disposition, and they're certainly not interested in calling him names. But there's a cultish obsession breaking out in the Patriots' locker room around their coach. It's not just that the Patriots have rocketed to the top of the AFC standings. It's also that they appear to be at the dawn of a new era under their elite young quarterback, Drake Maye.

Every person in the building follows Vrabel. You can call him a button-pusher. A chop-buster. A ball-buster. You can call him the a-word.

But it's all about another a-word: accountability. That's at the core of who Vrabel is as a man and as a coach.

"You try to treat [the players] the same way they treat the team," Vrabel told me. "If you treat the team like s---, hopefully you're not around very long. But if you are, I don't have much to say to you. But if you're somebody that treats the team well, knows what to do, shows up on time, plays hard, practices and does everything that you're supposed to do, then I'm willing to listen to what you have to say."

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Everyone has a friend who's never wrong, good at everything and exasperatingly effective … at life. For Izzo, that was Vrabel.

"When you get into an argument with Mike — or it's like some s--t-talking back and forth — you're never gonna win," Izzo said. "You just get into an argument with him and you're like, 'This f---ing asshole.' But at the end of the day, you end up having more love for the guy."

Back in the early 2000s, whenever the Patriots' special teams unit couldn't get its act together and coach Bill Belichick wasn't happy about it, there was one solution that worked better than any other. The solution wasn't a "what." It was a "who," and you already know "who."

Vrabel arrived in New England under the cover of anonymity, once a Steelers special-teams player who thought the Patriots would give him a shot to step into a starting linebacker role. He ended up converting that starting opportunity into a Pro Bowl nod and three Super Bowl wins. His former teammates attribute his sustained success to his grind-it-out mentality — no matter the role.

As a starting linebacker, Vrabel wasn't a full-time contributor on special teams, but when called upon, he took it seriously. In fact, he was as good as any player on the roster at covering kicks and punts.

That included Izzo, an all-time special teams great. So, when the unit was struggling, the coaches would tap Vrabel.

"OK, you're up," they'd say.

Vrabel would take the field for a kick return. He'd run 70-something yards and be the first man to meet the returner for a tackle. Every freaking time.

"It would drive me crazy," Izzo said. "He would get up and celebrate, and he would walk off the field talking s--- to the rest of us, me specifically."

Vrabel would say: "OK, I got mine. It's your turn."

Whether Vrabel knew it at the time, he was holding his teammates accountable in the same way he now holds his players accountable. Yes, he did it by talking a little trash, but also by targeting underperformance to help motivate and inspire those around him to achieve their full potential.

We're all human. We all let our performance slip. At times, we all need reminding of who we can be.

That's when the best leaders step in.

"For coaches, it's about finding the balance around the psychological warfare of not becoming complacent after wins and after success," Cassel said of Vrabel's tactics.

I asked Vrabel how he'd coach himself, if he could speak to himself as a younger player. What piece of advice would Vrabel give?

"The timing of your comments is important," he said. "Timing is everything."

Vrabel admitted that he has to be careful with his prickly, brutally honest side. When he was a player, he could get away with a snarky comment here or a bit of smack talk there. As a coach? It's a whole different animal because his words carry more weight.

"As far as an asshole, I can be a good asshole, I can be a bad asshole," Vrabel said. "There's a wide range. Sometimes that's a good thing, and sometimes I could probably take it to the other side."

Now in his seventh year as a head coach, Vrabel has learned to take more care of when and how he relays the difficult messages that are intended to help players. He can't snap off a quippy comment "just because it's on the tip of my tongue," he said.

"I have to be cautious of that. That's what happens when you're the head coach. You say things. People — it means something to them, positively and negatively. So a lot of that has to be intentional and understanding who the audience is," Vrabel said.

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It was the first day of training camp on a hot July Sunday in Foxborough. Vrabel, in what he called "the honeymoon phase," was in the process of reintroducing himself to New England. After stints with Ohio State, his alma mater, and with Houston, Tennessee and Cleveland in the NFL, he was conveying his coaching philosophies. The media asked what he thought would qualify as a successful camp, and he responded with a question.

"Well, if we can remember what the objectives of training camp were, which were — do you remember?" he asked.

He'd gone over them the day before in a media session, and yet no one could remember. These goals were clearly important to him. So, he decided to bust some chops.

"No?" Vrabel smiled. "Build a team. Earn a role. Remember the last one?"

Still: silence. "Prepare to win. You guys are on fire today. We're off to a great start."

Everyone cracked up. We'd been called out.

Vrabel couldn't help himself from educating the media on what he was building. He gave us a snapshot of how he challenges people around him. It wasn't mean-spirited. It was with an intention.

This was how meetings had been going with players and staff, too.

"Hey, that's how it is when we're in a team meeting room," receiver DeMario Douglas said. "So, you've got to know your stuff."

It hasn't stopped.

At some point each week, Vrabel stands in front of his players and tells them how — if they're not careful — the opposing team's star will absolutely run them over. One example: Bijan Robinson. Ahead of the Falcons game in Week 9, Vrabel let his guys know the havoc the runner could wreak.

"I hope you're ready for such-and-such this week. He's going to run through y'all," Williams imitated Vrabel saying. "He's trying to get us pissed. Every week, it's been somebody new. He gets us ready to play."

But it's not like Vrabel's speeches are inauthentic.

"He's laying the facts out there," backup quarterback Joshua Dobbs said. "That is true. If you give Bijan Robinson too much space, you saw what he did against the Buffalo Bills. He had 200 yards of offense. He's truthful in that."

Following this philosophy, you'd think that the best time to coach a team is after a loss, but that's not how Vrabel sees it.

"I think that when you win, you can coach them harder, because you won," he said.

Good thing the Patriots are 11-2.

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In the film room, Vrabel's criticism doesn't bring the vibe down. It somehow brings his players closer to him.

Not every player would walk away from that kind of meeting nodding in agreement. Not every coach can get his players to walk away from that kind of meeting nodding in agreement. But Vrabel can, maybe because, as a player, he sat through meetings just like the ones he now conducts.

Belichick was famous — or infamous — for laying into his players ahead of and after games. Vrabel played for Belichick from 2001 to 2008, which includes the perfect regular season in 2007 when Belichick was, as the legend goes, more critical than ever. Maybe knowing that he needed to bring balance on the tough days, Vrabel would try to mix things up. He was famous (and infamous) for joining the scout team (which starters don't normally do) just to piss off Brady. It was intense, sure. But it was also good for a laugh for the whole team.

"It didn't feel like a fun atmosphere at times because it was so regimented, it was so meticulous," Cassel told me. "Even when we won, sometimes it felt like you lost because of how we were held accountable. But [Vrabel's antics] brought a little bit of levity to the situation."

If there's another thing Vrabel seems to have borrowed from Belichick, it's the top-to-bottom criticism of players on the roster. Brady was never safe from Belichick's jabs, including the time-honored slight that "the starting quarterback at Foxborough High could make that pass." Vrabel distances himself from the idea that he comes from Belichick's coaching tree, in part because he never worked as a coach for Belichick, but there are similarities.

When Vrabel has a problem with his biggest star's play, he goes directly to that player.

"My job is to try to protect the team, stay consistent and try to hold the best players the most accountable," Vrabel said. "It sends a clear message to everybody throughout. If the quarterback makes a mistake, Drake makes a mistake, it doesn't really do me any good to sit there and coach Tommy DeVito. I go right to the source. I think players appreciate the consistency."

They do.

"It's definitely good coaching," veteran tight end Austin Hooper said. "I've been places where some coaches are afraid to talk to the superstars on the team and want to go hard in the paint on guys that are trying hard and are doing things the right way, but they're not a superstar.

"Here, everyone's treated the same."

Vrabel seems to treat everyone the same because he cares about them all the same, from the QB1 to the 16th man on the practice squad to the folks who run the cafeteria.

There's a trickle-down effect. Vrabel telling players what they don't want to hear creates an environment where players can speak to each other freely and provide constructive criticism. So Stefon Diggs, the team's veteran receiver, has often challenged and preached accountability with Maye, the team's star QB.

"That's huge. I think that's kind of what we're trying to build around here," Maye said. "I think it starts with the head coach telling you what you need to hear, instead of what you want to hear."

So, how does Vrabel get away with it?

"Because [the conversations] come from a place of support, and that's why you're trying to build relationships, so that when people do tell you the truth, you don't bristle at it," he said. "If a stranger tells you the truth, you tell them to f--- off. If somebody that you care about tells you the truth, you take a good hard look at it and say, 'Hey, am I doing this the right way?'"

Though criticism is hard to hear, most people do appreciate hearing the truth. And that's what Vrabel gives his players.

"I don't trust many people," Diggs said. "I appreciate straight shooters, and you can tell me the truth, no matter what it is. I rock with you if it's the truth."

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Vrabel bled from a gash on his face. His staffers and players stared at him as he applied an ice pack, which quickly turned red. A week before his 50th birthday, Vrabel had jumped into a pile of Patriots and Commanders players during a joint practice on Aug. 6.

"I was like, 'That is sick. That is sick! I love that,'" Patriots guard Jared Wilson told me. "Ever since then, I'm like, 'That's the guy right there.' It just gets me going. It makes me want to run through a wall. Your coach is willing to do things for you. … I don't think a lot of coaches would do that."

The first reaction was that the coach was setting the tone. Bringing intensity. "Taking no crap," as Maye said after practice. But it wasn't about escalating. It was about de-escalating.

That's another side of Vrabel.

You may have seen the videos of him waiting outside the locker room to hug every single one of his players after a game. Maybe you've seen the photo of Vrabel holding Christian Barmore's hand after he suffered a back injury, this after Vrabel had benched the defensive end earlier this season. Maybe you caught that moment where Vrabel seemed to be building up Maye on the sideline in the Week 9 game against the Falcons, which the Patriots won 24-23 despite the second-year QB throwing an interception and taking six sacks.

Even when Vrabel was a bad-boy enforcer as a player — kicking rookies out of the training room because he wanted a table — he also took care of his teammates. In 2008, practice-squad defensive lineman Vince Redd needed a place to stay, so he lived in Vrabel's basement for the whole year. Former Patriots linebacker Pierre Woods also had a long stay at Château Vrabel.

"I'd say, 'Hey, you guys need a place to stay — but just until you find a place?' Next thing we know, they were having Thanksgiving dinner with us," Vrabel said, referring to his wife, Jennifer, and their two sons. "They just lived in the basement. Yeah, they get their laundry done. I'd come home from practice, and Vince would be sitting there at the kitchen table with the boys, and Jen would be making dinner. … These guys were young players. It saved them some money on a place to stay. It didn't matter to me. Certainly didn't matter to Jen. Whatever we can do to help."

The Vrabels would host as many as 25 players for Thanksgiving and Christmas — even when they had two young kids running around. And remember: Most of those 25 people were NFL players whose portions could sustain the average person for days.

Think of how many pounds of potatoes! Of how many turkeys!

Vrabel's generosity didn't stop when he became a coach. When he was working for the Texans, he let new-hire coaches — Izzo, Wes Welker and John Perry — live with his family for whatever time period they needed.

"That's the kind of family that he had," Izzo said. "That was a big part of why we were successful in New England. It was just because of that, that closeness that we had as a team."

*** *** ***

Despite his brutal honesty, Vrabel can be wrong. He's human. What makes him a good coach is that he can admit when he's wrong.

Patriots linebacker Jack Gibbens remembers one moment in 2022, back in Vrabel's days as the Titans' coach. Gibbens was an undrafted rookie who came off the practice squad to help replace an injured starter. It was a third down against the Chargers. And before the snap, there was chaos.

"Everybody was running all over the place. We couldn't get lined up," Gibbens said.

Right before the snap, Gibbens and his safety made a pre-snap decision to switch marks in coverage. Gibbens handed off the running back to the safety and took up coverage of the tight end. To Gibbens' delight, the defensive line made quick work of the quarterback.

But when Gibbens saw Vrabel on the sideline, it did not look like the coach was going to congratulate him.

"He's chewing me out. He's like, 'You're supposed to have the back here.' I was like, 'I know, but the safety said he had the back so I covered his guy.' And he was like, 'All right' and walked away," Gibbens said.

That was it. Gibbens had an explanation. Vrabel backed off.

"If you know what to do, he'll definitely put that trust in you and let you kind of make things happen on the field," Gibbens said.

The next week, Gibbens played 72% of the defensive snaps and, the week after, he played 100% of the team's defensive snaps. Clearly, he'd made a good first impression.

More recently, during his early days as New England's coach, Vrabel realized that players grew hushed when he entered the cafeteria. Sure, the 6-foot-4, 260-pound coach has a big presence, but that's not the work environment he wants.

"My job is to have a relationship or connection with everybody here, players and staff included," Vrabel said.

So, during a team meeting, he spoke to the team about the cafeteria dynamics — and the quiet that followed him around the building.

"He just wanted everyone to be comfortable," said cornerback Carlton Davis, who joined the Patriots as a free agent before the season. "You can get the best out of everybody when they're comfortable, not when they're all tensed up and scared to make a mistake."

As tough as Vrabel can be, multiple Patriots players agreed that "accommodating" was the right word to describe him. They respect him because he was — and sometimes still thinks he is — a player. He understands how hard it is to make an NFL roster, earn a special teams role, earn a starting role, snag a Pro Bowl nod and win a Super Bowl (or three).

"He's the most in-tune coach that I've probably played for," Davis told me. "You could tell he puts himself in our shoes, whether it's the game, practice, scheduling, meetings, he's always there. He's super involved."

*** *** ***

There was a time when Vrabel wasn't certain he'd come back to the NFL.

In 2014, he'd just finished his third season as a position coach for Ohio State. The Buckeyes had won 24 of their last 26 games under Urban Meyer, and Texans coach Bill O'Brien wanted to poach Vrabel as a linebackers coach.

Even though it meant a step up, he wasn't certain it was the right move. So he called Izzo, who at the time was the assistant special teams coordinator for Tom Coughlin's Giants. Izzo's message to his close friend was simple.

"You're gonna crush it. You're going to be a D-coordinator in like two, three years. This is going to lead to where you want to go," Izzo told Vrabel. "Bro, take it. You're going to rise quickly."

By 2017, Vrabel was the Texans' defensive coordinator. By 2018, he was the Titans' head coach. It was a quick rise indeed. He spent six seasons in Tennessee, making the playoffs three times. After he was fired in 2023, he worked as a consultant for the Browns, appearing on practice fields and in drills with players, just like always. And then Patriots owner Robert Kraft scooped him up to replace Jerod Mayo after a 4-13 season, New England's second in a row.

Vrabel took a teardown approach to the roster, with some help from Kraft, who invested in this roster and this coaching staff to fuel the turnaround.

The Patriots added big names like Williams and Diggs, as well as under-the-radar culture guys and unsung playmakers like receiver Mack Hollins, linebacker K'Lavon Chaisson, safety Jaylinn Hawkins, Hooper and center Garrett Bradbury. The rookie class has also thrived. The Patriots also boldly dealt former starters and high draft picks such as safety Kyle Dugger, defensive lineman Keion White and second-round receiver Ja'Lynn Polk around the trade deadline. They sold but continued ascending.

To quote the movie "Miracle," it's about having the right players — not the best players. It's about finding guys who want to be crucial pieces of Vrabel's vision and can handle Vrabel's blended kindness and criticism.

"He's going to strike a nerve, but the message is getting delivered," Izzo said. "I think all of that helps him connect in his role as a coach now."

There's a fine line between insulting someone and ribbing them. In every conversation, Vrabel seems to find that line. And then he crosses it — by millimeters — just to see what you'll do.

Just to see if what he said will make you better.

MASS LIVE

Mike Vrabel's office perfectly captures his Patriots story | Karen Guregian
By Karen Guregian

FOXBOROUGH - Since he was hired as the Patriots coach in January, people have been sending Mike Vrabel souvenirs for his Gillette Stadium office.

He's hung some of them, he'll get around to hanging the rest. The decorating job, much like Vrabel's rebuild of the Patriots, is unfinished.

It's a work in progress and for good reason. Arranging what's on the field takes priority over what's on his walls.

"Stick (equipment manager Preston Rogers) keeps sending me jerseys to put up," Vrabel said. "God bless him … and people give me stuff. They mail stuff. People send me hats. I just put up whatever they send me. Old pictures. Somebody sent me a nice (wooden) tray. I'll wait til we have a house and I'll take that home."

What is already on display in his spacious office digs, captures his history, as well as his future with the Patriots.

A green helmet, featuring signatures from Will Campbell and every member of the Patriots 2025 draft class, sits high atop the massive shelf behind Vrabel's desk.

The un-Patriot-like color, representative of Green Bay, which hosted the NFL draft, immediately stands out from the doorway.

Sitting alongside is one of the silver helmets Vrabel wore as a Patriots player two decades ago.

"Well, I think it's one of mine," Vrabel chimed in, "but I'm not going to put it on to see if it fits."

There isn't much doubt about the validity of some of the other memorabilia adorning the office.

Directly behind Vrabel, is a framed photo of the former linebacker and part-time tight end catching a touchdown pass from Tom Brady that helped beat the Carolina Panthers in the 2003 Super Bowl.

The picture, which reflects Vrabel's talent and versatility as a player, was found in storage and delivered to the new coach not long after he was hired.

Below, propped against the wall is a framed front page from the Tennessean. A story on Vrabel's son, Carter, is featured just below the banner of the Nashville newspaper.

That was a gift from Stacey James, the Patriots Vice President of Communications. In another corner of the room are two framed No. 50 Vrabel jerseys in their blue and white editions.

In that same nook, there used to be a treadmill.

"We got rid of that," Vrabel said. "It's in the weight room where I thought it would get better use down there than in here."

Wait. Vrabel doesn't work out?

"I do," he said with a smile. "But I figure the least I can do is walk down to the weight room to use it."

Conversations with Vrabel typically feature a wisecrack, laced with his dry wit.

Verbal curveballs are his specialty.

While his office features many of the comforts of a downstairs family room (big screen TV, mini-fridge, computer monitor, table and chairs, erase boards) Vrabel doesn't allow himself to get too comfortable.

It's Monday, not long after the Patriots finished practice, and there's still work to do. He's about to prep for meetings. The Patriots coach is also expecting some players to drop by.

And right on cue, newly appointed captain Marcus Jones arrives and is waiting outside, seated on a couch.

With the season opener against the Las Vegas Raiders a few days away, Patriots headquarters is abuzz.

Vrabel, who has generated much of the excitement, is eager to see how well the team performs when the bright lights come on.

Because he's been under those lights, wearing the jerseys that are now hanging on the wall, he understands the pressure to be successful here.

"I think pressure is part of this job, and part of this league. We have to put a competitive product out there and win," he said. "Our job is to compete as we build this thing. That's the whole idea.

"The expectations are high. But that's where they have to be."

They are high. Many national pundits have projected the Patriots to be a playoff team, which is one of Vrabel's stated goals.

Does the Patriots coach, who inherited a team that went 4-13 the last two seasons, wish he might have been a little less bold?

Not for a second.

Vrabel isn't the type to regret much of anything.

"I just keep it moving. There's going to be a lot of things I probably shouldn't say," he said. "Sometimes I can't help myself. Unfortunately, I say the quiet part out loud."

That's also part of his charm. Vrabel enjoys trading barbs with the players, and anyone else who crosses his path. No one is immune.

Even Bill Belichick.

When Vrabel was a player, he wasn't afraid to poke fun at the Hoodie while he was standing right next to him.

Perhaps that stems from Vrabel, an only child, growing up in a house with a coach. Both his parents were educators and Chuck Vrabel, his father and hero, coached at Norton High School in Akron, Ohio.

"He was a high school basketball coach," Vrabel said. "I thought that was pretty cool."

Vrabel also learned the importance of being a part of a team, and the value of hard work by watching the teams his father coached.

Asked if he was like his dad, Vrabel sat back in his chair, thought about the question, before offering his answer.

"I probably talk more," he said, flashing an impish grin. "But I think I have some of the same qualities and characteristics. He would get after it, but he had a big heart."

Vrabel started his coaching career at his alma mater Ohio State before moving to the pros in Houston (linebackers coach, defensive coordinator), then Tennessee (head coach), and Cleveland (coaching consultant).

His favorite part about being a coach?

"Watching players improve. Seeing guys improve, gain confidence, and find a role on a football team," Vrabel said. "I enjoy that. I take great satisfaction in that.

"When they excel, it's because they put the time and effort in, and they're able to understand it, and get it. Our job is to be creative and find ways to help them develop. Teach them, inspire them, and make a connection."

When Vrabel was a player, he was occasionally called to Belichick's office, which was in a different part of the facility back then. Belichick's lair wasn't much like the one he's sitting in now.

"He had a window," Vrabel said, "and you'd have to go by Berj (Najarian) to get to Bill."

Now, players have to go by John 'Stretch' Streicher — Vrabel's most trusted aide — to get to the head coach. That works just fine for Vrabel, who likes having Stretch close by.

“I just think he’s got a very good demeanor, a good grasp, a good holistic understanding of what we’re trying to do,” Vrabel said of Stretch. “And he also tells me when I’m wrong. He’s a very good guardrail for me when I need to be reminded, ‘Hey, that’s probably not the right thing.’”

Streicher’s office doubles as the waiting room and reception area outside Vrabel’s office.

Unlike his expected timeline as the team’s coach, the office is temporary. Vrabel and the coaching staff will be moving into a new office next spring when the Patriots’ state-of-the-art training facility that abuts the practice field is expected to be completed.

While there are no windows in this office, he’ll have plenty of outside views in the new digs.

For now, though, Vrabel is happy with his surroundings. He’s exactly where he wants to be.

The Athletic

Why Mike Vrabel is the coach to return the Patriots to greatness: ‘There’s no gray area’

By Chad Graff

FOXBORO, Mass. — Early this summer, Mike Vrabel beamed as he jogged onto the grass practice fields next to Gillette Stadium for one of his first practices in charge of the New England Patriots, seemingly unafraid of the mountain of a challenge awaiting him. He had been tasked with resurrecting the franchise he previously helped hoist Lombardi Trophies, with restoring respect to a team that had gone 4-13 the last two years.

None of what he was embarking on would be easy. When he walked through the door in January, the Patriots were behind in every important area of team-building. But on this day, he smiled as he ran, headed out to try and fix all that had ailed the Pats in recent years.

His new players had heard stories about how hands-on Vrabel was. How he’d been convinced to draft Will Campbell with the No. 4 pick after the young offensive lineman bowled the coach over during a blocking drill. But this was their first real introduction to it.

A few did double-takes as Vrabel grabbed a blocking pad, typically a grunt job for low-level staffers, and stood there, smiling, as 300-pound men rammed into him as hard as they could.

The new coach stood in for blocking drills with the punt team. He pretended to be a pass rusher, swatting at the hands of offensive linemen.

Then, when it was time for the offense to run through plays against the scout-team defense, the usual suspects reached for pinnies. It’s a job typically left to the backups of the backups. Maybe some assistant coaches with terms like “quality control” in their job titles.

But Vrabel grabbed a green pinnie with the No. 5 on it. He went back about 12 yards behind the line of scrimmage and played safety, hollering at wide receivers when their routes weren’t crisp enough or chirping that he had them covered.

Finally, one of the few players with the necessary cachet spoke up. Players were still getting used to Vrabel’s style, so hard-hitting safety Jabrill Peppers, a veteran of eight NFL seasons and a former first-round pick who happened to wear No. 5, thought he could have some fun with his new coach.

“You’re not tough enough to wear that jersey,” said Peppers.

Vrabel didn’t miss a beat. He hollered right back: “Go check out the Patriots Hall of Fame.”

“And there’s nothing I can say to come back from that,” Peppers said earlier this summer with a laugh. (The Patriots cut Peppers last week as part of a massive roster overhaul overseen by Vrabel.)

The last two years have been brutal for the Patriots. A franchise that for two decades dominated the league like no other, winning six Super Bowl titles in the process, was quickly left behind. From the hard-to-watch final years of the

Bill Belichick era to the undermanned and overwhelmed season under Jerod Mayo, the situation was dire. The roster lacked clarity. The team had no identity.

But now, finally, after some turbulent times, owner Robert Kraft and the Patriots feel they have the right coach for the moment.

Vrabel is a football-mad 50-year-old who picked up a coach's whistle in 2011 as soon as his 14-year NFL career was over. A man who still enjoys holding blocking pads and smiles as he gets hit. A trash-talker who loves to chop it up with players. Someone who dove face-first into a fight during a summer practice. Most of all, someone who's authentic and direct.

Too often a year ago, the Patriots seemed lost. They were stuck between trying to follow the "Belichick way" and abandoning it completely. With Vrabel, though, there's little ambiguity.

"The best thing about Vrabel is you don't ever have to wonder where you stand with him," said Tony Dews, the Patriots' running backs coach and a longtime Vrabel aide. "When he's not happy with you, you'll know."

Outside linebackers coach Mike Smith, who spent three years as an assistant with the Kansas City Chiefs, agreed.

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"All the great coaches I've worked for, they might be different, but they have something in common. And he's very similar to Andy Reid. Andy might not get out there and put that blocking shield on, and he might not yell as much, but they both are very clear in their plan. There's no gray area.

"Coach Reid used to leave meetings saying, 'Does everyone know where we're at and where we're going?'" Smith added. "And that's the thing with Vrabel, too. From the schedule to practice to everyone's individual stuff, there's no gray area. You know exactly how he feels about something."

Despite playing linebacker as a pro, Vrabel mixed in some goal-line tight end (famously, all 10 of his career receptions went for touchdowns). He started in the NFL as a defensive coach but spent most of his one-year hiatus in 2024 on the offensive side of the ball as a consultant with the Cleveland Browns. At practices, he's everywhere: behind the quarterback, lined up at safety, mixing in on special teams.

A lot of coaches focus on mastering one aspect of the game. If you're the tight ends coach, you shouldn't have time to chat with running backs or mingle with defensive assistants. Focus on your specific role. Or, as Belichick used to say, "Do your job."

But this spring, Vrabel connected assistant coaches with players on the other side of the ball. He wants everyone to feel invested, not just in their position group, but in the success of the team as a whole.

"Sometimes I'm sure (running back) TreVeyon (Henderson) gets tired of hearing from me," Dews said. "But he can go talk to (safeties coach) Scott Booker and know that you can trust him and communicate with him and know you're not being judged for doing it."

It all seems to come rather naturally to Vrabel. He used to roam these same practice fields, unafraid to get after anyone. He talked trash to Tom Brady when few other players dared to speak to the legendary quarterback. As the Patriots' NFLPA rep, he even sparred with Kraft.

Not much about him has changed as a coach.

"When I got to Ohio State, they didn't leave the manual underneath the desk," Vrabel said, referring to his first coaching gig, leading linebackers at his alma mater in 2011. "So I just kind of went with whatever I felt like was best for me and fit my style, and it's kind of stuck."

Team meetings for the Patriots take place in a big auditorium with rows of plush seats. This is where players were first introduced to the pop quizzes that often surface in meetings run by Vrabel, the only child of two teachers.

Out of the blue, he'll call on a random player.

Who is the defensive coordinator we're facing this week? What are we doing in Cover-3 when they use this formation?

Sometimes it's not even about football.

What's the name of the team chef? What about the locker room attendant?

It has the vibe of an intense high school class where you're sitting as still as possible and hoping the teacher doesn't call on you.

"I definitely remember everyone was in those meetings sweating a little bit, and you get called on, and your voice is cracking, and you have to take a deep breath and say it with confidence. It's a little nerve-racking," said linebacker Jack Gibbens, whom Vrabel calls "Doctor" because of his knack for answering questions correctly.

The meetings are more about accountability than intimidation. He wants each player to stand up in front of his teammates and prove he knows what he must do to help the team. Sometimes the message is sent without a quiz.

During his first head-coaching stint with the Tennessee Titans, one of the team's star players arrived for a team meeting a couple of minutes late and tried to quietly sneak into a seat.

"It's a good thing you're rich," Vrabel quipped, making clear to everyone that even the best players would be fined for tardiness.

Still, for a new team, that style can seem harsh and unrelenting. Midway through training camp, Vrabel sensed the Patriots were taking things a bit too seriously. They didn't realize they could laugh at his jokes.

So he tried to lighten the mood. He was splitting the roster into two teams for a scrimmage, but rather than simply flashing the players' names on the board, he opted for some flair, showing the most embarrassing photo he could find of each player.

"I was sweating the whole time because I was on the second team that was announced, and I'm seeing all these embarrassing pictures," Gibbens said, "and I'm just like, man, I hope I don't have something bad out there."

Members of the media aren't safe from getting called out, either. At one point this offseason, Vrabel wondered aloud whether a reporter was "in a coma" after positing a question that had already been asked. Another time, he quizzed reporters on whether they remembered his three objectives for training camp that he had mentioned earlier in the week. (They did not.)

He tends to have a smile in those moments and enjoys giving people a hard time.

Between drills during a summer practice, he reminded Robert Spillane of a great hit he had in 2020 against bulldozing running back Derrick Henry. Then he asked the linebacker why he didn't hit that hard anymore. (He had to tell the linebacker, an intense football nut, to lighten up when he took offense.)

Vrabel's presence and demeanor have brought an air of confidence and hope back to New England. But it's also fair to note that what Vrabel inherited was a mess. That's part of why he completely renovated the roster. The Patriots have 28 new players on their 53-man roster, the most in the NFL. They have 12 rookies, also the most in the league, and 14 new starters. But Vrabel and company are trying to manage expectations given the state of things when the new coach arrived.

The Patriots haven't had a winning record since Mac Jones' rookie year of 2021 and haven't won a playoff game since Tom Brady left town. They're 8-27 over their last 35 games. It has been almost three years since they last scored 30 points in a game.

That's why so much of Vrabel's message in Year 1 centers on avoiding the dumb mistakes that have cost the team so dearly in recent years. During team meetings, he talks about putting plays into one of three buckets: the good, the bad and "the s— that gets you beat."

These are the reasons Vrabel seems right for this moment: his clarity, his authenticity, his directness. And, yes, the trash talking. His goal is to make it clear to everyone in the organization that what has gone on in recent years isn't acceptable. And it extends to the most important members of the team.

At one practice this summer, second-year quarterback Drake Maye threw a perfect pass into the corner of the end zone. He held a hand up in recognition of the receiver, then slowly jogged into position for the next play.

Vrabel started hollering. Touchdowns should be celebrated! They're hard for any team to achieve, but that's especially true for the Patriots of the past few seasons.

To drive home his point, Vrabel asked Maye how many touchdowns the team scored last year — another pop quiz. Maye shook his head as he pondered the question. Vrabel spoke up before Maye could respond.

"There's one answer," Vrabel quipped. "Not enough."

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."

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 Vrabes 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 Vrabes, 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.

Quarterbacks Coach Ashton Grant

telegram.com
WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

'Everything with the Patriots has been awesome': Former Assumption star Ashton Grant returns to New England as Pats' QB coach

By Jennifer Toland

Former Assumption football star Ashton Grant spent the last two seasons as the Cleveland Browns' quarterbacks coach, and although the team did not have a first-round pick in the 2024 NFL Draft, the staff still did its homework on the top QBs, including Caleb Williams, Jayden Daniels and Drake Maye.

The New England Patriots, of course, selected Maye at No. 3 overall, and as a rookie, he showed great promise in the 12 games he started.

In January, the Patriots hired the 29-year-old Grant as their quarterbacks coach, and the opportunity to work with Maye is one that Grant is enjoying.

"We thought very highly of Drake at the time (in Cleveland)," Grant said, "and we knew he was going to be the type of player who could lead a franchise for many years to come. It's just super exciting to be part of that journey with him."

Grant grew up in Manchester, Connecticut — as a fan of the Philadelphia Eagles, his step-dad's favorite team — and, as a standout wide receiver, finished his Assumption career as the program's all-time leader in receiving yards and receiving touchdowns. He was the 2016 Northeast-10 Conference Offensive Player of the Year and in 2017 helped the Greyhounds to the best season in their history.

Grant and his wife, whom he met in high school, are happy to be back in the area.

"Everything has been great," Grant said. "We're super close to our family, and everything with the Patriots has been awesome."

First-year Patriots coach Mike Vrabel spent the 2024 season as a consultant with the Browns, and he and Grant worked together closely.

"One of his responsibilities was taking a role in developing the younger coaches on the staff, helping us develop in our teaching styles," Grant said. "I would sit in a room with him and teach him some of our concepts, and he would give me feedback like, 'Think about this when you're teaching or think about that.' It was great getting to know him, and I'm excited to continue to develop that relationship with him."

The Patriots hired Vrabel on Jan. 12. About two weeks after that, Vrabel contacted the Browns about interviewing Grant for the New England quarterbacks position.

"It was a random Wednesday," Grant said. "I interviewed Thursday morning, and he called me back Thursday night to say the job was mine if I wanted it. I guess the interview went pretty well."

Grant said he is excited to be part of the Patriots offensive staff and working with offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels.

At Assumption, Grant played for coach Bob Chesney, who gave Grant his first coaching opportunity, handling special teams quality control at Holy Cross for two seasons, and inspired Grant's career path.

"We used to think Coach Chesney was a superhero when we played," Grant said. "I remember being like, 'I would want to be that influential to somebody.' He impacted my decision to get into coaching, and now that I am, our relationship has grown even tighter because we're in the same field."

Grant said he talks to Chesney, who is entering his second season at James Madison, once a week, and they bounce ideas off each other.

Grant has also remained very close to Deonte Harty, his former Assumption teammate who played the 2024 season with the Baltimore Ravens.

Grant said he hopes to make it to Assumption's spring game April 27.

In 2020, Grant was the Browns' first recipient of the Bill Willis Coaching Fellowship, which started Grant's five-year stay with the franchise.

He spent time in the defensive line room, followed by the running backs room, the wide receivers room, the tight ends room and the last two in the quarterbacks room.

"It would be easier to tell you what I didn't learn (in Cleveland)," Grant said. "Those five years were truly transformative in my coaching career because (Browns coach) Kevin Stefanski did a great job with my development and being intentional about it. I learned all the different aspects of offensive football."

With some of their nine picks in this year's NFL Draft, which is April 24-26, the Patriots will be looking to get Maye targets and protection.

Grant said when he first got the Patriots job that he and Maye got to know each other through phone calls, and they've been building their relationship since Maye got back to Gillette Stadium two weeks ago.

"We've been full steam ahead," Grant said, "trying to plow away at this playbook and, again, keep building our relationship. It's been awesome getting to know him. He's a smart young man and super well-rounded."

Inside Linebackers Coach Zak Kuhr

Boston Herald

Inside the unusual, rapid rise of Zak Kuhr, the Patriots' new defensive play-caller

By Andrew Callahan

His coming out party was last Sunday night.

Primetime in Buffalo.

A battle with the NFL's last undefeated team and the league's reigning MVP.

By beating Josh Allen head-to-head in a thriller, he announced his arrival.

That is, of course, if you bothered to Google his name afterward.

Not Drake Maye.

Try Zak Kuhr.

Kuhr, the Patriots' inside linebackers coach, has called defensive plays for about a month now after defensive coordinator Terrell Williams took a medical leave. His early-season rise has almost matched Maye's.

Thanks to Kuhr's clever game plan, the Patriots held the Bills to their lowest point total in more than a calendar year. The next day, Buffalo offensive coordinator Joe Brady admitted the Pats' wrinkles caused his offense to stall early. The last time the Bills stalled like that, scoring 20 points or fewer in a game Allen played start to finish, there's a chance Brady didn't know Kuhr's name.

A lifelong offensive coach in the college ranks, Kuhr converted to the defensive side upon joining Vrabel's Titans staff in 2020. Three years later, he was still working as a low-level assistant in Tennessee. Kuhr served as the Titans'

assistant inside linebackers coach before he fled to New York for another bottom-of-the-totem-pole job with the Giants after Vrabel was fired in January 2024.

Once Vrabel took over in New England last January, Kuhr followed and finally received his promotion. Then in the spring, when Williams took his first leave for an unspecified medical incident, Kuhr, 37, got another one: interim defensive coordinator.

“It just felt like Zak has great knowledge of what we’ve done here in the past with me, this system and with Terrell,” Vrabel explained last May.

A coordinator promotion after just five years coaching defense?

Yes. And it’s taken less than five weeks to see why.

In Kuhr’s play-calling debut at Miami, the Patriots got scorched and allowed scores on half of their defensive series. The next week, that percentage dropped to 37.5% against Pittsburgh (excluding kneeldowns), then 20% versus Carolina. Finally came the trip to Buffalo, a measuring-stick game by the Patriots’ own admission.

What followed was the largest regular-season, primetime upset in franchise history, backboned by a defensive performance that showed the league what’s been evident to Foxboro insiders for weeks now.

Just take it from one of Kuhr’s colleagues, Patriots assistant Mike Smith, a 20-year league veteran who’s played in and coached some of the best defenses of the NFL’s modern era.

“(Kuhr)’s doing one hell of a job.”

The best defense is …
Back in Week 4, as the Patriots shook off a few cobwebs during a slow start against Carolina, Kuhr developed a curious play-calling pattern.

The Panthers were down several of their best pass-catchers that day, from secondary receivers to their top tight end. Starting running back Chuba Hubbard, a hard-nosed player with a knack for breaking tackles, represented Carolina’s surest path to an upset. Ride Hubbard, control the clock and get lucky late felt like the Panthers’ one and only game plan.

Except Kuhr called for his defense to play Cover 2 on first downs. Two safeties dropped deep, again and again, while inside linebacker Robert Spillane bailed with them. Instead of defenders stepping forward to meet the run, Kuhr had them retreating into coverage.

And he was right.

Carolina repeatedly dialed up deep play-action passes on first down, hoping to manufacture big plays via surprise only to settle for harmless checkdowns. The Patriots weren’t fooled because Kuhr wasn’t. He put himself in the mind of the Panthers’ coaching staff as a one-time offensive play-caller himself, and knew what to expect.

“Any time when it comes to calling plays, at least for me in general,” Kuhr told the Herald, “I do go back to an offensive coordinator’s mindset.”

Early in his career, Kuhr worked as an offense coordinator at the high school and college levels. He accepted his first coaching gig as a high school student. Within a few years, Kuhr became a low-level college coach and finally a coaching intern at Ohio State in 2011.

There, he first crossed paths with Vrabel, but perhaps more importantly, he met Patriots vice president of football strategy and operations John “Stretch” Streicher. A year after he left Ohio State, Kuhr reunited with Streicher as colleagues and roommates at James Madison, where he coached running backs in 2014. He credits Streicher for eventually getting him to the NFL.

“I probably wouldn’t be here without Stretch,” Kuhr said this spring.

In 2017, Kuhr became the co-offensive coordinator at Texas State, his third school in as many years. He connected with players he hardly knew by applying basic lessons from previous stops, like using player feedback to inform his play-calling and using meetings as a place to bond as well as coach.

Nowadays, knowing the best offensive coaches learn defensive rules so they can force opponents to break them, Kuhr allows Patriots players to tweak their rules in practice to get ahead of problematic plays on Sunday. A collaborative approach comes naturally to Kuhr, who Patriots veterans describe as high-energy, down-to-earth and caring.

“He does a good job of making the player-coach relationship non-existent. He’s just a homie,” said Patriots linebacker Marte Mapu. “Just trying to keep it casual that way without compromising the part where we have to have fundamentals and a standard. The non-negotiables.”

This summer, Mapu started training camp on the back end of the roster bubble at best; a player without a position after two seasons where two different head coaches didn't know whether to play him at linebacker or safety. Vrabel's staff committed him to linebacker, and with Kuhr's guidance, Mapu pushed his way onto the active roster by playing special teams and contributing on defense in specialized packages.

"Even though this hasn't been my position, they say, 'Fly around. If you see it, believe it. Go ahead," Mapu said. "And if anything goes wrong, we go back to the drawing board."

In Week 2, Mapu began replacing starter Christian Elliss, and rotational backup Jack Gibbens, on passing downs in Miami. The coaches trusted Mapu to help slow what had been a Dolphins onslaught of short passes targeting their linebackers in space. Late in Kuhr's play-calling debut — a defensive mess until the fourth quarter — Mapu rewarded that faith.

Reading the eyes of Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa on fourth down, he believed what his eyes told him. He drifted right. And with 2:21 left, Mapu snatched a game-changing interception.

Intuition
In modern psychology, definitions of intuition vary, but they all reflect the same general idea: one's ability to problem-solve and make decisions without conscious reasoning.

Intuition is based on the subconscious recognition of patterns from information also gathered subconsciously. In other words, going with your studious gut.

Chess prodigies develop remarkable intuition without garnering the same experience as older players because they process and retain information from the board at a faster rate, which leads to accelerated growth and mastery. Football, to steal a cliché, is like Kuhr's chess board.

As a former offensive and defensive play-caller, all sides of the board and every piece is deeply known to him, which cannot be said for most coaches. Kuhr's holistic understanding of the game, and rapid absorption of defensive principles and details, are ultimately what fueled his rise.

"When we were able to get him to Tennessee, (it was) how quickly he translated that (offensive) knowledge to defense; how quickly he learned defense and what an asset he was for us," Vrabel said last month. "Especially coming from some of the college game, and as some of those trends started to make their way to the National Football League, some of the spread, the run-pass option(s), things like that. He really became an asset for us defensively."

Like most coaches, Kuhr's job during the week is to separate signal from noise; meaningful information from the meaningless. The Patriots defensive staff sifts through all kinds of data while scripting a game plan, from traditional player scouting reports, scheme tendencies, statistical analyses and film findings of their own. The information Kuhr dispenses — or disposes of — determines whether he succeeds as a play-caller.

"They don't always bog us down with all the numbers, because they don't want you to play for something specific. They just want you to understand," Spillane said. "One of the things he'll say to me is, 'Let the call speak to you.'"

Translation: trust your intuition.

Kuhr's intuition is already growing in the booth. Consider his blitz calls.

Against Miami, the Dolphins enjoyed a 100% success rate whenever Kuhr called a blitz and averaged 13 yards per play. In a loss to Pittsburgh, Aaron Rodgers beat the blitz 62.5% of the time and averaged eight yards per play;

figures that both fell the next week in a win over Carolina. A week later, the Bills' success rate sank to an eye-opening 25% against extra rushers, and they gained 0.8 yards per play.

"He's definitely got a good feel for the game," said Patriots cornerback Carlton Davis. "(I'm) definitely confident in his play-calling."

Two data points that surely had Kuhr's attention before last weekend's game were Buffalo's No. 1 ranking in rush offense and their league-leading use of outside zone runs. Bills running back James Cook is one of the best cutback players in the league, a danger because of his excellent vision, speed and power. Outside zone plays afford him the flexibility to hit the hole, bounce outside, or cut back, based on his read of the defense.

So, the Patriots built a wall across the entire line of scrimmage with a 3-4 front and extra defensive tackle on early downs, a complete departure from their previous four game plans. Kuhr and Vrabel pitched that changeup earlier in the week, and it helped limit Cook to 3.3 yards per carry, his lowest average of the season.

"That was something that was kind of like talked about in the spring as an idea, just in general," Kuhr told the Herald of the 3-4 plan. "And then when we brought it up in front of everybody, I think everybody just jumped on board with it."

By shutting the Bills' run game down with heavy personnel, the Patriots dictated terms and pushed the game into more of a spread battle in the second half. While Allen still led a couple of touchdown drives, that type of game allowed Kuhr to flex the strength of his defense: nickel personnel with three cornerbacks and man-to-man coverage. From that grouping, not only did the Patriots intercept Allen, but they held each of his wide receivers to fewer than 50 total receiving yards.

Except on Allen's penultimate snap, a critical third-and-10 play with 2:31 remaining, the Patriots pivoted from man coverage. Kuhr instead called for Cover 3, a zone defense that presents similarly to Cover 1, a man-to-man call and Pats' most common coverage so far that night. Meanwhile, the Bills called a pass that reflected an expectation they would see man-to-man.

So Allen took the snap, scanned the field, found no open receivers and bailed right, his eyes still sifting through layers of zone. Pressure arrived, and Allen ducked it initially to extend the play. He extended it long enough for Patriots cornerback Christian Gonzalez to break from his outside assignment once he saw Bills slot receiver Khalil Shakir spring open over the middle, then come crashing into Shakir for a timely pass breakup.

Fourth down. The Bills kicked a game-tying field goal, and minutes later, Maye led the first game-winning drive of his career.

Kuhr said he doesn't remember calling that third-down play or why he did. He joked he blacked out.

Let's just call it intuition.

For Terrell
Sometime after the Patriots' locker room calmed down, Kuhr was on the phone with Williams.

They chat every day.

Their conversations, Kuhr says, are mostly about life, as Williams continues to battle prostate cancer. But when Williams wants to talk football, they talk football. For most of September, the Patriots kept Williams' diagnosis quiet, but Kuhr was among the first to know he would have to step up as defensive coordinator for the foreseeable future.

"This isn't some coach-speak or anything, but once I knew that was happening, my first mindset was I don't want to let (Williams) down," Kuhr said. "I'll freaking grind myself into the ground to make sure of that, and, to be fair to the players, make them feel like, 'OK, we trust what's going on here.' Because, it's a tough situation for everybody."

In short order, that trust has been secured.

"He's been right on a lot of what (the opponent) is going to do, how they're going to do things, how they want to attack us, how they're looking to attack us in certain defenses," Spillane said. "He's been right on many occasions when it comes to what we're expecting and how we want to defend it. And he's calling the right call for the right situation; that's the biggest thing, as a defense coordinator."

Yet as Kuhr dives deeper into defensive football, his offensive upbringing remains ever present, ever useful. How could it not?

He was a teenager the first time he roamed a sideline. He couldn't rent a car the first time he held an offensive play sheet. Patriots players today still mine him for tips about how the next opposing offense might attack them or read a certain play or coverage.

Kuhr answers them, time and again, pulling from the right memory or rule or data point to build a defense whose instincts are developing as fast as his.

"(I think), like, 'OK, based on the film of what they've done, but also what I would have done in this situation and how the game's flowing, what will it be?" Kuhr said. "And I'm not always right."

But often enough, he is.

More and more, every week.

The Athletic

Meet Zak Kuhr, the former offensive coach now calling the Patriots' plays on defense

By Chad Graff

FOXBORO, Mass. — Ten years ago, Zak Kuhr was barely older than the players he was coaching when he was named a co-offensive coordinator at James Madison University.

He'd only been a full-time college coach for a year, with an internship at Ohio State doing the heavy lifting on his resume. He was in his 20s, still new to the world of coaching, and eager to impress his colleagues.

He wanted a fun way to kick off meetings while getting the players involved. So he began the sessions with a Sporcle quiz. Everyone in the room could pitch in, shouting out answers when they knew them. They beat up the "Almost Useless Trivia" page, though questions about the periodic table often stumped them.

"He's the Sporcle king," said Brett Elliott, Kuhr's co-offensive coordinator that year.

A lot has changed for Kuhr in the last six months, and certainly in the 10 years since Kuhr was one of college football's youngest offensive coordinators and rising coaching stars.

He came to the New England Patriots shortly after Mike Vrabel was hired, lured by the coach who gave him his first NFL gig. He was offered a chance to lead a position room for the first time: inside linebackers coach. It was a nice promotion after working as a low-level assistant for the New York Giants last year.

But this spring, as defensive coordinator Terrell Williams was away from the team to deal with a personal health matter, Vrabel asked Kuhr to run the defense until Williams got back. Then last week, with Williams out again, Kuhr got the call-up once more, this time to call defensive plays as the Patriots beat the Miami Dolphins 33-27. He'll have those duties again this week, Vrabel said, when Aaron Rodgers and the Pittsburgh Steelers come to town.

So how did a guy in his first year as an NFL position coach become the Patriots' temporary play caller at the age of 37? And how did he go from a promising offensive coach to being tasked with stopping offenses for the Patriots?

"He's a borderline genius with social skills, which is rare," Elliott said.

The New England defense leads the NFL in sacks, but tackling has been an issue and the secondary has struggled without Christian Gonzalez.

But to understand who Kuhr is, it helps to go back to the beginning.

Before he had a college degree, he landed an internship working at Ohio State under coach Urban Meyer on a staff that also included Vrabel. The gig was as low-level as it gets. Sure, he helped run the scout team and break down film.

“But also some of the intern crap that people didn’t want to do,” said Tom Herman, then Ohio State’s offensive coordinator who went on to head-coaching gigs at Houston, Texas and Florida Atlantic. “He was one of the few in that role that you kind of said, ‘Hey, we need to keep our eye on this guy.’”

In 2014, after Kuhr’s internship with the Buckeyes ended, Everett Withers, then Ohio State’s associate head coach, landed the head job at James Madison. He brought with him several up-and-coming guys from that OSU staff, including Kuhr and John Streicher, now the Patriots’ vice president of football operations and strategy.

JMU had a young coaching staff. Many of them lived together. They tested each other on schematics during the day, pushed each other at practices, then drew plays on napkins at the bar at night. Sleep was minimal.

“They were living like Animal House,” Withers joked. “But it was working.”

Kuhr was the running backs coach that season. A year later, he was promoted to co-offensive coordinator with Elliott. The two didn’t know each other. Elliott called the plays, while Kuhr designed the run game. With different egos, it could’ve blown up.

But they hit it off. They discussed what they’d heard from their favorite radio host on the drive into work each morning — “We’re big (Howard) Stern heads,” Elliott said — and found ways to meld their offensive philosophies. Kuhr managed the quote board for the offense, compiling the funniest comments made in the room.

“He’s got that disarming sense of humor that travels to any social scene you can put him in,” Elliott said. “He’s got a wide breadth of knowledge about different subjects, so he can sit in a room and talk classical music or hip hop or history or Howard Stern.”

A year later, Withers got the top job at Texas State. Kuhr spent one year coaching running backs at Rutgers, then rejoined Withers there. Also on that Texas State staff? Streicher.

When that group was disbanded the following year, Herman hired Kuhr. His role was a bit undefined. Herman wasn’t sure whether he’d need help on offense or defense, so he named him a general assistant coach. Why?

“Trust,” Herman said. “And I’m sure that’s why coach Vrabel has given him this opportunity. Everything that Zak Kuhr has ever been asked to do by me, he has done it at an exceptional level. So when we had that job opening, you want to hire people that you trust. And he was certainly one of them.”

Around that time, college schemes were making their way to the NFL: run-pass options, zone reads, spread football. So in 2020, Vrabel wanted to add a college coach to his Tennessee Titans staff who could prepare them for the schemes and alignments they were about to see.

“And nobody watches more defense than offensive coordinators,” Vrabel said. “But (Kuhr) learned. He learned what we were doing, he brought other ideas and helped us bridge the gap with some of those trends that were coming from college. He was heavily involved and did our red zone (defense) and grew exponentially as a defensive football coach.”

After Vrabel’s staff was fired following the 2023 season, Kuhr spent last season with the Giants. When Vrabel landed the Patriots gig, he offered Kuhr a promotion. It was the first time Kuhr would be tasked with leading an NFL position group on his own.

It seemed a natural progression. Maybe do that for a couple of years, then move up to something like run-game coordinator, then maybe become a defensive coordinator. After that, who knows?

But Williams’ situation has expedited Kuhr’s rise. Six years ago, he was an assistant coach working with a college team’s offense. Now he’s about to call defensive plays for the Patriots for the second straight week.

Kuhr is going to have his hands full. The New England defense has been giving up too many big plays and has been without its best player, Christian Gonzalez (though that could change this weekend).

From the outside, it seems like a shockingly meteoric ascent. But to those who know him, it’s no surprise.

“I’m so happy for those guys — Stretch (Streicher) will be a GM one day, and Zak will be a head coach one day,” Withers said. “It’ll be fun to watch those guys as they grow into their roles.”

Offensive Coordinator Josh McDaniels

Drake Maye, Josh McDaniels have sparked Patriots' resurgence

By Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- When Drake Maye met Josh McDaniels for the first time, they were in different countries.

Maye had just proposed to his longtime girlfriend, Ann Michael Hudson, on the sandy beaches of Mexico. McDaniels was moving back into a familiar space as New England Patriots offensive coordinator for the third time in his NFL coaching career.

"He was in the office, obviously, like he always is, probably watching film or something," Maye recalled of the January video call with a smile.

"It had nothing to do with football, that's what I remember," McDaniels said.

It wouldn't be about football for a while. Before Maye and McDaniels shared X's and O's that have made them one of the NFL's most explosive QB-coordinator duos this season, they played pickleball together and dined at McDaniels' home, with quarterbacks coach Ashton Grant joining them. Maye and Ann Michael later bought a home around the corner from McDaniels.

Other contenders called but Khalil Mack didn't answer: Why he returned to L.A. and how he's become a mentor
Kris Rhim
"Gaining that trust and getting to know who they were as people was the first thing," said Grant, who is 30. He has had the most intimate behind-the-scenes viewpoint of how Maye, 23, and McDaniels, 49, have united.

Who won those pickleball games remains top secret. Nonetheless, the "thwack!" was symbolic in the sense they had both taken hits and were motivated, after being on divergent paths last season, to reignite their careers together. Maye was coming off a 4-13 season as a rookie that led to a coaching change in New England, and McDaniels found his "peace and joy" before returning to the NFL for the first time since being fired as Las Vegas Raiders head coach in October 2023.

The AFC East-division champion Patriots host the Los Angeles Chargers in the first round of the AFC playoffs on Sunday (8 p.m. ET, NBC) after completing a 14-3 regular season under coach Mike Vrabel, which ties the 1999 Indianapolis Colts and 2008 Miami Dolphins for the best turnaround in NFL history.

There are myriad reasons sparking the once-proud franchise's resurgence. One of the most important began on that video call.

"I was just looking forward to meeting him and thankful to get the opportunity to play for him," Maye said of his mindset at the time. "Obviously, I heard about him, saw all the old Patriot tapes and old videos, and what he's done here as a coordinator before. It's come true of what I thought."

McDaniels' comeback
THERE WERE NO guarantees McDaniels would be back in the NFL in 2025. He wasn't going to force it after doing important self-improvement work in his first season out of the league since being hired by Bill Belichick in 2001 as a Patriots coaching assistant.

He fell in love with pickleball. Lost weight. Drove his youngest daughters, Livi and Neenah, to school. Watched his son, Jack, play football at John Carroll University, his alma mater. Took his daughter Maddie on college visits.

Coaching can be a rewarding profession, but also stress-filled, especially when losses outnumber wins as they did in Las Vegas.

"The first thing I was doing was trying to get healthy," McDaniels said of his 14 months out of the NFL. "You put yourself on the back burner a little bit when you're doing this thing, grinding at both ends."

McDaniels and his wife, Laura, had kept their home in suburban Boston when McDaniels was hired as Raiders head coach in January 2022. So that brought him back to Massachusetts in November 2023 when his tenure ended with a 9-16 record. A lot of things would have had to fall in place for him to leave his family for another NFL job, even though his acumen as one of the NFL's top playcallers made him a candidate for vacant offensive coordinator jobs. He previously guided the Patriots to eight top-10 rankings in his 13 seasons, including the No. 1 ranking in 2007, 2012 and 2017 with quarterback Tom Brady.

Then the unexpected unfolded in New England.

Jerod Mayo, whom owner Robert Kraft had identified years earlier as his choice to succeed Bill Belichick, was fired after one season. Kraft took the blame for putting Mayo in an unwinnable situation, before quickly hiring Mike Vrabel as the franchise's 16th head coach.

"By this time last year, I had a peace and joy about myself ... I re-gained it and had a different perspective on life and what I was looking for."

McDaniels said on the "Schrager Hour" with ESPN's Peter Schrager
As Vrabel began putting a staff together, he started with the core of coaches who had been with him in Tennessee. He had never coached with McDaniels before but had a connection with him from his playing career in New England; McDaniels, then a coaching assistant, picked Vrabel up from the airport on his free agent visit in 2001.

McDaniels was among a handful of candidates interviewed for offensive coordinator -- a group including former Panthers and Bears interim head coach Thomas Brown -- and Vrabel ultimately hired them both with McDaniels as OC and Brown as tight ends coach/passing game coordinator.

McDaniels' affinity for the Patriots, which includes close ties with owner Robert Kraft, was among the reasons the timing was right for his return to coaching. So too was the chance to work under Vrabel, an already-proven head coach with whom he had a prior connection and admiration for his vision of installing a winning culture.

"Beyond grateful," McDaniels said. "This has been a really special place in my professional career, but not just that, in my personal life. My kids, my wife, my family has really grown up and been raised here in New England. To have this opportunity to be with Mike in this place, and to be around this group of people every day, there's a lot of joy in it." Players have seen it firsthand, noting how often McDaniels talks about Laura and their kids.

"Sometimes he'll FaceTime with the fam, we're in the room, and everyone will say hello," third-string quarterback Tommy DeVito said.

"It seems like it's been good to him," added veteran No. 2 quarterback Joshua Dobbs. "Watching him after a game, he's with his daughters and they have their friends and they're hanging out. His son has been able to come to practice. I can imagine a unique sense of peace -- doing what you love, close to the people you love, and they get to see you do it from the convenience of your own home and not a rental. There's a lot that goes into it outside the [team] complex."

Maye's continued development
WHEN THE PATRIOTS mapped out a plan for Maye's hopeful development in his second NFL season, Vrabel essentially said it had two parallel tracks. The first: Leadership, command and connection that resonates throughout the entire team. Then, mastery of an offense coordinated by McDaniels and supported by a talented, experienced staff of assistants. Putting those together would make Maye, in Vrabel's view, the "conductor" of the Patriots.

Vrabel, as the culture-setting head coach, has worked closely with Maye on the first part -- especially in voluntary spring practices and training camp. He said he was intentional in putting Maye in situations to lead with authenticity, which included supporting his plan to host teammates in his native North Carolina for pre-training camp throwing and bonding sessions. Vrabel also called it a "unique" role for a player who was turning 23 in August, with room to grow.

As this was unfolding, the X's and O's marriage between Maye and McDaniels was also taking shape behind the scenes.

"You have an experienced coach who has done it at the highest level, who has seen the progression of [Tom Brady] come in and become the greatest ever. And you have a curious and wide-eyed young player who's very talented at football coming off a year where you don't win a lot, so you're like 'I'll do whatever if it means we'll be good.' I think that's a good combination," Dobbs, 30, observed.

"The biggest way to grow in life in anything is curiosity, and I think Drake has great curiosity in how to become a great football player, great quarterback. Not just throwing the ball, but managing the game, understanding the offense, leading men."

Leadership was a significant change from 2024. Maye had been more deferential after arriving as the No. 3 overall pick in the draft, careful not to infringe on veteran quarterback Jacoby Brissett's turf. Their lockers were side by side. Brissett had a "C" on his jersey as a captain. Maye also was part of a rookie class with sixth-round pick Joe Milton III, who had his own hopes of being the starter.

In 12 starts, but only 10 in which he played all four quarters, Maye totaled 10 interceptions and completed 66.6% of his passes.

"Vrabes calls him the conductor. The train, the show, whatever it is - everything literally goes through the quarterback."

Patriots backup QB Tommy DeVito on Drake Maye
In hopes of sparking Maye's growth in 2025, the Patriots altered the quarterbacks room dynamic by signing Dobbs (with his eighth NFL team) early in free agency, trading Milton to the Dallas Cowboys before the first day of voluntary offseason workouts and claiming DeVito on waivers from the New York Giants at the end of the preseason. Vrabel also hired Grant, whom he views as a rising star after getting to know him as part of the Cleveland Browns staff in 2024, as quarterbacks coach.

That infrastructure, along with McDaniels' acumen, contributed to fostering Maye's development when there was inevitable disruption on the railway.

"I missed OTAs and training camp when all that really went down. From what I heard, it was a lot of growing pains from both sides -- all sides -- for the offense in general," DeVito said.

"There is a lot to this offense. When I first got here [at the end of preseason], I was getting frustrated and [they said to me] 'take it easy, we dealt with this all OTAs and training camp.' I know they grinded it out day in and day out a lot to get to the point they are."

That continued into the early part of the regular season. When the Patriots lost to the Raiders 20-13 in the season opener, and Maye looked indecisive at times in finishing 30-of-46 for 287 yards with a touchdown and interception, McDaniels fielded a flurry of questions from the media. One of the most prevalent was if the offense was too complex, and if Maye had "too much on his plate."

McDaniels was calm and decisive in saying they weren't asking too much of Maye.

"It's got to be a long-term vision of where this guy is going to be," he said. "He's going to be a really good player. He's the right guy."

Coming together for an MVP-like season
MCDANIELS REMEMBERS ONE play from training camp providing a glimpse of Maye's promise. It was a broken play. Maye scrambled to his right and looked as if he was going to run out of bounds or throw it away.

Instead, just inches from the sideline, he uncorked a 60-yard bomb down the sideline to receiver DeMario "Pop" Douglas.

"I'm like, 'There's no way he can get the ball to this guy, right?'" McDaniels recalled.

The ball placement was perfect. Douglas, who called it "fastbreak" football, scored. McDaniels' jaw dropped.

"I looked around and was like, 'Did anyone else see this?'" he said.

Coaches had been working with Maye on remaining a thrower for longer instead of taking off to run. The play was one example of how Maye took the coaching to heart.

By season's end, Maye led the NFL in Total QBR (77.2), completion percentage (72%) and yards per attempt (8.9). Since Total QBR was introduced in 2006, the only quarterbacks to lead the NFL in all three of those categories were Tom Brady in 2007 and Tony Romo in 2014.

Maye also became the first quarterback in NFL history to complete at least 71% of his passes and average 8.9 yards per attempt in a season (minimum 100 attempts).

"The questions he asked were questions a guy who has been in the league 4, 5, 6 years would ask. So you knew you were dealing with a guy that could think the game of football."

McDaniels on Maye
He entered Week 18 as the favorite to win the NFL's Most Valuable Player award, according to DraftKings Sportsbook. After Los Angeles Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford threw four touchdown passes in a win over the Arizona Cardinals, Stafford became the odds-on favorite (-180) to win MVP ahead of Maye (+150).

"Just the way Josh is wired is good for him. I think they almost counterbalance each other in a way, too," veteran tight end Hunter Henry said. "They've really, really gotten close, seeing things on the same page."

Players say McDaniels' unwavering and relentless attention to detail has been embraced by Maye.

"He's intense in the best way possible -- always firing. Probably one of the more detail-oriented, dialed-in people throughout the day, consistently, I've ever been around," DeVito said of McDaniels.

"Whether it's teams or random companies, if the person leading doesn't have that innate sense of 'I want to get it right, I'm anal about what I do and I take pride in what is being put out there,' usually the results kind of show that," Dobbs added. "I think results have shown success because of his mindset."

As a result, Maye shared he feels well-prepared for the variety of challenges opposing defenses present, which in the playoffs will be among the toughest the Patriots face. New England had an easier schedule -- opponents' final win percentage was .391 -- as a result of its last-place finish in 2024.

"He really takes practice very seriously, and I think that's one of the greatest things about him. He cares so much about practice and getting practice right," Maye said.

In turn, McDaniels has noted Maye's growth-based mindset.

The combination has been at the forefront of the Patriots' stunning turnaround.

"What I'm most impressed and excited about is how much he grows from a good or bad experience," McDaniels said. "I don't know what else you could ask from a player. Some take a little bit longer than others to digest a mistake and learn from it, and then utilize it. Boy, he does that really well."

Vice President of Football Operations and Strategy John Streicher

The Athletic

Meet John Streicher, the guy behind the guy most responsible for the Patriots' turnaround

By Chad Graff

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — John Streicher's first apartment, an admittedly generous term for the situation, was a supply closet. It was in the Woody Hayes Athletic Center at Ohio State, and Streicher was a low-level student assistant and equipment manager.

He needed a cheap place to stay, so he rolled out a sleeping bag in one of the closets off the defensive meeting room, where coaches typically stored binders of game plans. But Streicher wanted to show how serious he was about working in sports, so he slept there each night. The free rent didn't hurt.

“Let me be clear, this was not a very big closet,” Parker Fleming, a former graduate assistant who worked with Streicher at the time, said. “This is not like some magical Harry Potter thing where you open the closet door, and it’s massive inside. It could barely fit Stretch.”

No one in football calls him John. Or Streicher (pronounced “striker”). It’s always Stretch. And Stretch’s setup in the defensive meeting room at Ohio State made it easy for Everett Withers, then the team’s defensive coordinator, to dole out responsibilities to his student assistant. He tasked Streicher with so many things: third-down plans, recruiting information, opponent study.

“Stretch was such a great problem solver for me,” Withers said.

That’s also where Streicher met Mike Vrabel and planted the seeds for the duo teaming up in the NFL — first with the Tennessee Titans and now with the New England Patriots. What started in that supply closet has taken Streicher on a winding 13-year journey to becoming the Patriots’ vice president of football operations and strategy, the head coach’s right-hand man involved in every aspect of the team’s operations.

He’s designing the franchise’s new practice facility, which will be unveiled in a couple of months. He’s organizing scouting trips. He’s evaluating players. He’s the man on the other end of the headset with Vrabel during games, in charge of the game management for which Vrabel gets so much credit. It’s no understatement to say he has played a huge role in the Patriots being on the doorstep of a seventh Super Bowl title.

And Streicher does it all behind the scenes. He doesn’t do interviews. He’s the guy behind the guy. He just doesn’t want any credit for it.

“He keeps me in line, keeps me focused and keeps me constantly thinking about things that we should do,” Vrabel said. “It’s no secret how much he means to me, and he’s a large part of the reason why we’re here.”

That last part is where things could get complicated. As much as Streicher might prefer to keep it quiet, the Patriots’ secret is out of the bag. His immediate success could have him on a shortlist of general manager candidates next year.

“Everybody is digging into New England right now to figure out how they did this,” Withers said. “And a lot of arrows are going to be pointing to John Streicher. So if I’m one of these 32 teams, and he’s not on some list in our building of future GM candidates, then they’re dumb. Ownership is dumb if he’s not on the list. Because he’s going to be a GM one day.”

By hiring Mike Vrabel, owner Robert Kraft has turned the Patriots back into a winner
When Withers landed the head job at James Madison in 2014, the school wanted to set a plan in motion to bump the program up to Division I. So they wanted someone with D-I experience. They got that in Withers. But they needed someone to implement the plan.

Streicher was in his mid-20s. His experience to that point had just been working for Vrabel and Withers. But Withers made him the director of football operations at JMU.

His job included a bit of everything. During the football season, he led football ops. After that, he ran recruiting. He built a spreadsheet with a detailed breakdown of every player they were targeting, including his own scouting report on them. When signing day passed, he worked on fundraising to help James Madison move up a division.

“He just wore so many hats,” Fleming said.

Streicher moved into a house just off campus with Fleming (now the special teams coordinator at Kentucky), Drew Mehringer (now the offensive coordinator at Oregon) and Zak Kuhr (now the Patriots’ defensive play caller).

They were living the dream: a group of guys in their mid-20s chasing a goal of making it in this industry. They lived on a golf course and would sneak out at night — barefoot, no less — with a wedge and a pocket full of balls. They put two massive TVs in the living room. One was for studying film. The other was for video games and movies.

The recent snowstorms all over the country brought back memories for the four and lit up their group chat. One winter weekend at James Madison, a rare blizzard shut them in. They used the foot of snow outside as a refrigerator for their beer and had a tournament playing the NHL video game.

“I won that, and since there was no trophy or prize at the time, I feel like I should get Super Bowl tickets,” Mehringer joked recently.

A few years later, Withers landed the top job at Texas State and took the whole crew with him. Streicher was his director of football operations when they went one offseason to visit the Houston Texans, where Vrabel was serving as defensive coordinator.

“We were having lunch one day with Vrabel,” Withers said. “And he said, ‘You know, if I get one of these head jobs, I’m coming after Stretch.’”

Withers knew, of course. Vrabel and Streicher were tight, going back to their time at Ohio State.

“But it was still hard for me when he left,” Withers said. “I had good people around me, but I didn’t have anybody like Stretch.”

Streicher began as a special assistant to Vrabel with the Titans, but his influence grew as Vrabel came away impressed by all Streicher could handle. He eventually became the team’s director of football administration, a fancy title for a guy whose role encompassed so many aspects of team building.

“Here’s what I call it,” Withers said. “He’s a jack of all trades and a master of all.”

After Vrabel was fired by the Titans and went without a head job in 2024, Streicher became Sean McVay’s game management coordinator with the Los Angeles Rams. When Vrabel landed the gig with the Patriots, McVay wanted to keep Streicher in Los Angeles but felt like it was only right to let Streicher reunite with Vrabel.

Now, they’ve led this incredible turnaround as the Patriots have gone from one of the league’s worst teams to one of its best. Next up? The biggest game of Stretch’s life. The way Vrabel values him tells you everything you need to know.

That’s why, when Vrabel puts on his headset for the Super Bowl on Sunday, the first voice he’ll hear is his most trusted one.

The Boston Globe

John Streicher is Mike Vrabel’s version of Ernie Adams, and that’s not all: ‘This guy is going to run an organization one day’

By Christopher Price

FOXBOROUGH — Let's start with the obvious: John "Stretch" Streicher isn't Ernie Adams.

"Stretch is probably a little more … he's got a little bit better sense of humor than Ernie Adams," said Mike Vrabel, who made Streicher one of his first hires when he became coach of the Patriots in January.

There's an easy line to draw between Adams, who served as Bill Belichick's football research director for several years, and Streicher, who was named vice president of football operations and strategy. Both have a deep and abiding relationship with their coaches, both have rare football minds, and both operate (or operated) mostly out of the public eye.

But that does a disservice to both, particularly Streicher. The 35-year-old is a rangy 6-foot-7-inch former high school basketball player who defines the term "football multitasker."

Whether it's engaging with players while bouncing from one position group to another, taking notes and relaying information to and from the head coach, or keeping a close eye on a drill, Streicher has versatility as a coach and administrator.

You combine that with an already impressive résumé, a thirst for innovation, and a world-class ability when it comes to recall, and it's easy to understand why he's already considered "a rising star" in the NFL, according to Rams coach Sean McVay.

"This guy has checked every box, and continues to progress in his career," said McVay, who had Streicher as the Rams' game-management coordinator for the 2024 season. "He's made a tremendous difference, a tremendous impact with everyone he's around. He's absolutely someone who is a rising star in this profession.

"I think that what you understand about Ernie, there's a respect and influence and reverence, and you saw that in how much Bill relied on him because of how smart and informed Ernie was. I never met Ernie, but I can say that when you look at Stretch and his ability to impact change, there's some comparison here. His ability to understand the game from an all-22 perspective is an incredible tool."

Streicher speaks cautiously but warmly, with a certain Midwestern ease. Talking to him for a few moments, it's easy to see why he's developed a legion of fiercely loyal supporters. When approached for comment for this story, at least one of his friends checked with Streicher to see if it was OK.

"He's such a great person," said Everett Withers, a coach who worked with Streicher at multiple stops, including Ohio State. "And he knows his [stuff]."

Streicher's relationship with Vrabel is at the heart of his football journey.

"He's meant a lot to me," said Vrabel, who called Streicher his "best friend" in 2022. "He's meant a lot to the success that we had in Tennessee. His growth, in this business of NFL football, the connections that he makes with our staff and our players.

"They know that he's an extension of me. If they need to, maybe they don't have a strong enough connection with me to say something, they'll certainly be able to find an avenue with Stretch as a point of contact."

'He had all the facts'
As a teenager, Streicher was more into basketball than football.

A native of Cincinnati, he played two years on varsity at Oak Hill High School. His high school coach, Mike Price, said Streicher considered a partial scholarship to Marian University, but opted to attend Ohio State.

Streicher didn't play in college. He started as an equipment manager for the Buckeyes, and became a student assistant coach before graduating in 2012 with a degree in animal science. (He added a graduate degree two years later in community leadership.)

Each assistant coach had an assistant of their own. Ron Miles, who went on to work as a Patriots scouting assistant, was with Vrabel; Streicher was paired with Withers, who coached at Ohio State from 2012-13.

While other student assistants were able to land some extra amenities — Jen Vrabel made sure Miles had an inflatable bed, for example — Streicher found other accommodations.

"Stretch lived in a damn broom closet," Withers said.

It was that sort of sacrifice that distinguished Streicher in Columbus. And while people praised his willingness to embrace the grunt work, it was his ability to remember everything that allowed him to stand out.

“We all know the guys who are like the ‘Stump the Schwab’ guys,” said Tyler Carpenter, who became friendly with Streicher when the two were together as student managers. “He was one of those guys. He had all the facts.”

Streicher’s connection with Vrabel was cemented when the former Patriots linebacker would spend Tuesday nights in the office talking football. That progressed to having Streicher and Miles house-sit for Vrabel when the coach would take his family to baseball tournaments.

The moment Miles realized Streicher was a different breed was at the end of the 2013 Ohio State-Michigan game. The Wolverines scored with 32 seconds left to cut the Buckeyes’ lead to 42-41, and were set to go for 2. Miles said Streicher was able to recall earlier in the year when Michigan was in the same spot.

“We called the coverage that rolled a safety down to that side of the field, and [Tyvis Powell] was right there,” Miles said. “We came away with an interception that ended the game.

“I remember thinking, ‘Son of a gun, this dude is going to be good.’ ”

Learning and growing

While Vrabel left to join the Texans, Streicher followed Withers from Ohio State to James Madison in 2014, and to Texas State two years after that. Every step was marked with an innovative approach, a fastidious attention to detail, and that same upbeat attitude.

But there was always the understanding among everyone that when — not if — Vrabel became a head coach, Streicher would be one of his first hires.

So when Vrabel was named head coach of the Titans in 2018, Withers wasn’t surprised Vrabel reached out.

“I knew exactly what the call was about,” Withers said. “I think Mike — all along — had an eye on Stretch, that when something came up bigger than what I could offer, then Mike was going to come to him.”

Streicher spent six seasons in Tennessee from 2018-23, leaving his fingerprints in just about every aspect of the operation. He dissected game film with players, managed coaches’ schedules, and even stepped in for Vrabel on the sideline when he was out with COVID in 2021.

But that journey came to an end when Vrabel got fired in January 2024. Vrabel spent a year as a consultant with the Browns while Streicher took a job with McVay and the Rams.

“He’s so smart, and has such great wisdom and poise for his age,” McVay said. “His value on game day was especially awesome. I remember always being impressed by Tennessee from afar when it came to the way they handled things.”

McVay pointed specifically to end-of-half and end-of-game situations, as well as Streicher’s communication skills, as his biggest strengths.

“He was able to help create clarity for the players on what they needed to do and when,” McVay said. “And he did such a great job educating me and being very clear. He was always so clear; just a clarity and a courage and poise — especially on game day — that I really respected.”

McVay also knew it was just a matter of time before Vrabel got another head coaching job … which meant Streicher would be on the move. When Vrabel was hired by the Patriots, the call came once again.

McVay could have prevented Streicher from leaving but knew it was more than football.

“He’s Mike’s guy,” said McVay. “The thing that struck me was that Stretch earned the opportunity to have a significant role in New England. There are just a lot of things in alignment there, with where he wanted to continue to progress. It’s a cool option for him.

“We didn’t get better by losing him. We were only fortunate to get him because of what happened in Tennessee. Mike has always been good to me, I thought it was the right thing to do.”

‘This guy is going to run an organization’
As McVay suggested, it seems Streicher will be in New England for the near future. But it’s natural to wonder about the next step.

Adams tied himself to Belichick for the duration of his career with the Patriots, and the relationship between Vrabel and Streicher suggests the same.

But would a bigger job offer for Streicher — such as the chance to run his own team — ever preclude that possibility?

He’s acknowledged that it’s his desire to be an NFL general manager, and those who know Streicher say that could happen sooner rather than later.

“This guy is going to run an organization one day. He’s going to be a GM or a president of an organization one day. I don’t have any doubt in my mind,” Withers said. “I personally don’t see Stretch as a coach. I see him bigger than that.”

In the meantime, Streicher’s friends agree that the most impactful Patriots pickup of the offseason was a former high school basketball star who won’t catch a pass or throw for a touchdown.

“They’re getting a very loyal guy who is very smart. He’s down to earth with very little ego. Whatever needs to get done, he gets it done,” Withers said. “He’s one of those guys who will do everything to help the Patriots organization win a Super Bowl.”

Boston Herald

He is the Patriots’ best kept secret, the man behind Mike Vrabel’s rebuild

By Andrew Callahan

The only place to start is the closet.

The dark wooden door inside a meeting room at Ohio State’s football facility, and the empty space behind it running seven feet long and three wide.

This is where John Streicher walked in, laid down, slept hundreds of times, and over time, the man they now call “Stretch” walked out.

This is where Mike Vrabel says he first found him, then an unpaid coaching intern who lived there starting in 2012, out of pure hustle and love of the game.

“I said, ‘Who are you?’” the Patriots head coach remembered from his office in late July. “And he said, ‘Stretch.’ And I told him, ‘Well, time to get to work.’”

In those days, Stretch cut video. He created presentations. He studied film, chauffeured recruits and basically everything else Ohio State assistants, like Vrabel, asked of him. All of his clothes hung in a couple of lockers. His food kept warm in the team cafeteria.

Of the millions of people who have ever claimed to live, breathe and sleep Ohio State football, Stretch is the only one who told the truth, thanks to that closet. But don't spend much time there.

Stories like the closest, about inglorious grunt work and uncommon sacrifice, are everywhere in the NFL; tales that calcify with each retelling until the truth of this coach or that executive's rise becomes inseparable from myth.

In January, Vrabel hired Streicher to be the Patriots' vice president of football operations and strategy because in the 11 years since he left Ohio State, yes, he labored, lost and did sleep in that closet. But today he walks the halls as Stretch, the most powerful person in the organization under Vrabel, because he wields more truth than anyone else.

And the truth of the closet is not only could a young Stretch hardly afford to sleep anywhere else but … he liked it.

"He used to pride himself on telling me his only bill was his cellphone bill," said Tom Stewart, a longtime confidant and retired adjunct professor at Ohio State.

One last thing about the closet: Vrabel fibbed.

They met in 2011, Vrabel's first season in coaching and Stretch's last as an undergraduate equipment manager. Vrabel's version of how they met is probably a joke he tells himself, and if so, one he definitely shares with Stretch.

Wise guys. Close friends. Partners who have begun to remake the Patriots in Vrabel's image, just as they did with the Titans from 2018-23.

So, here is the truth about Stretch.

He's 35. He stands at 6-foot-7, the inspiration behind his nickname. He has blue eyes and short brown hair he's tried to keep in place for years that now grays at his temples.

He's cheap; driving the same Hyundai sedan he owned in college and ordering the least expensive light beer off most bar menus. He's quiet, but affable, and observant. Friends and former colleagues know he's smarter than they are, and note he tends to hide his intelligence from strangers.

Stretch touches every department in the Patriots' football operations, yet rarely leaves fingerprints. He handles analytics and game management on Sundays. He scouts opponents, college prospects and pro players, a voice in the team's free agency and draft plans. The Patriots' athletic training, travel, equipment and security staffs all report to him.

Through his first six months in New England, Stretch has been described as an evolved version of Ernie Adams, the one-time consigliere to Bill Belichick. Try again.

"There's ownership, there's Vrabel, and then Stretch," one source said.

Had he accepted an interview request for this story, Stretch might have commented on the Patriots' new power structure or another story from his Ohio State days. But he declined.

Too bad. That tale is almost too good to be true.

History and a home

In November 2013, an instant classic reached its tipping point on a chilly afternoon at Michigan Stadium, with 113,511 fans, at full throat and full tilt, bearing witness to college football history.

Ohio State led 42-41 with a minute left after entering as two-touchdown favorites under legendary coach Urban Meyer. The Buckeyes were undefeated that year, chasing a national title. Michigan had dropped four of its last six games, but mustered enough trickery and belief to keep pace that day and finally, enough gall to try a 2-point conversion that could clinch the game.

Back then, Stretch sat in the visiting coaches' booth of the press box next to his direct boss, Ohio State co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers. Seconds after Michigan's offense broke into formation, Meyer called timeout from an anxious sideline.

"FILE"Urban was on the headset kind of panicking," remembered Oregon assistant Parker Fleming, then a student coach at Ohio State.

Not Stretch. He had a premonition and announced it in the coaches' box.

"What? Say that again," Withers begged.

This time, Stretch leaned into Withers' headset so he could relay to the coaches down on the sideline a piece of intel that would temporarily save their season.

This was the gist: Michigan had called a similar formation and motion 10 weeks earlier before throwing a game-winning, 4-yard touchdown in the fourth quarter against Notre Dame. That play was coming again: a pass to wide receiver Drew Dileo, who had motioned before the snap and was going to run a stop route before Meyer's timeout.

"Are you sure?" Meyer asked.

The whistles blew, and play resumed. The home crowd fell into a murmur while their Wolverines moved into the same formation they had shown before the timeout. Dileo motioned. Quarterback Devin Gardner took the snap, looked right and fired an early Christmas gift to a repositioned Buckeyes defender.

Ballgame.

In post-game interviews, Ohio State players credited assistant Kerry Coombs with a stroke of genius preparation. But Coombs was only the messenger. Not that Stretch cared.

Football, not glory, fills his servant's heart, where the Buckeyes have always loomed large. He is a west Cincinnati native and the only son of Jack Streicher, a former offensive lineman at Miami of Ohio. Jack introduced his son to the game at an early age, then encouraged him to keep his distance.

"He didn't really like the contact. And I told him, 'If you don't like to get punched in the nose and come back, this isn't the game for you,'" Jack says. "But you can still love it."

John turned to caddying, which he did for five years. In high school, he pursued the Evans Scholarship, a full ride to college for young caddies with limited financial means. No luck.

Basketball became his plan B, a Division I scholarship that never materialized for Oak Hills High School's gangly starting center with a glossy 3-point shot and mind for the game.

"If a team was running an out-of-bounds play from the baseline and he was on the bench," Oak Hills assistant coach Greg Rolfes said, "he could tell you who was going where and who was going to get the ball."

By the time John pivoted to Plan C, an equipment manager job at Ohio State, he floored the three people he was closest with: Jack, his mother Debbie, and Mike Price.

Today, Price is still the head basketball coach at Oak Hills. He's old school, the type of coach who says he's seen it all, and you believe him. And for all the games and practices they shared together, the first memory Price summons of a young John Streicher is a skinny kid volunteering at every single one of his youth camps.

Because while John had been well-liked at Oak Hills, he was reserved. He didn't date and spent weekends at home or on the golf course. He, the tallest guy walking the hallways, was often invisible. Whereas on the court and within a team concept, John was his most seen.

So when John told Price he was forgoing basketball to scrub footballs and clean dirty shoulder pads, Price paused. But sometime later, in the clarity of reflection, it clicked.

Football offered what caddying and basketball could not: the chance to activate his love of strategy, service and his father's game all at once.

He enrolled at Ohio State in 2008 and became lead manager as a senior in 2011, just after a personal hero, Ohio State coach Jim Tressel, resigned amid a recruiting scandal, and an assistant named Luke Fickell took over.

Despite the ongoing turmoil, John found a sense of belonging and began to foster it outside of himself, hosting other managers at his house after work days that ran over 10 hours long. Meanwhile Vrabel had retired from the NFL, just in time to join Fickell and help lead their alma mater out of the darkness.

Fickell lasted just one season at the helm before handing the wheel to Meyer, who retained Fickell and Vrabel as assistants upon taking over in 2012. Fissures formed immediately within Meyer's coaching staff, cracks that would last for the next two years

"When you worked for Urban Meyer, it was chaos every day," Withers said, "and you were really trying to keep your head above water."

Vrabel threw John, now fully formed as Stretch, a life raft. Tuesday nights at the facility became a ritual for them, the three-time Super Bowl champion sharing war stories with student coaches and sleeping on an air mattress not all that far from Stretch's closet; precisely when and where Stretch began cultivating and collecting stories all his own.

'He did all of that'
On June 2, the Patriots were minutes away from opening one of their final spring practices on a sunny day outside Gillette Stadium.

But first, interviews.

Interim defensive coordinator Zak Kuhr stepped behind a microphone before a throng of reporters waiting on the edge of one practice field. I asked him about Stretch, the towering man of mystery.

"He got me going at my first full-time gig at James Madison," Kuhr said. "My whole thing with him is I didn't want to let him down wherever he put in a good word for me. So, I probably wouldn't be here without Stretch."

Kuhr was right. He wouldn't.

But here's what he left out.

The two of them followed Withers from Ohio State to James Madison after the 2013 season with two other student coaches, Parker Fleming and Drew Mehringer; how the four of them lived together in a house on the edge of campus; how Stretch negotiated his way into paying a lower rent by converting their basement into a bedroom, where his future wife, Caroline, later stayed with him.

The golf course behind the house, where they'd run out to play three holes at a time on slow days. How they huddled over the same phone to call high school recruits. How they brought a projector home to study practice film in their living room.

How Stretch founded the Alpha Dogs, a boosters club that fundamentally changed the program, which went 18-7 during their two seasons and 28-2 over the two that followed. How the Alpha Dogs paid for a renovated locker room, new helmets, uniforms, training tables and expanded the recruiting budget. How Stretch organized the program's present and plotted its future simultaneously, all at 24 and 25 years old.

"All the departments that exist in college football today with 15 different people," Fleming said, "he did all of that at James Madison."

Kuhr also omitted that these four 20-somethings each found the limits of ambition, which when left unchecked can send a career soaring and drag a person into places impossible to climb out of alone.

Like when Mehringer stared at the team's 2-3 start in their first season together, a 26-year-old offensive coordinator who began internalizing his offense's failures. Stretch insisted, both in the office and at home, the season would straighten out. That they would find a way.

JMU won its next seven games and made the FCS playoffs. Their winning streak started with a rainy, last-second triumph at Albany saved by Stretch's recommendation to kick a field goal before fourth down in case the snap was botched. That way, the holder could spike the ball, and they could kick again.

Of course, with 10 seconds left in a tied game, the snap was botched. JMU survived, kicked again and won.

“See? We’re good!” Stretch told Mehringer. “I told you. I told you!”

Then there was the time Stretch fell into a small pit of his own, cursing himself on a weekend his parents visited because he’d left a preeminent program like Ohio State for a little outpost in the Appalachians. How he was supposedly on a path to nowhere. That is, until Caroline extended a loving hand and pulled him back to his senses.

How moments like that all passed, as they all do, and Withers parlayed all of his triumphs at JMU into the head job at Texas State, where Stretch and Kuhr followed him in 2016, but winning didn’t.

And finally, how Vrabel had become a Texans assistant in those years and once asked Stretch if he could poach him upon landing an NFL head-coaching job. How Vrabel did land a job and stepped out of a recruiting visit to Boston College with his eldest son, Tyler, to take a call from the Titans in January 2018.

How Vrabel hung up and then made two calls himself.

The first to his wife, and the second to Stretch.

Reunited, torn apart
On Jan. 4, 2020, Stretch celebrated his 30th birthday by laying the Patriots’ dynasty down into its grave.

He sat high above the Gillette Stadium field that night, peering through the night fog from the visiting coaches booth with a direct line to Vrabel. No premonitions. Just cold, calculated clock-killing.

The Titans led by a point midway through the fourth quarter of a bruising Wild Card playoff battle, when they prepared to punt the ball back to Tom Brady; the opening line of countless NFL horror stories. But instead of booming the ball away, Stretch and Vrabel initiated a plan to strip the Brady-era Pats of their scarcest resource: time.

Without running a single play, they sapped 1:49 off the clock. Then, finally, they punted.

Not long after, Brady looked helpless on his final snap as a Patriot, standing at the 1-yard line with nine seconds left because of that maneuver, which Stretch had stolen from Brady’s head coach and now turned against them both.

Earlier that season, Bill Belichick exploited a loophole in the NFL rulebook by committing consecutive penalties that kept the clock running for an extra minute and a half during a 33-0 blowout of the Jets. Belichick smirked that night on the sideline as he skewered a hated rival on national TV just because he could.

The next day, down in Tennessee, Stretch studied that film and filed Belichick’s loophole away, likely with Titans center Ben Jones sitting right next to him. In their years together, Jones would usually grab a coffee in the team facility between 5 and 6 a.m., walk over from the offensive line room and sit with Stretch in his cubicle next to Vrabel’s office.

This is what Jones saw and heard.

Stretch took every order Vrabel barked through his open office door. He studied every play of every regular season game within 48 hours of its completion for six years straight. He stitched video clips of plays from across the league to cap the Titans’ Friday team meetings with situational breakdowns. Friday teach tape, they called it.

He also reviewed how referees officiating the Titans’ next game enforced penalties; like whether they flagged pass interference just when receivers shoved defenders at chest height or lower on the body, too.

“Good teams know the rules, great teams know how to use the rules,” Jones said. “So we did everything possible. And every other team I’ve been on, we never looked at anything like that. We just installed our game plan that week, and that was it.”

Sometimes over their morning chats, Stretch asked Jones for favors.

Talk to this rookie. He’s hitting a wall.

Check in with this veteran. He had bad body language yesterday.

Tell me what you think we need this week.

Stretch was an extension of Vrabel then, as he is today. He also listened to players vent about their boss, and kept those complaints to himself.

“People trust the s— out of him,” Vrabel said. “The players know if they say something to Stretch, he doesn’t come and tell me. And I think that’’s why the coaches trust him, too. He’ll know how to say it to me.”

As Stretch’s reach grew, first as director of player development in 2020 and director of football administration three years later, the Titans fell apart. Their talent pool ran dry over Vrabel’s final seasons, and his relationship with ownership became too strained for a coach who won just 13 games over two years.

Vrabel was fired, along with the rest of his staff, on Jan. 9, 2024.

In the following days, Vrabel started making calls around the league to pitch Stretch to anyone who would listen.

“He’s helped us win football games,” Vrabel said. “Point blank.”

Stretch received interest from several teams as a game management guru, the skill he had become most famous for, especially after the Wild Card win at New England. One of the last teams that called Stretch got him.

A deal was struck roughly four hours after he picked up the phone.

“Stretch,” the voice said, “this is Sean McVay.”

The stamp
Hunched over a phone at Rams headquarters in late July, McVay sounds certain of two things while recalling his one season with Stretch.

One: Stretch made him, a Super Bowl champion at 36 years old, a better coach.

Two: one day, Stretch will run his own team as an NFL general manager.

Stretch wants this. Confidants shared the longer his NFL career has lasted, the clearer his long-term vision has become. They also remember a rockier start to his Los Angeles tenure than he might admit to because of his fondness and respect for McVay.

The hours in LA were different from his Tennessee days, and his to-do list did not run nearly as long as he wanted working as Los Angeles’ new game management coordinator.

“The Rams just didn’t understand everything he had done (in Tennessee),” his mother, Debbie, said. “But I think he eventually worked himself into more responsibility.”

The added responsibility started with coaching on special teams, then serving as a sounding board for McVay. The Rams started 1-4 last season, which forced McVay to review just about everything with his team during his Week 6 bye. Stretch had a few ideas.

Sometime in their discussions, McVay began to embrace a new, holistic view of the game; zooming out before each matchup to consider an opponent’s history, coaching philosophy and the connective tissue between its offense, defense and special teams. How he could run a program with more connective tissue itself, instead of one led by his charisma and insights as an offensive savant.

“I think Stretch deserves a ton of credit for collaborating with our offensive and defensive coaches, and in the kicking game, which allowed us to handle a lot of those things better than maybe what I had in the previous seven years,” McVay admitted.

He continued: “How does this team play? How do they want to win? How do we make sure that we don’t allow certain things to occur, or we want to prevent them from being able to do this?”

Sure enough, the Rams started rolling, and won nine of their last 12 games. McVay’s improved clock management emerged as a prevailing narrative of their season — a nod to Stretch — but a storyline that overshadowed Stretch’s true impact.

In the playoffs, the Rams upset the Vikings and came the closest of any team to beating the future Super Bowl champion Eagles. Rams coaches recognized how Philadelphia wanted to play: run the ball, control the clock and win up front. That meant fewer possessions, which gave the Rams a real shot if they could simply hang around until the fourth quarter.

All week, the Rams planned to win on the final drive, and they fell 22 yards and 26 seconds shy from pulling it off, losing on a fourth-down incompletion from Matthew Stafford to Puka Nacua.

Once his team fell 28-22 in the snow of that Philadelphia night last January, McVay knew what would come next: a call from Vrabel to hire Stretch away.

Stretch's bond with Vrabel is one of the tightest in football. Perhaps the tightest. To say Stretch knows where the bodies are buried would be to overlook the possibility he may have been the one who put them there in the first place.

"It's hard to come by a guy you trust at all times. (Vrabel and Stretch) have that in each other," Jones said. "And they don't want to let each other down."

More than trust, it's a relationship steeped in love and loyalty now going on a decade and a half. Which might be why, among other reasons, Vrabel declined to elaborate on how Stretch could one day become a GM.

"Oh, I'm not gonna get into that," he said.

Let's get into it anyway.

Above all else, the Patriots must win. No tide raises all boats, and all profiles, like winning.

Second, Stretch must detach himself from the perception he is an extension of Vrabel, even if those in the know realize the value he provides has never been greater, nor more independent, of his boss. Spending last season in Los Angeles helped. McVay's stamp of approval might be the most valuable in the entire league.

This is that stamp.

"He understands the game from an All-22 perspective. He's special as it relates to the situational stuff, and he's got a great eye for talent. And so you put all those things together, and his big-picture understanding of the landscape of the league, offensive and defensive football and special teams, schematics and tactics, meshing all that together, he was a difference-maker for us," McVay said. "And I loved being around him."

Finally, if and when the time comes, Stretch must bend the general manager position to him. Taking a traditional approach, studying players dispassionately and from a distance, treating them like assets, won't do.

"He's said that if and when that kind of position would come (available), it would be hard for him to be a little more distant from the team," his father, Jack, said over the phone. "He just likes dealing with them every day, being there and the camaraderie."

"The belonging," Debbie interjected.

Perhaps Stretch will rise to the top of the Patriots' front office one day. Maybe he will soar elsewhere. Whatever Stretch decides or doesn't, Vrabel will be the first to know, and that secret will be kept between them for as long as they want to hold it there.

On Jan. 12, news of Vrabel's hiring in New England broke across the Streicher family television as Jack settled in to watch an afternoon of Wild Card playoff games.

He texted his son, asking if he planned to follow Vrabel to the Patriots. That, of course, had already been decided.

Stretch replied.

His text read: "I'm employed by the Rams. I don't know."

Hands on the future
The only way to reach Vrabel is to go through Stretch.

Both men share an office doorway off a main hall inside Patriots' headquarters, where their nameplates are affixed at about eye level. Stepping through the doorway, Stretch's office comes first. It's the size of a modest bedroom, with an L-shaped couch and large desk supporting two curved computer monitors off to the right. No closet.

Vrabel's office, a few steps further ahead and through another doorway, is sized closer to a studio apartment.

Stretch was gone when I entered to interview Vrabel the day before Patriots training camp opened. After a quick handshake, I slid into one of two chairs in front of Vrabel's desk, while he kicked his feet up, and leaned back into his chair. A spiral-bound copy of the 2025 NFL rule book rested on the desk.

We started with the Ohio State days. Vrabel answered my questions, some of which he'd heard plenty of times before. He confirmed he used to allow Stretch, as a coaching intern, to throw parties at his Columbus home whenever he left town for his son's baseball tournaments.

Vrabel also omitted the one rule that's been left out of every other story written about their relationship to date: If I find one beer can, I'm gonna f—ing kill you.

We continued. Vrabel rebuffed the one question about Stretch's next steps to becoming a GM, but opened up about everything else. Anything for Stretch, he'd said.

Toward the end of our 16 minutes together, I asked about the Michigan story.

Vrabel put his feet back on the ground, leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk, now more physically engaged than he'd been in our time together. He jogged his memory, a football catalogue of big hits and bigger games.

It was hard to tell whether Vrabel genuinely didn't remember the ending of that game or was testing me. He guessed the wrong season at first, so I corrected him and finished the story. Vrabel smiled.

"And that's how it all started," he said.

We shook hands, and I thanked him for his time, turning back toward Stretch's office.

Stretch was still missing.

Turns out, that afternoon Stretch met with Jonathan Kraft, President of the Kraft Group.

They discussed the Patriots' new state-of-the-art facility, which broke ground last December and is scheduled to open next spring; a physical manifestation of the franchise's future.

Stretch is redesigning it.

LS Julian Ashby

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Patriots Can Expect a Locker Room Leader in Julian Ashby

By Julleann Challacombe

Stepping onto the field as a bright-eyed freshman at Parkview High School, Julian Ashby's aspirations of being a quarterback couldn't be stopped by a 10-foot brick wall.

It was his dream to become a dependable leader for his team. At the time, fulfilling that dream meant being quarterback, but he spent his freshman year sharing the position with a fellow teammate.

His time on the field was cut in half, and in the moments he stood on the sideline he realized one thing -- what mattered to him most was being there for his teammates, not the position he played.

The time came to immerse himself in the world of varsity sports. The long bus rides full of music and motivating speeches. Being pushed harder than you've ever been and doing it as a unit, at the highest level.

Ashby caught word of an open tryout at long snapper for the varsity squad, he saw his opportunity and knew he couldn't pass it up.

"It was the best way to help my team through high school," said Ashby in his post-draft press conference.

After making his first few snaps, he was immediately approached by Parkview's running backs coach Rod Twyman. Twyman clocked Ashby's snapping accuracy and advised him to work on fine tuning his craft; he had potential to make it far. Turns out, Twyman is right.

Ashby went on to play 39 games and handled 276 snaps covering placements and punts for the varsity squad. In doing so he earned nearly a full ride to Furman University, but more importantly, left an impact on those he was leaving behind in Lilburn, Georgia.

The Young and the Selfless Teammate

The first thing former Parkview head coach Eric Godfree noticed about Ashby was his character. Coming from a family which, according to Godfree, strives to 'lead by serving others,' it wasn't shocking to him that Ashby wanted to be there for his teammates in any capacity.

"He wanted to contribute for his team, he wanted to help out," said Godfree. "Because of the person Julian is, and his work ethic, and his character, we all wanted him on the field too."

Ashby's desire to support his team turned into taking on two roles. He continued to take most reps as the second-string quarterback, which meant improving at long snapper bled into his free time before and after practice.

Ashby's commitment to being the best where his team needed him outweighed the teenager within him that wanted to play video games or hangout with his friends. The work was his outlet, and it ended up paying off. He was the perfect guy for the job.

"He turned out to be better than we could have imagined because of how hard he works at things. It's one of those spots that nobody recognizes until you mess up, or until you don't have one," said Godfree. "It really is a selfless job, and that really is him, he's an others-first guy."

As Ashby begins his campaign to take a spot on the Patriots 53-man roster, Godfree isn't worried about his success. The numbers that made him the sixth-best long snapper in Georgia and later the best in the NCAA will speak for itself. It's really Ashby that will blow New England away.

"The way that he works at it, cares for others and treats his teammates, he's going to be respected in the locker room," said Godfree. "As soon as you get to know him, you find out real quick that you're pulling for him."

Immediate Impact

After three seasons at long snapper and graduating with a degree in physics from Furman University, Ashby decided to take his final year of collegiate eligibility to Nashville to and play for the Vanderbilt Commodores.

Ashby made the most of his opportunity and dove headfirst into what Music City had to offer, both on and off the field.

His resume as a Commodore quickly stacked with accolades like being named to the CSC Academic All-American, CSC Academic All-District and SEC Football Community Service Teams, as well as being named a semifinalist for the Patrick Mannelly Award, which is reserved for the best long snapper in the country who exemplify "Excellence, Integrity, Effectiveness, Teamwork, and Balance" according to the award's beneficiary website.

"Julian makes a huge impact wherever he goes, he was one of our leaders in community service," said Vanderbilt special teams coordinator Jeff LePak. "He came in and made an instant impact and was a huge part of our culture in his short amount of time here."

LePak was present for the Patriots first encounter with Julian Ashby. Head coach Mike Vrabel, special teams coordinator Jeremy Springer and a crew of Patriots team-ops staff were present to see the top-ranked long snapper in the country for themselves.

Both LePak and Ashby recall the workout being intense. Coaches walked him through the expectations and opportunity the Patriots were offering, making him only more hopeful the Patriots would throw the first punch come draft night.

"He pushed me hard and that's what got me excited about this opportunity," said Ashby. "It's a high standard which I think is a great expectation to walk into, and I look forward to doing my part to keep the great line of specialists through New England going."

LePak has complete confidence Ashby can become a leader on special teams as New England establishes its culture. He can build relationships with anyone, it's what he does best.

"The franchise is getting a great human being first of all, as well as a talented long snapper," said LaPek. "Anyone that comes in contact with him is going to come off the back end better for it."

Laying the Foundation

In a few short months, Ashby will take the practice field at Gillette Stadium. His motivated and dependable character remains as strong as it was back in Lilburn, Georgia, but his purpose lies elsewhere.

Tangibly, Ashby will work hard and won't stop until he's made everyone else's job easier.

"For me, dependability has always been the word," said Ashby. " That's staying healthy, and staying available, but it's also doing the job well so that the coach can worry about scheme and the rest of the game rather than the actual operation of a punt or a kick."

Intangibly, on all of his past coaches' accounts, Ashby can become a solid piece of the foundation VP of player personnel Ryan Cowden spoke of in the hours following drafting the nation's best long snapper.

"There's an idea here that can't be overstated enough: if you don't get the person right, then a lot of that other stuff can go by the wayside," said Cowden.

"I think we've been trying to be very intentional about the people to build the foundation that Coach Vrabel and his vision has here for this football team."

AZ SPORTS

'He prides himself on that' - New England Patriots 2025 NFL Draft pick Julian Ashby is more than just an elite long snapper

By Sophie Weller

Long snapper is not a position that often gets all the glory in the game of football, but it's vital for success.

So, when the New England Patriots selected Vanderbilt's Julian Ashby in the 2025 NFL Draft, they were bringing in someone who would be a staple of the team for a while. And that became even more clear after the Patriots released long-time long snapper Joe Cardona.

It's officially a new era on special teams for New England, and according to Vanderbilt special teams coordinator Jeff LePak, the Patriots got an "elite human being."

“They’re going to have their long snapper for a long time," LePak said when speaking with A to Z Sports. "It’s not a position that you have to worry about. I know people don’t always look at the long snapper as a huge position need, but you don’t know how much you need one until you don’t have one."

"And the Patriots have one. Not only do they have one, but they got a great one," he added. "The special teams operations will flow smoothly with Julian being the catalyst for it. And it all starts with the snap. And so they got a great one. They should be excited about the future to come with Julian as their snapper."

The Patriots kept a close eye on Julian Ashby during the draft process

As the New England Patriots prepared for the 2025 NFL Draft, they had an eye on the Vanderbilt long snapper. And not just that, but they sent a small group down for a private workout, which included Jeremy Springer and Mike Vrabel.

"Any time an NFL franchise sends four people down to see your long snapper, you take these context clues there that they are very interested in him," LePak explained. "Whenever they spend time, the resources to send those guys down and work Julian out, they're serious about him.

"I could tell by their actions that they were serious about Julian and wanted him to be a part of their team," he added.

New England ultimately decided to select Ashby in the seventh round, using their second-to-last pick on the special teams star. It also allowed him to join an exclusive group, becoming the first long snapper selected in the draft since 2021.

"I know they didn't want him to be a free agent where he could really choose his destination. They wanted to be able to lock him in and get him in a spot where they knew they were going to be able to get him on their roster, which was awesome," Lepak said. "I was super fired up for him for being the first ever snapper drafted since 2021. That's a huge, huge honor for him, but also a testament to the work that he's put into being where he's at now."

Julian Ashby was a Patrick Mannelly Award Semifinalist

While Julian Ashby began his college career at Furman, spending four seasons there from 2020 to 2023, he ultimately decided to transfer to Vanderbilt prior to the 2024 season. That's when he teamed up with LePak.

"We were going to be in the market for our new long snapper, and we were potentially looking for someone who could transfer in who had game experience," LePak stated. "We saw the crossover tape and saw a guy who was snapping the ball with great velocity, great accuracy, but also had the athletic ability to get down the field and make tackles, and he was making tackles against returners from South Carolina and from Clemson. So, we really, really like that, and thought that it would be a good fit for our team."

Knowing that he was entering the portal, the Vanderbilt coaching staff had multiple phone conversations and even hosted him on his bye week during his junior year at Furman, where he "came up to a game, and actually we got to get around him and sit with him.

"He got to see how we do things," LePak said. "And so it was really just kind of a match made in heaven."

And it all worked out incredibly, as Ashby went on to play in all 13 games and recorded 114 snaps. Plus, he managed to tack on two tackles which came against Kentucky and South Carolina. His efforts earned him a high honor, being named a Patrick Mannelly Award semifinalist, which is given to the best college football long snapper.

"It was awesome to see him get honored that way," LePak explained. "I mean, in my opinion, Julian was the best snapper in the country, and it was cool to see that other people put him in that same prestige.

"Obviously, the Patriots think super highly of him to take a draft pick on him, and that's the kind of light he's put himself in with what he's gone on and done. He should be in that award. He's one of the best in the country, and one of the best in the nation."

So, when New England selected him, LePak was certainly on Ashby's call list.

"Me (and) Coach (Clark) Lea FaceTimed him and talked to him for a little bit. Super fired up for him and for his family," he said. "And obviously he's a great human being who deserves an opportunity that he's got. So we're super excited."

What kind of player are the Patriots getting?

LePak was asked this exact question, and he didn't hold back, detailing each and every reason why the Patriots are lucky to add Ashby to their roster.

"He's a dude who's constantly going to be smiling, enjoying his life, and a real positive, upbeat guy," the Vanderbilt special teams coordinator said. "He's going to come into work every single day. He's always looking for ways to get better. He's going to watch his tape. He's going to be self critical of himself. He's always going to be around the building. He's always going to be working."

"If there's ever an opportunity for him to snap with the operation, with the holders, with the punters, anything like that, he's always going to be looking for opportunities to snap and any kind of feedback on any of his snaps."

And he's someone the coaching staff is going to love working with.

"Julian is extremely coachable," LePak added. "So any kind of feedback that you give him, he's going to take and he's going to go work on it to the highest level until he perfects it. He is a perfectionist in his craft, which you really kind of have to be in his position. But he takes it to a different level, where if you give him something to work on, he'll work on it.

"And he's open to any kind of feedback that you have. He's never down on himself. He's never down on the process," he continued. "He's always back engaged in the process and attacking the next rep."

Plus, last season, Jeremy Springer allowed Cardona to be a little more physical, with the veteran long snapper finished the season with four total tackles. And that's something that is expected to continue now that they have Ashby.

"Julian is an athlete. He doesn't like to be looked at as just a long snapper," LePak explained. "He's a good football player. He can go down and get his body in positions. He's athletic enough to be able to make plays on returners. He did it in our league, in the SEC, and he'll be able to do it in the NFL as well.

"I think that's something that the Patriots really liked, is somebody that can not only be an elite snapper at the beginning of the play, but then also get down and be able to finish off the play with a tackle. That's what Julian enjoys. He prides himself on that. He works on that part of his game. And so, it's not just about his snapping and his protection. It's also about his ability to get down the field and actually be a factor in the tackle as well."

But it doesn't end there. The Patriots are also getting someone who looks to be close with each and every member of the team, while also giving back to the community.

"He did a high, high amount of community service, and led a lot of community service opportunities here at Vanderbilt. And in only a short amount of time here, was really a spokesperson for us on campus as well and the things that we were trying to get done. So, Julian's a great asset for a franchise," LePak said. "I think that's something that attracted the Patriots as well, is a high character person that they're getting. You're not going to find a better person than Julian Ashby, and so he's going to fit into that locker room."

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 ablity 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 commited 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

A night out with the best golfer in the Patriots' locker room: punter Bryce Baringer

By Nicole Yang

CANTON — It doesn't take long to discover who's the best golfer on the Patriots.

An informal poll of teammates will reveal the same answer: punter Bryce Baringer.

Even the typically reserved Baringer would agree.

“That’s the one thing I will confidently and without hesitation say,” Baringer said. “I am 100 percent the best golfer in the locker room.”

“Oh, that’s very humble of him,” joked center Garrett Bradbury.

But Baringer isn’t blowing smoke.

“Bryce is actually annoyingly good at golf and likes to talk a lot of trash when we’re all together,” special teams captain Brenden Schooler said. “He’s a very, very legit golfer.”

So, the Globe decided to head to Topgolf in Canton with Baringer, his wife Bella, and rookie kicker Andy Borregales to witness Baringer’s highly touted skills.

Sure enough, it immediately became obvious why the team’s answer was a no-brainer.

Using the generic Topgolf equipment, Baringer effortlessly struck towering iron shots and booming drives. He seemed to have no problem reaching the most difficult target in the small row of black rectangles close to the back of the net. Despite the casual setting, Baringer easily proved his ability to manipulate the spin and trajectory of his shots.

As someone who is still learning golf — my best score was a 50 on nine holes at Fresh Pond in Cambridge — I stood in awe of how easy he makes the game look. While Borregales, who just picked up the sport eight months ago, would occasionally top or slice the ball, Baringer never seemed to misfire.

And he politely spared us the trash talk his teammates sometime experience.

“After a good drive, a good approach shot, a good putt, which is most of the time for him, he’ll just look at you and you know,” Schooler said. “If he’s with a group of guys, he has no problem rubbing it in. At all.”

Baringer began playing at age 4, thanks to his father, Bruce. They started with a putter (still Baringer’s favorite club), in part because his dad recognized the importance of developing a short game but mainly because, well, he was only 4.

“You look at my dad and you wouldn’t think he has soft hands around the green,” Baringer said. “He’s 6 foot 7 and 200-something pounds. He’s a big dude. But he taught me how to do the very short shots, the important shots, first — and have some creativity at the same time.”

Baringer fell in love with the sport as a family activity and a chance to spend hours outside in the summer. After he grew a bit older, his father would drop him off at the Detroit Golf Club on his way to work and then pick him up on the way home. Baringer would spend the day there, playing holes on a loop and working on the practice greens.

Related: What moves might the Patriots make ahead of Tuesday’s NFL trade deadline?
When Baringer turned 13, his father told him to start caddying as a way to understand the importance of handling responsibilities, waking up early, and saving money.

“It’s funny because I would have to wake up early and then my parents would have to drive me,” Baringer said. “So, they were kind of thrown in the mix, too.”

He’ll never forget one of his first days, when he caddied for a group of Red Wings, including legends Chris Chelios and Kris Draper — players that make you say, “Oh my god!” in the words of Baringer, a Michigan native and avid Wings fan.

The more exposure Baringer had to golf, the more he learned — and loved it.

By his junior year of high school, Baringer had also started punting and eventually needed to make a decision about which sport to pursue in college. Although he opted for football, golf has very much remained an integral part of his life.

After getting drafted by the Patriots in the sixth round in 2023, Baringer joined TPC Boston on a three-year trial membership for his “rookie splurge gift.” He’s checked out a number of other local courses, including Old Sandwich Golf Club in Plymouth, Boston Golf Club in Hingham, GreatHorse in Hampden, and Worcester Country Club.

Just last year, Baringer shot a 1-under-par 69 and won the Massachusetts Amateur qualifier at Stockbridge Golf Club. He earned a spot in the Mass Am at Framingham Golf Club, where he shot even par on the front nine before stumbling on the back.

“I just did it because I wanted to feel something again,” said Baringer, who is a scratch golfer. “We hadn’t been in a football game since January. Obviously, every day and every practice is competitive, but those juices that you get extra on game day, I just wanted to feel that again.”

There are certainly some parallels between punting and golfing, particularly in terms of the mind-set. Patriots assistant special teams coach Tom Quinn actually recommended Baringer read “Golf Is Not A Game Of Perfect” by Dr. Bob Rotella because its discussion of the mental aspect of the game can apply to punting.

“When you look around the league, I feel like a lot of specialists are relatively good golfers,” Baringer said. “I think it’s just a very similar mind-set as far as how you approach things, the detail in which you’re approaching the shot or the punt or the kick.

“Other than game circumstances, like you could have situational punts that are very similar, but no punt is going to be the exact same, like, ‘Oh, I’ve hit this punt 100 times.’ Same with golf. You’re never going to hit the same shot 100 times.”

Baringer appreciates golf for the same reason many professional athletes do. It’s low-impact and easy on the body, especially in comparison with football. It’s also an opportunity to socialize and decompress while still staying competitive.

He’ll play with his father, his wife, other NFL punters, and, of course, his teammates. He’s also befriended Dorchester native Bruce Brown, who now plays for the Denver Nuggets and is also a member of TPC Boston.

The list of golfers on the Patriots’ roster (and even coaching staff) always seems to be growing, given the rise in popularity of the sport following the COVID-19 pandemic. Among those who have golfed with Baringer are Borregales, Bradbury, Schooler, retired center David Andrews, long snapper Julian Ashby, linebacker Jack Gibbens, tight end Hunter Henry, and quarterback Drake Maye.

“We’re all athletic enough that we can hit the ball,” Schooler said. “But Bryce has so much control, as far as where he wants to put the ball, what type of shot, what kind of spin he puts on the ball, so it’s honestly fun to watch him golf.”

As much as he loves it, Baringer has set a rule for himself: No golfing during football season. So, he had to turn down an invitation this past Tuesday to play at The Country Club in Brookline, a course he’s been wanting to try since moving to Massachusetts.

Come offseason, though, he will undoubtedly be out on the links. And if you catch him with his teammates, you might hear a friendly back and forth.

“I am probably known to be a relatively quiet person in the building,” Baringer said. “You get me on the golf course and you want to compete, I will jaw a little bit. But jokingly. I don’t chirp anywhere other than on the golf course.”

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

BOSTON SPORTS JOURNAL

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

By Greg A, Bedard
September 10, 2022
If you were impressed with Christian Barmore's rookie season for the Patriots, the former Alabama defensive tackle doesn't share your opinion.

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

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

That is bad news for the rest of the NFL.

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

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

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

Barmore has a goal in mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Barmore continues to use that as motivation.

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

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

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

...

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

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

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

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

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

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

The team that had the late second-round grade on Barmore said that was the earliest they would have been comfortable with the risk.
"Alabama barely held him together," said an NFC scout. "As a pro, he's a real wild-card."

I asked another scout if he had any specifics, and he said that just general accountability — getting to practice and class — was a struggle for him and Barmore has to be in a very tightly controlled environment, like Alabama has, to

succeed. Barmore also was in a very heavy rotation — most players with his talent play upwards of 70 percent of snaps. His playing time just kept dropping to about a 50-50 split. That's very unusual and sent scouts digging for answers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sounds like someone's ready for this season.

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

K Andy Borregales

In Andy Borregales, Patriots are getting competitive football player who 'happens to be the best kicker in the country, too'

By Alexandra Francisco

There are plenty of stories about Andy Borregales coming up clutch.

His former coaches, from high school through four years at the University of Miami, can recall a handful of instances off the top of their head where the New England Patriots' sixth-round draft pick was the hero in a game.

But when asked about a time when Borregales' mentality under pressure stood out to him, Manny Diaz, former Hurricanes head coach, thinks of a time in 2021 where the true freshman came up short.

Miami had the ball back after scoring two unanswered touchdowns in the fourth quarter. Now down just two points to the University of Virginia, with over five minutes remaining, the Hurricanes drove the ball into Cavalier territory, setting their kicker up for a game-winning, 33-yard field goal on the final play.

Borregales banged the ball off the upright and it bounced right back towards him as time expired.

"For a young guy, that was a pretty harsh introduction to the ups and downs of the hero world of kicking," said Diaz, now the head coach at Duke University.

"I remember calling him on the phone after the game that night and telling him he would have many opportunities in his career to be back in that situation and perform with a different outcome. That has certainly proven to be true."

Borregales went on to finish 17-for-21 on field goals that season and was perfect on 45 extra point attempts, serving as Miami's primary placekicker in all 12 games.

Though Diaz left Miami after that 2021 season, Hurricanes special teams coordinator Danny Kalter was part of Borregales' entire college football journey.

Another constant, by all accounts, was a confidence that propelled Borregales to do everything he said he would.

A lifelong Miami fan, he knew he wanted to be a Hurricane, and when Borregales achieved that goal, he set his sights on the next one. Borregales was not shy about wanting to be the highest-drafted specialist in his draft class, and for four years, he prepared every single day to make that happen.

"Coming here as a little, bubbly kid just running around his junior and senior year of high school, always wanting to be a Miami Hurricane, and then making that dream come true has been remarkable to see," Kalter said.

"He set out his goals and dreams and has achieved every one of them. He's the type of kid that has always been so vocal about what his vision for himself is, and when you're like that you can often open yourself up to disappointment, especially at this high of a level. But to see him achieve more than anyone could have expected through his hard work, that's what I think of when I think of Andy. The little kid running around our practices saying how he wanted to be the best kicker to come to Miami, starting four years, setting the all-time points record which will never be broken, and being the top kicker selected in the draft. That's what stands out to me."

Work Ethic Runs in the Family

The kicking position may be a lonely one, but not for Borregales.

When the call came from New England making him the No. 182 overall selection in the 2025 NFL Draft, video from his draft party gave a glimpse at one person there with him every step up the way.

Borregales hangs up the phone and puts on a fitted, navy Patriots hat. With cheers erupting from the room full of people there to celebrate with him, he digs his head into the shoulder of his older brother, Jose.

As evidenced by the emotional embrace, only those two truly knew what it took to get there.

"Seeing (Jose) go through the whole ordeal, he learned it wasn't easy," said Hector Clavijo III, Borregales' coach at Champagnat Catholic High School.

"His brother was an All-American and won the Lou Groza Award. And Jose got a tryout and went to camp, but never made it to one NFL game. Andrews saw how difficult it really was."

Born in Caracas, Venezuela, Borregales' family immigrated to Doral, Florida. when he was 1 year old.

Both brothers grew up playing soccer and football in the melting pot of culture that exists in the greater Miami area, shaping them as both athletes and people.

Eventually, Borregales decided to focus solely on football, playing every position he could.

"His background and his family have a lot to do with his work ethic and mentality as a teammate, but I think the city of Miami also has a lot to do with that," Kalter said of Borregales.

"The more you talk to him, you see he's really proud of his Venezuelan heritage, but he's super proud to say he's from Miami, too. Seeing his parents come here and their hard work to provide for him and his siblings, you're forced into that melting pot where if you don't assimilate to that, and if you're not comfortable with a lot of other people, it's hard to make it down here and be successful."

With hardworking, loyal parents, that mentality was passed down to their sons. But despite humble beginnings, the brothers picked up fierce competitiveness in Miami that resulted in a certain swagger.

Jose went on to kick four years at Florida International University, showing his younger brother the path to becoming a college kicker.

Borregales, meanwhile, was cementing himself as one of the best high school kickers in the country.

Diaz' staff at Miami took notice of the talent in their own backyard.

"We had a really good relationship with the Borregales family through Andy's recruitment, and after a year of recruiting him, Jose graduated and had one year (of eligibility) left so he actually transferred as a grad student from FIU to play at Miami that last year," Kalter said.

"It was really successful with (Jose) winning the Lou Groza award and being an All-American, and then Andy signed right after that. It was kind of a whirlwind from there."

Diaz recalls Borregales having a phenomenal performance at one of Miami's summertime kicking camps and offering him soon after.

Being a Hurricane was Borregales' dream, and he verbally committed thereafter. Jose then transferred to warm up the job awaiting his little brother in Coral Gables before passing the torch.

"Jose had an outstanding senior year with us, and the idea that there was a Borregales kicking in Miami for five years straight was a pretty neat thing," Diaz said. "They're a wonderful family, great people, and I wasn't surprised to see the success he had after I left."

With plans to play for the Hurricanes already in place, Borregales transferred to Champagnat Catholic High School for his senior year of high school in 2020. The switch would allow him to graduate early and contend for a Florida Class 2A state title.

Champagnat Catholic had just won two out of four state championship appearances, and under Clavijo, was looking to go back-to-back.

At the time, Clavijo's squad had an underclassman kicker after years of struggling at the position, and Borregales served as a great mentor. The top recruit took care of kickoffs and longer field goals, while the younger player gained experience with extra points.

"At that point, Andy didn't really have anything to prove, so he was a really great teammate and allowed the other kid to develop," Clavijo said.

"It was huge for us and just ended up being a great fit the entire season. We all understood the business and what he came here for. He wanted the opportunity to graduate early and win another state championship so we all had similar goals in mind, but sometimes, when you're dealing with a high-profile guy like that, there is a little bit of a diva personality. But him, he just wanted to win."

Borregales got what he wanted.

The Class 2A state championship ended up being scheduled at Florida State University on National Signing Day. Champagnat Catholic took over their hotel lobby in Tallahassee as four members of the football team committed to Division I programs.

Later on that day, Borregales helped his and Clavijo's team to a second consecutive title.

"It was a special time because my brother, who was my defensive coordinator, had passed away that summer," Clavijo said.

"He died in a car accident, so the whole season was very emotional, but it all ended the right way. With signing day, and with us winning another state championship that same day, it was very special. The atmosphere was amazing playing at FSU and everything aligned itself."

With that chapter finished, Borregales went on to Miami to begin his freshman year.

Around the same time, Jose signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers as an undrafted free agent, was waived, and then re-signed to the practice squad where he spent the 2021 season.

Jose was waived again in August of 2022 without the chance to kick in the NFL.

"His older brother was extremely talented and in my opinion was deserving of a better chance than the one he got in the NFL, and I know that means a lot to Andres, it means a lot to him for the family, not just for his own success, but he knows Jose really should have had a better shot than what he was given in that league," Diaz said.

"I would never speak for him, but I'm sure Andres was aware of just how difficult it is, how competitive it is, and how much politics goes into it at that level. It's about finding the right spot at the right time with the right situation."

With no kicker on the Patriots' roster at the time of the 2025 NFL Draft and a history of excellent specialists, New England appears to be a perfect situation – even in the cold.

"With the cold, I think he's going to have a harder time shoveling the (expletive) snow out of his driveway than he is kicking in the cold," Kalter said.

"He's going to be fine and he's preparing for it. I promise you right now, that narrative is going to fuel him even more. He's going to crave that snowy, classic New England game. And he'll thrive in it."

Photos: Patriots sixth round pick Andres Borregales in action
View photos of Patriots sixth round pick, kicker Andres Borregales in action at Miami.

The It Factor

Within an hour of hearing his name called in the draft, Borregales had a call with the New England media and was asked about those cold weather concerns.

Borregales couldn't have given a better answer, sharing that he grew up watching Patriots legend Adam Vinatieri make Super Bowl winning kicks in the snow. He, too, hoped to experience iconic moments like that of his own.

It was exactly what fans wanted to hear, but Kalter knows the sentiment was genuine.

"Typically, that might be a bulls* answer, but Andy has no bulls*," Kalter said.

"That's so typical of him and exactly what I would expect him to say. And I'll tell you, to my grave, I believe him from the bottom of my heart.

Everything Kalter has seen to this point makes him bullish on Borregales.

Since his recruitment, what stuck out most to both Kalter and Diaz was an aura that made Borregales the best kicker in the country the last four years.

For those who don't know him well, that could come off as arrogance, but those close to Borregales describe him as the ultimate teammate. One of the guys who is just as likely to be best friends with the punter as he is a starting defensive back or offensive lineman. One who is celebrating a big defensive stop or a touchdown on the sideline before running out to kick the extra point.

His teammates respond well to his energy, and that success fuels his fire.

"He just has competitive greatness to him, which is what all the great ones have," Diaz said.

"We're in an era where a lot of these guys are just robots of sorts, trained up by really talented kicking coaches, but they may not have what it takes to really be special. But Andy was just different from the beginning."

Kalter always believed in Borregales' NFL goals from a mindset perspective, but that confidence intensified in the kicker's junior year.

Coming into Miami at 140 pounds, Borregales knew he had to gain weight to play at the next level.

Kalter saw Borregales really buying into the nutrition side of things, and policing himself on the workload required to set the Hurricanes up for success on any given Saturday.

By the time he played his last game at Miami, Borregales was up to 205 pounds.

"There's going to be a lot of natural leg strength that occurs over the course of gaining 60 pounds over four years, but I think the biggest place for growth with him over his time in college that sets him apart just goes back the mentality piece," Kalter said.

"His ability to have a short-term memory, and not just a short-term memory, but his ability to self-correct very quickly whether it was a bad kick or a bad kick off. Even a ball that goes through the uprights but isn't what he calls his "A ball," having the ability to say, 'Hey, I left my heel up a little there,' when he gets back to the sideline, but then two seconds later it's out of his mind and on to the next one. His maturation and ability to self-assess and move on to the next one – that's what shows his growth to me."

Confidence from Composure

The numbers speak for themselves, with Borregales hitting 86% (74-of-86 of his field goal attempts over four seasons with the Hurricanes. He made 99.5% (183-of-184) extra point attempts.

The statistics only told half the story, though.

How Borregales carried himself is actually what made him so reliable to everyone in the building. Through his confidence and composure, he earned the trust of the entire locker room at Miami.

"This past season, there were a couple moments where we would be doing two-minute drills in practice and you would see the defense give up because they knew they either had (quarterback) Cam Ward driving them down the field or the best kicker in the country helping the offense win the drill regardless," Kalter said.

"There was a kick in practice last year in one of these drills that was like a 58 or 59 yarder. It was weird, because typically in those situations there's a little bit of uncertainty of what's going to happen, but this time there was a feeling from everyone, and an assumption, that he was going to make it. I was like, wait a minute, this is a 59-yard kick. But he put it halfway between the uprights, and I was like, OK, this kid is the best kicker in the country."

In times like these, his nickname "Automatic Andy" was earned. For Borregales, no moment was too big.

What sets him apart from other kickers is the fact that nothing can rattle him.

When Borregales missed a kick in his first game of his senior season at Miami, he didn't miss another. And when he traveled to the NFL combine and missed three of his first four kicks, he went on to hit 10 in a row.

"The Patriots are getting a football player -- not a kicker who was a spoiled kid that grew up with parents paying for him to travel all around the country to go to all these kicking camps," Kalter said.

"It was all built from sacrifices from his family and hard work he had to put in himself from the ground up. It started from a young age to have achieved the talent level that he had and continued here when he had to really put on weight to be successful. All that leads to him having what we look for when we're recruiting offensive and defensive players. He has those qualities as a kicker. They're getting as uber-competitive of a football player as they can imagine. He just happens to be the best kicker in the country, too."

Miami Hurricanes on SI

Miami's All-Time Leading Scorer Andres Borregales Ready To Kick For Patriots

By Mark Morales-Smith

The New England Patriots decided to invest into a kicker in the 2025 NFL Draft. They drafted former Miami Hurricanes kicker Andres Borregales in the sixth round of last month's event. The clutch kicker is a Venezuela native and was considered the best kicking prospect in the nation who declared for this year's draft. He is all but a lock to quite literally kick off the season as the Patriots' starting place kicker. Recently, the Pats' official website caught up with some familiar faces for the Hurricanes faithful who spoke about all that Borregales brought to the table at Miami and what they expect from him on the next level.

His former head coach at Miami until 2021, and current Duke Blue Devils head coach, Manny Diaz spoke about his resolve as a young player.

"For a young guy, that was a pretty harsh introduction to the ups and downs of the hero world of kicking," Diaz said. "I remember calling him on the phone after the game that night and telling him he would have many opportunities in his career to be back in that situation and perform with a different outcome. That has certainly proven to be true."

His former special teams coordinator also talked about his growth as a player and spoke on his character as a player. "Coming here as a little, bubbly kid just running around his junior and senior year of high school, always wanting to be a Miami Hurricane, and then making that dream come true has been remarkable to see," Kalter said. "He set out his goals and dreams and has achieved every one of them. He's the type of kid that has always been so vocal about what his vision for himself is, and when you're like that you can often open yourself up to disappointment, especially at this high of a level. But to see him achieve more than anyone could have expected through his hard work, that's what I think of when I think of Andy. The little kid running around our practices saying how he wanted to be the best kicker to come to Miami, starting four years, setting the all-time points record which will never be broken, and being the top kicker selected in the draft. That's what stands out to me."

MASS LIVE

New Patriots kicker a source of pride for Venezuelan community

By Matt Vautour

Andres Borregales hasn't even attempted a kick in a preseason game for the Patriots, but he already has devoted fans.

He hasn't met most of them yet, but the rookie reciprocates their affection.

Borregales, the Patriots' sixth-round draft pick in April, is part of a rare club of NFL players from Venezuela. He was born in Caracas and moved to the United States as a toddler. He grew up in South Florida and played for the University of Miami, where he became the top-rated kicker entering the draft.

His arrival has been cause for excitement among New England's Venezuelan community, which includes quite a few Patriots fans.

“It’s a big thing,” Borregales said. “I’m excited to meet them at the games. I take pride in my heritage and where I was born. I’m excited.”

Borregales, who uses Andres or Andy interchangeably, smiled.

“I love them all,” he said. “I’ve never met them, but I love them.”

Cristina Aguilera Sandoval, a long-time Venezuelan community leader in Massachusetts and Executive Director of the Massachusetts Office for Immigrants and Refugees, was excited when she heard Borregales was drafted.

“Everybody’s cheering for him,” she said. “We’re looking forward to meeting him in New England and within the Venezuelan community in Massachusetts, which has grown exponentially in the past few years.”

Daniel Oreadi, an oral surgeon at Tufts, shared her enthusiasm. Oreadi was born in the United States but spent much of his childhood in Venezuela. He returned in 2001 and moved to New England just in time for the Patriots’ golden age.

The first game he watched was Tom Brady’s debut after Drew Bledsoe was knocked out of the game by Mo Lewis in 2001.

“You can imagine, after learning more about football and seeing this guy take over as essentially a rookie and doing what he did. I was just hooked,” Oreadi said. “Since then, I’ve been a die-hard fan.”

He has high hopes for Borregales.

“Hopefully, he’ll have a good future in the NFL,” he said. “This is exciting to have him come to play at Gillette. You will see more Venezuelan flags than you would have seen in the past for every game. Kickers can play for a long time. For him to do that, and for people to be able to hear over that time that his background his from Venezuela, would be very, very good.”

Ruben J. Azocar is a doctor and the vice president of perioperative services at Beth Israel Deaconess and part of the faculty at Harvard Medical School.

A former resident of Miami, he had already been rooting for Borregales at The U and was glad to see him coming to New England, where Red Sox fans have been cheering for Venezuelan baseball stars for decades, including current rightfielder Wilyer Abreu.

“The Patriots being so significant in New England and him coming from a very competitive team like the University of Miami is a point of pride,” Azocar said. “It’s a premier team. It’s not like he’s going to the Cleveland Browns, right?”

All the Venezuelans in the NFL have been kickers:

Alan Pringle, who is from Los Taques, Venezuela, played one game for the Detroit Lions in 1973, but didn’t attempt a field goal or extra point.

Pat Ragusa of Caracas made two field goals and seven PATs for the Jets in 1987.

Jose Borregales, Andres’ brother, kicked for the Buccaneers in the 2021 preseason and had been on their practice squad but didn’t make their active roster.

Unlike those three, Borregales will go into Patriots training camp as a favorite to be the team’s No. 1 kicker. Presuming he makes the Patriots roster, it won’t take much for him to become the most accomplished of that group.

According to the 2022 United States Census, there are approximately 814,000 Venezuelan immigrants living in the United States, including 7,266 in Massachusetts and 2,378 in Rhode Island.

Immigrants and refugees from the South American nation have become a flashpoint in the heated immigration debate. President Donald Trump has alleged that representatives of the Venezuelan government have directed members of the gang Tren de Aragua to enter the United States as invaders.

While reports in both the Washington Post and New York Times have used declassified intelligence memos to dispute any significant contact between the Venezuelan government and Tren de Aragua, the administration has used that as a pretense to deport Venezuelans under the Alien Enemies Act.

So with those concerns hanging over their heads, Borregales offers Venezuelans a bright spot.

He's not just someone to root for on a local team who shares their roots, but he also represents a chance to celebrate and talk about Venezuela in non-political terms.

"Unfortunately, our country has been on this political nightmare for a while," Azocar said. "We're being kind of used as a poster for bad immigration or bad this and bad that. Maybe this can give a different twist to the Venezuelan image."

Oriadi had similar hopes.

"Being able to talk about Venezuela outside of politics and the negative things we've been associated with is always great," Oreadi said. "Andres gives the opportunity to think of our country outside of the political side.

"We are well-known for being kind, good-hearted people who love to laugh and help," he added. "We'll welcome him with open arms and we'll be at Gillette when he plays here. Hopefully, he feels the Venezuelan love far away from his hometown."

Aguilera Sandoval hoped his success would help reshape the image of Venezuelans in America.

"(His success) just shows the values that we're bringing to this country in a time where the Venezuelan community has been beat up by the national rhetoric, and all put kind of in the same negative bag," she said. "I think it shows that when families and individuals are coming to our country and coming to our state, it's to work hard and to contribute and to make us all proud."

Borregales appreciated the warmth.

"It just shows the love they have for you," said Borregales, who added that other Hispanics have embraced his arrival, too. "As Hispanics, we see one Hispanic do something well and we jump on that train. I felt it once I got drafted. There's so much support from people who I never knew, but are from the same country. That's how Venezuelans are."

The Boston Globe

Patriots rookie Andres Borregales putting best foot forward early in kicking competition with veteran John Parker Romo

By Christopher Price

This season, the Patriots are looking at the possibility of using their fourth kicker in four years, as rookie Andres Borregales and veteran John Parker Romo have spent the spring jousting for the job.

In the practices that have been open to the media, Borregales — a sixth-round pick out of the University of Miami — has outperformed Romo. During Monday's workout, each got four attempts from 33 to 49 yards. Borregales connected on all four, while Romo, who ended last season on the practice squad, was 2 for 4, going wide right from 39 and 49.

There's been no sense of who might be better on kickoffs — there's been little special teams work during the open practices, save for return reps — but it's clear that Borregales has the inside track.

It's no surprise to University of Miami special teams coordinator Danny Kalter, who predicts Patriots fans will "fall in love" with the 5-foot-11-inch, 199-pound Borregales, who has a penchant for big kicks while earning the nickname "Automatic Andy."

"He'll be talking [expletive] as a kicker and making big kicks and getting the crowd involved," Kalter said of Borregales, who made 75 percent of his field goal chances from 50-plus over the last two seasons with the Hurricanes. "He'll be as fun a kicker as you can root for. And his teammates will love him. He won't be hanging out over by the kicking net during the games. He's going to be in there, cheering on the offense and defense.

“I think from a fan perspective, they’ll fall in love with his personality and his swagger. He doesn’t carry himself as a prototypical kicker. And it’s easy to fall for a guy like that when he’s putting the ball between the uprights at the rate he does.”

Borregales has a résumé that suggests he could bring some stability to the position. A first-team All-ACC choice in 2023 and 2024, he connected on 86 percent of his field goal attempts in college, including a career-high 94.7 percent as a senior. He finished as the leading scorer in Miami history with 405 points.

The 22-year-old Borregales, who acknowledged the history of New England’s “legendary kickers” when he spoke with reporters shortly after he was drafted, was the first kicker taken this year, 182nd overall.

“We decided to jump in there with Andres when we did, and feel pretty comfortable with that,” executive vice president of player personnel Eliot Wolf said shortly after the pick was made. “We felt like Andres was good value there, and he was a player that was ranked high on our board.”

Kicking runs in the Borregales family. Andres is the younger brother of Jose Borregales, a fellow Miami alum and winner of the 2020 Lou Groza Award, given to the best college kicker in the country. Kalter said that’s one reason Andres Borregales has the mental and physical makeup to succeed in the NFL.

“The Patriots got a kid who is a great competitor,” Kalter said. “Personality-wise, he’s not your typical kicker. Andy proved himself that when he started playing, he was a football player first, and that propelled him to be the best kicker in the country last year. He’s a fierce competitor with a great mind-set when it comes to letting missing go, and self-evaluation and all of it.

“That comes from his family. His brother Jose was a great kicker, and Andy came right up in the same footsteps. That’s the mind-set he brings to the job every day.”

Kalter said that if Borregales trusts the form he worked to craft the last few seasons, the Patriots’ choice will pay dividends.

“He’s the most complete kicker I’ve ever been around,” said Kalter. “He just needs to trust in his leg and his incredible technique that he’s honed the last few years. Just trust in himself.

“The Patriots don’t just have a kicker. They have a true football player.”

WBZ NEWS

New Patriots kicker Andres Borregales idolized Adam Vinatieri growing up

By Matt Geagan

The Patriots drafted Miami kicker Andres Borregales in the sixth round of the 2025 NFL Draft, and the 23-year-old doesn't sound too worried about kicking in the finnicky New England weather.

Why? Because he's modeled his game off Patriots legendary kicker Adam Vinatieri, who had a knack for making clutch kicks in the worst conditions. Even after spending the last four years in humid Miami, Borregales is confident he can handle the cold in New England.

"All my life I looked up to Adam Vinatieri. Legend, honestly. All those kicks in the snow, and clutch kicks in the snow, actually. I can't wait to experience that," Borregales said Saturday after being drafted by the Patriots. "I know a lot of people thought that obviously, being from Miami, I can't handle the cold, but I think I can prove people wrong about that."

Borregales was one of the top kickers available this year, and will now compete with John Parker Romo for New England's kicking duties in training camp. He'll bring a solid resume to New England and the NFL.

Who is Andres Borregales?

Borregales was the first kicker drafted in 2025 -- taken 182nd overall -- after he earned First-Team All-ACC honors in each of the last two seasons for the Hurricanes. The Venezuela native was a four-year starter at Miami, and hit 74 of

his 86 field-goal attempts (86 percent) for his career. He was 18-for-19 in 2024 and connected on 40 of his 45 field goal attempts the last two seasons.

On the rare occasion he did miss, Borregales channeled his inner-goldfish and moved on quickly.

"Really, it just comes down to short-term memory. If you miss one, OK, so be it, on to the next, and just continue that streak," he said. "Even if it is a game winning kick, celebrate for a time because you got to enjoy the good times too. The very next day, now it's time to get back to work because you never know what comes in the future.

As a kicker, I had this saying. It's a, 'one shot, one kill' mentality. You get one shot just to make a field goal," he added.

Borregales set a school record at the U with 405 points for his career. Now we'll see if that success translates to the NFL level, in a place where the weather can get real iffy late in the season.

Kicking field goals runs in Borregales' family. His brother, Jose, won the Lou Groza Award while with Miami in 2020, which is given to college football's top kicker. Jose spent time on the Tampa Bay Buccaneers practice squad in 2021.

Andres Borregales bringing ‘one shot’ mentality to Patriots kicker position

By Brian Hines

As New England Patriots special teams coordinator Jeremy Springer was on the hunt for his next potential kicker over the last few months, one trait stood above the rest.

“The guys that have been doing it for a long time, they got a different mentality,” Springer said weeks ago. “They just go out there, they kick balls, and they just do their job and they don’t overthink. They don’t overtrain, they have a routine, they stick to it. They’re consistent and they show up every day and they do their job.

“Those are the ones that usually do a good job around the league from what I’ve seen so far.”

Springer’s search perhaps ended in the sixth-round of the 2025 NFL Draft, as the Patriots selected Miami kicker Andres Borregales with pick No. 182.

After meeting with Borregales multiple times throughout the pre-draft process — including a stop at his Pro Day where he connected on a 65-yard field goal — it was clear the 23-year-old’s attitude fit the bill.

“As a kicker, I had this saying. It’s a, “one shot, one kill” mentality. You get one shot just to make a field goal,” Borregales said. “It just comes down to short-term memory. If you miss one, OK, so be it, on to the next, and just continue that streak. Even if it is a game winning kick, celebrate for a time because you got to enjoy the good times too. The very next day, now it’s time to get back to work because you never know what comes in the future.”

That way of looking at things proved successful for Borregales, who was viewed by many as the top overall kicker in this year’s draft. Borregales left Miami connecting on 86 percent of his kicks, including a career-best 94.7 percent hit rate in his senior season — with a new long of 56 yards.

As he now heads to Foxboro, Borregales will enter a positional battle with veteran John Parker Romo, a friend who he has trained with in the past. If the rookie wins the job new challenges will await, such as kicking in New England weather after spending his collegiate career in South Florida.

Borregales is ready to prove he can handle it like a former Patriots legend at the position.

“All my life, I looked up to Adam Vinatieri, a legend, honestly. Especially all those kicks in the snow and clutch kicks in the snow, actually. I can’t wait to experience that,” Borregales said. “I know a lot of people thought that, obviously being from Miami, I can’t handle the cold. I think I can prove people wrong about that.”

Patriots rookie kicker grew up idolizing Adam Vinatieri

By Karen Guregian

Andres Borregales might be from Miami. But the rookie kicker, taken in the sixth-round by the Patriots Saturday, is well-versed in the team's history.

Particularly, with a nod toward their kickers.

"I'm excited. All my life, I looked up to Adam Vinatieri", Borregales said of the Patriots 3-time Super Bowl winner during a video call shortly after being selected. "(He's) a legend, honestly, and especially all of those kicks in the snow, all of those clutch kicks in the snow."

While there is some thought kickers who are used to operating in the warm weather don't do as well in the cold, Borregales doesn't buy that notion.

"I can't wait to experience that," he said. "I know a lot of people thought that, being from Miami, I can't handle the cold. But I can prove people wrong about that."

Borregales is aware of the long line of successful kickers in New England, starting with Vinatieri, and moving on to Stephen Gostkowski, and Nick Folk.

"I feel like the Patriots have, honestly, a good line of legendary kickers," Borregales said. "I'm excited to one day be a part of that conversation, and contribute to this organization."

Borregales, who was the first kicker taken in the draft, hit on 86% (74-of-86) of his field goal attempts over the last four seasons.

He had a 94.7% field goal percentage (18-of-19) last season at Miami. Distance-wise, he connected on 7-of-10 kicks from 50 yards or more during his collegiate career.

Borregales says as a kicker says he has a "one shot, one kill mentality" when it comes to making kicks.

The consensus top kicking prospect in the draft also indicated he was close with Patriots senior personnel executive Alonzo Highsmith, who was previously on the staff at Miami.

During the spring camps and training camp, Borregales will be competing with John Parker Romo for the starting job.

WR Kayshon Boutte

The evolution of Patriots' Kayshon Boutte: From broken ankle to NFL success

By Mark Daniels

FOXBOROUGH – Kayshon Boutte was riding high.

Days after catching a go-ahead touchdown to help lift the Patriots over the Titans the receiver was back at his Massachusetts home doing what he loves — playing with his 3-year-old son, Kylan.

The father-son combo kicked the soccer ball together and then ran around the backyard with their dog, a 100-pound, 1-year-old Cane Corso named Bella.

The receiver was exhausted and recovering from his second straight road game, but in this moment, his enjoyment of being a dad exceeded his need for sleep

“You just gotta learn how to balance life outside of football,” Boutte said. “It can be tiring, but I mean, it’s all worth it.”

Boutte’s football journey hasn’t been easy, but the 23-year-old is finally on the right path and in a place he always knew he would be: as a sure-handed, capable receiver in the NFL.

After signing with LSU out of high school, that looked like a given. He was projected to be the next in the line of great Tigers receivers.

A broken ankle during his sophomore year at LSU led to two surgeries and a long recovery. The setback cost him in performance, draft status, money, and reputation.

An elite prep sprinter, Boutte didn’t have the same burst in 2022 after a coaching change at LSU, a disappointing season led him to declare for the NFL draft after his junior season.

The wide receiver fell to the Patriots in the sixth round of the 2023 NFL Draft.

“I wasn’t gonna sit there and beat myself up about it,” Boutte said. “The only way to get through it was work.”

Boutte never stopped believing.

In his third season with the Patriots, he looks like the player who sparked such high expectations early on. Those who know him say Boutte’s resurgence in New England shouldn’t be a surprise.

“I always knew I could get back to where I was,” Boutte said. “I just think everybody stopped believing for a second. I feel like now, everybody’s back on the train. It’s kind of how it goes. But I don’t really buy into too much of the noise. Just be me at the end of the day.”

A natural talent
Boutte was bored, so naturally, he went outside to play with Ali.

The black lab seemed giant to Boutte, who was 5 years old. To entertain himself, Boutte chased the family dog around his family’s property.

But when Ali chased him, Boutte realized how athletic he was. As years passed, it got harder and harder for the black lab to catch him.

“You know how they always say, you run faster when you’re in fear?” Boutte said. “It was just that thought of a dog chasing me and then just running away from it. I think you really reach your full speed by doing that. And I think that’s when I started getting into the track and running the football.”

Growing up in New Iberia in Southern Louisiana, Boutte started playing football when he was 5. He was a standout on the track and a legend in youth football. By middle school, he was getting recruited to other high schools, but opted to stay and play in his hometown for Westgate.

“Every time he touched the ball, he was scoring. He just had exceptional speed,” said Westgate coach Ryan Antoine, who first saw Boutte when he was in sixth grade. ”You could tell he was just a natural athlete. He was just different.”

The year before Boutte arrived, Westgate was 0-10. He went to high school as a running back, where the team showcased his elite speed. Even before his first game, Boutte made a list of goals. He wanted:

To earn a football scholarship to LSU
Win a Louisiana state championship in track.

He crossed one of those off as a freshman, winning the 400-meter state title. He also added a state championship in the 60-meter dash to his resume. Boutte also set Westgate High School records in the 100 meters (10.97), 200 meters (21.25), and 100-meter hurdles (15.47).

Moving to receiver as a sophomore helped him achieve the other. It took him two seasons to achieve one dream, signing with LSU.

“I’ve never had a kid that wants to compete like Kayshon,” Antoine said. “It could be shooting the basketball, it could be walking outside, it could be getting first to lunch. Kayshon is going to compete, and he’s not going to stop until he’s the best at it.”

Boutte Combine
LSU wide receiver Kayshon Boutte runs the 40-yard dash at the NFL football scouting combine in Indianapolis, Saturday, March 4, 2023. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)AP

Boutte returned too early
When he arrived on campus, Boutte had high expectations.

At LSU, wide receiver coach Mickey Joseph had a type. He only wanted to recruit athletes whom he thought could be first-round picks. That’s why he successfully recruited Justin Jefferson, Ja’Marr Chase and Terrace Marshall.

After Jefferson, Chase, and Marshall’s time in Baton Rouge was over, Joseph had a plan to restock LSU’s receiver room. It started with Boutte (class of 2020), Malik Nabers (2021), and Brian Thomas (2021).

“(Boutte is) one of them. He’s at the top of the charts, talent-wise,” Joseph said. “I didn’t deal with you if I didn’t think that you were going to be a high draft pick one day… He ran into some injuries, but I always thought he was first-round talent.”

The above-mentioned receivers all went in the first round except Marshall, a second-round pick. Boutte’s downfall came from the ankle injury and new coach Brian Kelly’s staff, who didn’t know him.

In 2020, when Chase and Marshall opted out of the COVID season, Boutte became the Tigers’ top option. In his last game, the true freshman set an SEC record, catching 14 passes for 308 yards and three touchdowns against Ole Miss.

Boutte caught nine passes for 148 yards and three touchdowns in the first game of his sophomore year. Five weeks later, however, his world came crashing down. On Oct. 9, he suffered his broken ankle. Eight days later, LSU coach Ed Orgeron was fired. The chain of events was catastrophic.

Boutte needed multiple ankle surgeries and still has two steel plates and six screws inside his leg. The recovery was brutal. After graduating from crutches, Boutte made his way around the LSU campus on a motor scooter. As the depression set in, so did embarrassment.

This once-promising receiver fell off his scooter one of the first times he was making his way around campus.

“I was a little hurt at first,” Boutte said. “Depressed, just trying to figure out how to get through everything, not being able to walk. Now crutches. Now, scooter, falling off the scooter, trying to get used to the change.”

The next season, Brian Kelly took over at LSU. Despite the surgeries and Boutte’s diminished speed, the program cleared him for offseason activities in June after holding him out in the spring.

Joseph knew it was wrong.

“They brought him back too early. That’s not knowing the kids. If you know, Kayshon, he’s gonna tell you, ‘I’m good, coach, I’m ready to go,’” Joseph said. “But as a coach, you gotta know the kid and say, ‘Ah, he’s not good. He’s not moving right.’ But if you didn’t recruit him, you don’t know the way he moved in high school. You don’t know how he moved when he first got (to LSU).

“When they were talking about playing him, I said, ‘This is too early. He’s gonna end up damaging the ankle again.’”

It was difficult for Joseph to watch Boutte play in his final season at LSU. He shuddered when he saw him run at the NFL Combine.

As a senior in high school, Boutte ran a 4.37 40-yard dash. At the Combine, Boutte ran a 4.50, and his draft stock plummeted.

Newfound maturity
Boutte was 20 years old when the Patriots drafted him. Three years later, he's still one of the youngest players on the roster. After having success early, he needed to mature.

In 2024, he was arrested for underage gambling and fraud charges after placing bets on sporting events while at LSU. Charges were dropped when Boutte completed a gambling awareness program, and due to him not placing bets against himself or the team.

As a rookie, he caught two passes for 19 yards and was buried on the depth chart by Bill Belichick after failing to get his feet in bounds on a fourth-quarter pass in his first NFL game.

In his second NFL season, Boutte became openly frustrated with his lack of targets, revealing that he "demanded" to see more passes in a game against Houston.

Even from afar, Antoine could see Boutte's frustration.

"It pissed me off. Kayshon is near and dear to me," Antoine said. "I know how great of a person the kid is, and so people saw something that's in a totally different light."

Joseph was worried too. He visited Boutte during a game in Miami during his rookie season. He got the sense that the receiver wasn't gelling with Belichick and gave him a pep talk. Joseph told him to keep his head up and not to do anything that would make him look bad with the Patriots staff.

"It looked like Belichick really didn't care for him too much," Joseph said. "I think (Mike) Vrabel runs a different ship. I think it's a better culture, better atmosphere. And it fits him."

The low points have made this season sweeter for Boutte and those who have always been in his corner. After realizing he needed to grow up, that's happened, on the field and at home.

His maturation has been one of the biggest storylines of the Patriots' 2025 season.

This year, he looks like that five-star recruit. Before suffering a hamstring injury in Week 9, Boutte was on pace to surpass the 900-yard receiving mark this season. He was second in the NFL in yards per reception (18.7) and tied for eighth in touchdown catches. The receiver returned to action last week in Cincinnati.

"I've watched so many people turn their backs on him. I've watched so many people forget about who this kid truly is," Antoine said. "And now he's humbled, and now he's hungry, and now he's back to the Kayshon I always knew."

Part of his growth came at home. The newfound maturity that's come from fatherhood has led to better results with the Patriots.

Four days after he played soccer with his son, Boutte was an in-game captain for the Patriots' matchup with the Browns. The receiver finished with 75 yards and a touchdown that day. He's proud of who he's become.

"You mature as life goes on. As much as you go through is as much as you're gonna grow, honestly," Boutte said. "I think just part of what I went through shaped me and who I am today."

T Marcus Bryant

Bryant Looking to Leap Into O-Line Picture

By Paul Perillo

When Marcus Bryant arrived on the campus of SMU back in the fall of 2020, he barely weighed 250 pounds. That's not nearly enough for a Division-I tackle let alone one with NFL aspirations. Five years later, Bryant tipped the scales at 320 and helped solidify the offensive line as the left tackle at Missouri.

The 6-7 native of Round Rock, Texas, was selected by New England in the seventh round, 220th overall, and given his size and attributes he has every opportunity to carve out a role for himself along the Patriots front.

Given his size as a youngster in Texas, Bryant fancied himself as a basketball player. But as he developed, things quickly turned to the gridiron, and he's been a fixture up front ever since.

"Every offensive lineman's first love is basketball," said Missouri offensive line coach Brandon Jones with a laugh. "But like most of them, Marcus started to grow out instead of just growing up and he eventually made the switch. When he started at SMU, he was only around 245-250. I was really impressed with his ability to gain the weight and sustain the weight, and when he came to us this year, he was really impressive."

Bryant was at SMU for four seasons, starting 29 of the 42 games he played for the Mustangs. He opted to transfer to Missouri for his final season because he wanted the opportunity to perform on a larger stage in the SEC. With an eye toward getting on the NFL's radar, Bryant entered the Tigers program as the starter at left tackle despite the presence of Armand Membou, the right tackle who was chosen seventh overall by the Jets.

"He represented kind of a missing piece for us at the time," Jones said. "As the season went on, he just improved and got better and better each week. The caliber of defensive linemen we faced each week in the SEC prepared him for the next level, and now he'll have a chance to prove he belongs."

Despite the presence of Membou, who Jones believes was more than capable of switching sides to man the left tackle spot, Bryant served as a plug-and-play option in his lone season at Missouri. Because the Tigers were set to add a new left guard as well, Jones felt pairing Bryant with the newcomer made the most sense.

He was not disappointed. Bryant immediately added a level to stability to the left side in the Tigers run-heavy attack. And his ability to work at his craft was something that really stood out to the staff.

"Our big concern was his run blocking, and I do think that improved significantly," Jones said. "The style we are at Missouri is pretty much run first. The big challenge was working on his flexibility, and he's done that. He's been doing some yoga, and I thought he was a completely different person at his pro day as a result of that work. He was running better and was much more fluid. He will just continue to develop. His best football is ahead of him."

Like Patriots first-round pick Will Campbell, Bryant spent time working at OL Masterminds, clinics designed to further train and develop offensive linemen. Founded by Duke Manyweather, an expert in the field with more than a decade of experience training offensive linemen, OL Masterminds provides an opportunity for young players to work on techniques to enhance their ability.

"Marcus was a bit star-struck at O-Line Masterminds in the summer," Jones said. "He was around some really talented players like [Kansas City's] Creed Humphrey and Trey Smith and really enjoyed the experience. It was basically a two-day clinic of offensive line play and learning how he can improve. He did a lot of training for the Combine with Duke Manyweather. I believe he got a lot out of that work and he's ready."

It's no secret that the Patriots offensive line was a trouble spot in 2024. With that in mind, the team drafted three – Campbell, Bryant and Georgia center Jared Wilson (fourth round) – and signed veteran right tackle Morgan Moses. The message those moves sent is clear – jobs are available to be won.

As a seventh-round pick, Bryant isn't likely to find himself in the mix for a starting job at the outset, but he will get every opportunity to find a role as a backup swing tackle with a strong camp.

"He's pretty unique," Jones concluded. "He has some similarities with [Miami second-year tackle] Patrick Paul. His point of emphasis will be improving his run blocking, but he seldom gets beaten in pass protection.

"He has to continue to stay the course. He's motivated and hungry. He won't waste this opportunity."

Missouri Tigers ON SI

Marcus Bryant is Beginning to Find his Role on the Mizzou Offensive Line

By Michael Stamps

The Missouri Tigers had a giant question mark at left tackle after Javon Foster left for the NFL. During the spring window of the transfer portal, the Tigers brought in former SMU offensive tackle Marcus Bryant. The former Mustang has years of proven experience at left tackle and appears to be ready for the step up in SEC play.

When Bryant entered the transfer portal, he was looking for a school where he felt needed. The coaching staff made it clear that Bryant would be an important part of the offense in whatever role he ends up playing. That was the main reason he ended up choosing the Tigers.

"I wanted to be in a program, it was kinda like a puzzle piece, somewhere that really needed me, not really in a rebuild type of deal," Bryant said in a press conference Friday. "So that's when Mizzou hit me up and I came down here and we visited. They were emphasizing how I'm the puzzle piece to the to the puzzle so that's why I chose to Missouri."

Bryant clearly has the talent to play with the Tigers, starting 29 games over four years with the Mustangs. That being said, jumping right into a new team, especially coming off a season like the Tigers had previously, can prove to be challenging. Bryant is starting to fit in with the Tigers offensive line unit.

"I just want to be the best left tackle in the country. That's what I wanted to do and really display on a bigger level. So that's why I felt like this is the right piece for me."

No one doubts that Bryant can prove himself, but he also has to fit into the Tigers scheme and play to the offenses strengths. He has some experience with a similar scheme from his younger years of playing.

"We run a lot of outside zone and definitely pass protection. I know coach Drink(witz) and my old head coach, they really have the same style."

The outside zone scheme and play itself leads to a outside run. That becomes the offensive tackles job to make sure the hole is there for whichever running back is in. It also requires an extreme amount of athleticism, especially for a larger person. That precisely becomes the selling point for Bryant.

Bryant stands at a whopping 6-foot-8. 318-pounds. He is exceptionally huge, even for an offensive tackle. That is his biggest strength, and to say Bryant knows how to use it is an understatement. According to Bryant, no one is moving through him, ever. Want to guess how many people can run through Bryant.

"Not a lot," Bryant said. "I had a hard time just sitting down on it, but just running straight through me, I don't think it's gonna work."

Not only is Bryant learning the scheme, but the offensive line as a whole is starting to gel together. They lost two key pieces in both Foster and Xavier Delgado and learning how to play together, as well as communicate, will take some time. It does seem as if they are beginning to come together as one group when it comes to their togetherness.

"It's going really good. We get better each day. Our meetings are fun are funny and all that. So I feel like our chemistry is really there," Bryant said.

When it comes to how they will begin to come together, reps and good execution. as well as small details appear to be the key. It may have started off as a challenge at first, but this far into fall camp, things seem to have improved.

"We're really emphasizing on details. You're not gonna be perfect every play, but you just got to try to get all five guys to do their job at the same time," Bryant said.

It wasn't as good as it seems to start out, with Bryant struggling the first couple of days. He might be fitting in now, but it certainly was not that way at the very beginning.

The first couple of days, it was kind of a struggle because I hadn't played in so long and then everything is so much faster and having to adjust each day, it really just helped me speed up my game, speed up my steps and really tune into my detail," Bryant said.

Bryants progression throughout fall camp has been postitive and all signs point to him securing the day-one starting left tackle spot. He might be facing some competition from JUCO recruit Jayven Richardson, who appears to be the current LT. Unless he struggles the last couple days of fall camp, expect to see a ready Marcus Bryant at left tackle against the Murray State Racers.

OL Will Campbell

The Athletic

Patriots rookie Will Campbell is a symbol of team's promise: 'He's got that it factor'

By Chad Graff

MONROE, La. — The drive into the neighborhood is lined with big oak trees. If your truck is big enough, a straggling branch might knock against your windshield.

The house is the second on the right. There's a Patriots logo on the front door. Can't miss it. It used to be an LSU sign. Before that, there was a flag for the local high school.

The directions are simple. They lead to the childhood home of Will Campbell, the left tackle the New England Patriots drafted in April with the hope that he'd keep Drake Maye's blind side safe for the next decade or so. If all goes according to plan, he'll be one of the most important players for one of the NFL's most successful franchises.

But here, he's just Will. Said with a Southern drawl, his name has two syllables. He's a big, affable, soft-spoken kid.

His youth football photos are still on the refrigerator inside. There's a magnet with the Patriots' 2025 schedule. The family has mentally circled a few games as potential road trips. It's fun for them to see a new part of the country after a lifetime near the bayou. Games in Foxboro are a chance to check on Will and make sure he's not too homesick as he adjusts to life outside Louisiana.

His dad will make a pot of gumbo before they leave. They're trying to find some crock-pot recipes that Will can put together as he preps for his first real winter. Something warm to come home to after a day of football practice in the cold.

In Will's childhood bedroom, there's a stuffed duck, the first he ever got hunting. A couple of buck heads hang on the wall. There's also the usual assortment of memorabilia from life as a major high school recruit and an All-American college career.

It's a Friday in October, and the weather is finally starting to break here. It feels like football. Up the road, the high school band is practicing, and one can hear the tubas a mile away. Buses are being loaded for an away game.

There are a lot of memories over there for the Campbells. But it's time for a tour of the town that'll have us heading in the other direction.

The neighborhood is sandwiched between the Ouachita River in one direction and Bayou Desiard in the other. On the way out, you pass Will's grandma's house. She's 98. A few doors down are Will's aunt and uncle. They can all walk to church on Sundays.

At the stoplight, Will's father, Brian, waves at another car from the cab of his white truck. It's his mom, who is headed out to run errands.

We pick up Will's mom, Holly, for her lunch break. The restaurant of choice has a nice, perched deck overlooking the bayou. Crawfish dip, gumbo and barbecue shrimp.

Stories are shared and photos swapped. There's one image of a young Will, maybe 4 years old, in a jersey of the local high school. The Neville Tigers. Will's grandparents went there. Brian and Holly, too: class of 1993. Brian played offensive tackle. Holly was a cheerleader. She was on the homecoming court.

The Campbells' roots run deep here. Patrons get seated at the next table, and, of course, Brian and Holly know them. Hugs are exchanged. They ask about Will. Everyone is curious how he's doing way up in New England.

This is the first time Will has lived outside the state. He left his truck behind, still parked in his parents' driveway, and went north to try to protect the franchise quarterback, the player tasked with returning the Patriots to greatness. In New England, he's Will Campbell, left tackle out of LSU, the No. 4 NFL Draft pick, an embodiment of the promise and potential that surrounds an upstart team.

But to get to know Will, you need to know the people and the place that raised him.

Will Campbell played four years of varsity football at Neville High in Monroe, La.Courtesy of the Campbell family
H. Mickel Sports looks and feels like a throwback to a time before Amazon, when the local sporting goods store outfitted all the youth athletes in town. There's a big sign out front promoting a sale on football cleats.

It's the kind of place where kids can still come in, pick out a new baseball glove or a pair of sneakers, and leave without paying. A bill will be sent to the family's house. There are perks to knowing everyone in town.

Holly's family has run the store since it opened in 1937.

It's on the same road as the high school, maybe a mile from the football stadium. Brian and Holly still go to every game, even though both of their boys have graduated. They use the season tickets that have been in the family for some 50 years, a couple of seats right behind the home bench. It's hard to keep track of exactly how many years, as they get passed down from generation to generation.

The football stadium is fit for a small college. Signs around the field commemorate the 12 state championship teams that called this place home. There's a brick patio with a roof and grills behind one end zone. The premium seats. Season tickets there go for $2,500. They're currently sold out.

The locker room at the school is pristine. The weight room is lined with gold and black squat racks. The dumbbells have the school logo on the side.

Once, coaches were told Will had a strained back and might need a few days off. When head coach Mike Collins went to the weight room that morning, Will was doing squats. He "had that sumbitch loaded up like nobody's business. And I thought, huh, that's the guy with back problems? But that's him," Collins said.

Will played football, basketball and baseball growing up. The family got in the habit of bringing his birth certificate to games after repeated complaints from other parents. But the goal was always to play football at Neville, then LSU.

Thanks to an injury in the opener of Will's freshman season, the varsity team needed him earlier than expected. Coaches called Brian and Holly to make sure it was OK to use their 14-year-old on the varsity squad.

On his first play, Will pulled across the line and came upon a charging linebacker. Will's knees buckled in the collision.

"But he didn't go down, and he got his feet back under him and moved the guy out of the hole," Brian said. "And I was like, 'OK, I guess he's gonna be all right.'"

Word of the freshman offensive tackle playing for a powerhouse school spread across the state. When the family was on vacation in Colorado the next summer, LSU called. The Tigers wanted Will to come to a camp in Baton Rouge.

The family ended its vacation two days early and made the three-hour trip down. They didn't know what to expect. Will is the older of two boys. When Brian was recruited and played for East Texas A&M, camps like this didn't exist.

On his first rep, Will lined up against a junior college transfer.

"That didn't go good," Brian said.

On the next, he went against a high school senior.

"That didn't go good either," Brian said.

After the camp, then-LSU coach Ed Orgeron pulled Will aside. He told Will that the school had planned on offering him a scholarship that evening, but practice went so poorly that there would be no offer that day. Orgeron was stern. Go back to Monroe, work on your craft and come back when you're ready.

Tears in his eyes, Will walked back to Brian's truck. They drove back to Monroe in silence. Finally, as they approached home, Will spoke up.

"We're going back," Will told his dad.

"I'm sure everyone you talk to is going to tell you about that Carencro game his senior year," said Neville strength coach Eric Herndon. He was right.

In this town of some 47,000, that game from the fall of 2021 is still talked about.

Senior year, on the road, in the playoffs. Will was out with a hip-flexor injury. Neville was struggling. The offense was in a funk. The Tigers were losing 8-6 at halftime.

Quietly, Will left the sideline and got his helmet and shoulder pads off the bus. He got dressed under the bleachers. He told the coaches he was going in the game, injury be damned. Neville came back in the second half and won 19-15.

"He's got that it factor," Collins said. "No one can tell you what it is, but he's got it."

Off the field, teachers praised Will. They told his coaches how nice he was. Those coaches saw the other side of Will, though — what would happen to him once he strapped on his helmet. There were some flags thrown against him along the way for, shall we say, playing to the echo of the whistle.

"There was more than one time I wanted to put my foot in his rear end for that thing," said Mickey McCarty, Will's first coach at Neville. "But that's his drive and attitude. And you need some nastiness in an offensive lineman."

One of the most decorated offensive linemen LSU has produced, Will Campbell started in all three of his seasons in Baton Rouge and earned consensus All-America honors as a junior in 2024.Courtesy of the Campbell family
A tragedy rocked the close-knit community on Jan. 5, 2024. Will's brother Thomas and cousin Tarver Braddock, who grew up several blocks away, were at a hunting camp with some friends when a fire spilled into their cabin. Tarver didn't make it out. He was 16 years old.

Tarver played football and baseball and was a member of the student council. He was a funny kid who always made Will laugh. The two of them had to be separated at church so they'd keep quiet.

Tarver loved watching Will play. He wore his jersey and went to LSU games. He would've loved watching Will now, a rising star in the NFL. He would've been with Will in the green room in Green Bay on the first night of the 2025 NFL Draft, awaiting news of which team would pick Will, probably cracking jokes and keeping things light.

Amid the tragedy, Tarver's family started a foundation in his name. The goal is random acts of kindness, surprise gifts for strangers in need. The family has already given gifts to strangers they've come across in the Boston area, including a waiter they met at a restaurant, while visiting Will.

Will is involved with the foundation, too. A week before the draft, the foundation held a pickleball fundraiser. Will lugged ice chests around and took photos with fans. He wanted to make sure everyone was having a good time.

Tarver's memory lives on through the foundation, as it does with Will as he chases his NFL dream.

On draft night, when the Patriots chose Will as a key part of this rebuild, he had a picture of Tarver in his suit pocket.

Campbell, whose close cousin died in a fire last year, has helped lift the Tarver Braddock Foundation.
The Ouachita River runs down the western border of Monroe. Along it are a few museums that recall the town's creation. There's a shop with trinkets from Delta Air Lines planes commemorating the company's founding here, initially as crop dusters. There's a Coca-Cola museum that marks the first bottler of the soft drink moving to Monroe and setting up shop. There's a Bible museum next door, which houses an original 1611 King James version.

Beyond that, there's football. At one busy intersection in town, there's a billboard displaying Neville's schedule.

Former All-Pro offensive tackle Andrew Whitworth grew up on the other side of the river in West Monroe. He was a role model for Will.

“Here in the 318 area code,” Herndon said, “it’s faith, family and football.”

The on-field stuff was never hard for Will. He was a five-star recruit. An All-American in college. There was never an aha moment where everything flipped. He was always just talented.

That’s what made the pre-draft process difficult. The scouting combine, for example, is a place for measurements and sprints in skimpy clothing. There’s no football to be played.

So while Campbell tested off the charts athletically, his arms were measured shorter than you’d like for an offensive tackle. It became a massive talking point. People called him “T-Rex arms.”

“And that just drives him even more,” McCarty said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s writing T-Rex on his tape before games just as a reminder to give it to ’em.”

On the left, a sign for H. Mickel Sports touting a sale on football and soccer cleats. On the right, a billboard in Monroe, La., showing Neville High's 2025 football schedule.
That’s all in the past now. It’s easy to put that behind you when you play the way Will has. He has allowed just one sack in the last six games and only two all season, while playing the most important position on the offensive line.

Back in Monroe, interest in the Patriots has multiplied now that a local boy is an important part of the team. The party store just up the road has an aisle full of Patriots-themed plates, cups, napkins, and decorations.

We drop Holly off at the sporting goods store, and the tour ends back at the Campbells’ house. Will’s truck sits underneath a basketball hoop that doesn’t get used much anymore.

There’s talk of what’s to come for Will, a 21-year-old rookie trying to navigate life in a new city while protecting the league’s most exciting young quarterback. Life in the NFL can be lonely, but his adjustment is going well, they say. Will has made a habit of heading over to Maye’s place for dinner. For a hunter from the South, he can’t get over how many turkeys there are just walking around greater Foxboro.

Before bidding farewell, iced tea is offered, and the Patriots’ schedule on the fridge is studied some more. Some big games loom, and maybe, if things break right, a trip to the playoffs. It’s been a whirlwind year for the whole family, from watching Will get picked apart due to the length of his arms to beginning his first season as a pro in a faraway place.

But the point is made as they contemplate various road trips to see Will: There’s a lot to look forward to.

MASS LIVE

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 it’s 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 ever 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.

WBZ NEWS

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 is 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."

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

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 ⅝-33 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.

The Boston Globe

New Patriot Will Campbell arrives in Foxborough and can’t wait to get started: ‘It’s everything I could ever ask for.’

By Christopher Price

FOXBOROUGH — Last fall, during his final season at LSU, Will Campbell had a meeting with Patriots executive vice president of player personnel Eliot Wolf. The offensive tackle had one request: Get me to New England.

Wolf and the rest of the Patriots’ brain trust granted Campbell his wish on Thursday night, making him the No. 4 overall pick in the NFL Draft. On Friday afternoon, Campbell explained why he wanted to play for the Patriots so badly.

“The biggest thing for me was I wanted to play for an organization that had history,” he said as he faced the six Super Bowl banners above the south end zone at Gillette Stadium. “That cared. [One] that wants to win. That’s the thing for me.”

There’s a new head coach and a different coaching staff than when Campbell first approached Wolf, but it appears that the changes have only reinvigorated the rookie’s hope of being part of the franchise. He used the phrase “super excited” five times in his 13-plus-minute session with the media.

“I want to come in and I want to win. And I want to do whatever it takes to help the team win,” Campbell added. “Drake [Maye] is a heck of a player. I’m super excited to build our relationship. Coach [Mike] Vrabel is a guy that I want to play for.”

That upbeat feeling apparently was infectious for the franchise, and for Vrabel in particular. The coach praised Campbell several times Thursday night shortly after the pick was made, confirming a story that he lined up opposite Campbell during a pre-draft meeting in Louisiana with a blocking pad to get a feel for what Campbell might bring to the next level.

On Friday, Campbell talked more about going head to head with his new coach, and the meeting that Vrabel pointed to as the one that clinched the decision to draft Campbell.

“For me, it was just coming out there and giving them everything that they flew down there to get,” Campbell said. “Showing how intense I was. How coachable I can be. And just really having all eyes on what they wanted to see.

“Whatever they wanted to see, I was willing to do, no matter what it was. And that’s something that I just wanted them to know, because I’m going to do whatever they ask me to do to help this team win in any way that I can.”

Throughout the pre-draft process, Campbell was dogged by criticism that his arm length was just under the 33-inch industry standard for left tackles, something that could portend an eventual move to guard in the NFL. But arm length wasn’t something that seemed to bother Vrabel and Co. On Thursday, Vrabel said he expects Campbell to compete for the starting left tackle job.

“It’s a pretty cool opportunity to have,” said Campbell, who anticipates being able to wear No. 66. “I’m just super thankful for them giving me this opportunity [and] believing in me. I’m super excited for what the future holds here, and I really just can’t wait to get back out here after today and get back to work.”

If he remains at left tackle, Campbell will serve as one one of the chief protectors of Maye, a quarterback who was often forced to improvise last season because of a poor offensive line. Campbell, who had a chance to connect with Maye on a pre-draft visit to Foxborough, loves the idea.

“That’s my quarterback,” Campbell said. “I’m just super excited to continue to build the relationship with him, get to know each other as people. [It’s] something I’m looking forward to. I’m a quarterback guy.

“He met my family, so that was pretty cool. We just talked for a little bit,” Campbell added about his first meeting with Maye. “We had stuff to do. It was short and sweet, but you know that relationship will continue to grow.”

In the end, the 21-year-old Campbell, who was accompanied to the press conference by his family, sounds like someone excited to get started on the next phase of his career.

“This is the organization, you know, the proof is in the pudding with this place,” Campbell said, again looking up at the championship banners. “And that’s something that I want to be a part of. So for me to be able to represent this organization [and] wear that logo on the side of my helmet and on the front of my jersey, it’s everything I could ever ask for.”

LB K’Lavon Chaisson

BOSTON.COM

Amid setbacks and tragedy, K'Lavon Chaisson's road has led him to Super Bowl LX

By Conor Ryan

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Jon Kay remembers the first time he saw K'Lavon Chaisson out on the gridiron.

Even as a ninth grader, the dynamic pass-rusher caught the eye of Kay and his coaches at North Shore Senior High School in Houston. Beyond his knack for slipping past offensive linemen with his 0-to-60 acceleration, Chaisson's ties to the Houston football community made it evident to Kay that the freshman had a bright future ahead of him.

"His dad was a hell of a player down here in the Houston area, and then at Baylor. So we knew of him when he came over," Kay told Boston.com. "But he certainly passed the eye test, even though he was young."

It can be easy to paint an athletic edge rusher like Chaisson with a broad brush — with the 26-year-old former first-round pick emerging as a heat-seeking missile on New England's defense in 2025.

But as Kay was quick to note, there's a lot more to Chaisson than meets the eye.

The explosive swim moves and thumping hits are easy to glean when looking over his tape. But it's Chiasson's inner drive — one that had been tested countless times over in his football journey — that still resonates with his former high-school coach.

It's a drive that — through countless trials — now has him on the brink of football immortality.

"I think K'Lavon — and those who really know where he's come from — this is probably the least amount of adversity he's ever had to come through, personally," Kay said of Chiasson's growth from potential first-round bust to game-changing talent. "I don't think he's any stranger to understanding how to kind of grab yourself by the bootstraps and get yourself right."

Upward growth … countered by grief

As imposing as Chiasson was as just a ninth-grader, football wasn't always in his plans.

He spent his entire sophomore season off the gridiron, choosing instead to pursue basketball on the AAU circuit. It was a venture that didn't last long

"There were a lot of things I just wanted to find out and just understand — what to do with my time going forward," Chaisson said. "So I thought, I can be a basketball star for sure, going to hoop.

"And then once you start playing 6-foot-7 guards — I think it was like Kelly Oubre and De'Aaron Fox — I started understanding, like, 'man, I might not get too far in this.'"

The pivot back to football was to be expected.

After all, football has always been rooted in Chiasson's family. His father, Kelvin, earned three all-district selections at Smiley High School in Houston as a dynamic linebacker, before going onto the collegiate level at Baylor.

K'Lavon served as a spitting image of his father on the gridiron, tormenting offensive linemen with his quick-twitch burst and high motor. But during K'Lavon's sophomore season, tragedy struck.

Kelvin Chaisson was shot and killed by his girlfriend in a domestic dispute. He was just 33 years old.

Amid the pain of losing his dad and football mentor, Chaisson found a renewed sense of purpose in following his father's footsteps.

"I just took a chance to get back on the football field and honor everything that I feel like my family has embraced in the sport," he said.

His growth was evident under Kay's watch, especially during his junior season.

Chaisson's imposing 6-foot-3-inch frame already made him a menace at the high-school level. But it was focus away from the gridiron that routinely gave him the edge against the elite talent found in the Lone Star State.

“You started seeing, even in high school — a focus on diet, a focus on nutrition, a focus on rest and things that a lot of kids his age — they were focused on girls and partying, you know,” Kay noted.

It didn’t take long for Chaisson’s stock to soar back on the football field.

The talented junior played a key role in leading North Shore to a Class 6A Division I state title — earning Defensive MVP honors against Austin Westlake after recording two sacks and forcing a fumble in an eventual overtime win at NRG Stadium.

By his senior year, he was a five-star recruit — eventually committing to LSU under head coach Ed Orgeron.

After starting as a true freshman against SEC competition, Chaisson’s sophomore year in Baton Rouge came to an abrupt end during the first game of the season, with Chaisson tearing his ACL, forcing him to use a medical redshirt.

Despite that sizable setback, Chaisson emerged as a dominant force on a 2019 LSU team that cemented itself as one of the greatest teams in college football history.

Awarded LSU’s No. 18 jersey — given annually to the Tigers player who best displays a selfless attitude and strong leadership qualities — Chaisson showed few signs of rust in his redshirt sophomore campaign.

By the end of the year, he was a national champion, First Team All-SEC honoree, and was poised to go in the first round of the 2020 NFL Draft.

Months later, he was selected 20th overall in the 2020 Draft by the Jaguars.

Amid stretches of setbacks and personal tragedies, Chiasson had finally achieved his dream of playing in the NFL.

It quickly turned into a nightmare.

Left rudderless
Despite his pedigree as a first-round pick, Chaisson struggled to put it together in Jacksonville.

Over his first four seasons in the NFL, he only generated 5.0 sacks and 23 tackles for a loss with the Jags — eventually serving as more of a situational pass-rusher in both 2022 and 2023.

Looking for a fresh start elsewhere, he signed with the Carolina Panthers in 2024 in hopes that he could rekindle his game as a devastating pass-rusher.

He never got the opportunity in Charlotte. After a so-so showing during preseason action, Chaisson was cut by the Panthers in early September.

For the first time in years, Chaisson wondered whether or not he’d have a fruitful career in football.

“My injury at LSU, between that and my release at Carolina, those have been probably like the main two,” Chaisson said of his greatest challenges faced on the football field. “I can say that … obviously truly helped me understand my commitment, my love for this game, and how bad I really want it, without knowing what the result was going to be.”

Chaisson found a lifeline out west — signing with the Las Vegas Raiders’ practice squad seven days after getting cut by Carolina. It was the second chance he needed, eventually earning a spot on the Raiders’ 53-man roster.

His baseline numbers (5.0 sacks in 15 games) in Vegas may not leap off the page. But four of those sacks came in his final six games of the 2024 season — showcasing some of the untapped potential still found in his game.

It was the type of finish that caught the eye of the Patriots, who were in the market for an athletic edge rusher with a chip on his shoulder.

When Chaisson finally put pen to paper on a one-year contract in New England, Patriots outside linebackers coach Mike Smith tried to mask his excitement.

“Watching him in free agency, I saw a kid that was very athletic,” Smith told Boston.com. “I saw a kid who plays hard. I saw him make two interceptions on screen plays — so he’s instinctive. And then you gotta sit there and look back

like, ‘Okay, what’s going on?’ I see guys that are first-round guys that don’t make it. Sometimes the stars gotta line up just right.”

Chaisson found his North Star in Foxborough.

Finding a home
Initially deemed as a depth option on the edge, Chaisson quickly dispelled the notion that was more of a value pick-up on Vrabel’s revamped defensive unit.

By the end of training camp, he had leapfrogged Keion White and earned a starting role alongside Harold Landry III.

Under Vrabel’s watch, a Patriots roster rife with cast-offs, injury reclamation projects, and former first-round “busts” found avenues to channel those former frustrations into tangible results.

“I think he does a great job with just instilling confidence in each and everybody on the team,” Chaisson said of Vrabel, adding: “He just kind of unlocks the things that we already have within us, man, and we get a chance to show it on the field.”

Chaisson — seemingly set to land on the NFL scrap heap in September 2024 — finally had his breakthrough in 2025.

In 16 regular-season games with New England, he posted a career-high 7.5 sacks to go along with 18 QB hits, 10 tackles for a loss, and two forced fumbles.

He’s been even better during New England’s run to Super Bowl LX — recording three sacks, nine QB hits, three tackles for a loss and a forced fumble in playoff wins over the Chargers, Texans, and Broncos.

Only one player in the NFL this postseason has generated more pressures than Chiasson (18).

Chiasson’s incessant motor and athleticism have been evident on a Vrabel-led team that routinely hones in on effort and finish as hallmarks of their bruising approach.

Smith believes Chaisson’s results are drawn from more than just his physical talents.

“My grandpa used to say all the time — ‘If it wasn’t for the weak-minded people in this world, we would never have the opportunity to be successful.’ Going back to KC and watching him – I remember seeing how hard he’d play,” Smith said. “I think that’s missing these days, guys that truly play hard. I mean, it’s unbelievable to say that, right? But play hard and play violent.

“I felt like I watched KC every year in free agency. I used to tell him, when he first got here — I saw some flashes of him just busting people up. I was just like, man, he’s starting to figure that part out. I’ve got goosebumps just thinking about that. But that’s what I want. I want guys that are talented, physical, violent, play hard, and plays like football means something to them. I think that’s what sums up KC.”

A dream fulfilled
A month before a contract offer from the Patriots was handed out, Chaisson was in Mexico as Super Bowl LIX played out between the Eagles and Chiefs.

It remained to be seen where he’d end up in free agency — let alone how much run he’d get with a new club. But Chaisson believed that his time on football’s highest stage was coming.

“I have a video of my notes from two years ago,” Chaisson said Tuesday. “Me and my girl were out of town. We were watching the Super Bowl while we were in Mexico. But I kind of recorded just telling myself, ‘We aren’t supposed to be here. Like, we’re supposed to be at the big one.

“I just knew and understood that I had a bigger calling than where I was at. It was only a matter of time. I just put it all in God’s plan. I knew exactly where I belonged.”

Little has gone according to plan for Chaisson in his journey that has taken him from the basketball courts of Houston to Levi’s Stadium on Sunday night.

But a few days away from the most important game of his life, Chiasson’s road has led him exactly to where he wants to be.

“I think me and Robert Spillane were saying this, like how your life can literally change in one year just like that, man,” Chaisson said. “But it’s just continuously staying focused and staying dedicated and committed to your grind.

“The discipline that you show throughout the journey is everything and more. You’re going to look up one day, and you’re just going to be able to overview everything that you’ve been through, throughout this game. You’ll be proud. And as long as you continuously did what you were supposed to do throughout the journey — man, everything will pan out.”

Veteran pass rusher comes to Patriots planning to build off career year

By Mark Daniels

K’Lavon Chaisson always believed in himself – even when the production wasn’t what he expected.

That’s why last season was so important to this veteran pass rusher.

In 2020, Chaisson was a first-round pick, selected 20th overall, by the Jacksonville Jaguars. Over his first four seasons, the LSU product finished with five sacks in his first four seasons. That led him to Las Vegas in 2024.

Last season, despite a slow start, Chaisson finally showed his potential. In the final six games, he finished with a career-high five sacks. The outburst of production led him to sign a 1-year, $5 million deal with the Patriots this offseason.

“Man, just getting the opportunity to produce and play,” Chaisson said of his performance last season. “I think that was just kind of the biggest thing that I was excited about and looking forward to being in that position, so I’m thankful. And being a part of a prestigious league that’s the NFL, you have to be able to show out and take advantage of those opportunities regardless of how the season is going.

“So, I knew that each opportunity I got, I had to take it for granted. I’m super thankful that I got a chance to do that in Vegas and now I’m in the perfect spot here.”

The Patriots brought Chaisson in, where he reunites with his former Jaguars head coach Doug Marrone, to help their pass rush. Last year, the Patriots finished last in the NFL in sacks (28). The leading pass rushers in New England were Keion White and Deatrich Wise. Both finished with five sacks – the same amount Chaisson totaled in the final six games last season.

Chaisson entered the NFL as a raw, but athletic prospect with a high upside. He didn’t play varsity football in high school until his senior year. He only played two seasons at LSU due to a torn ACL during his sophomore season. After chasing his NFL dream, he said the success he had last season – after starting the season on the Raiders practice squad – showed him that he could do it.

“I do think it’s a great confidence establishment, for sure. That you’re able to contribute to this league and perform at a high level,” Chaisson said. “Just how I originally thought I’d be able to contribute to this league. It’s a great chance to be a part of and something I don’t take for granted.”

Chaisson said that every year he not only “progressed and matured” but tried to build off different teachings from his different coaches. He also had help from teammates. Chaisson also credited playing with 4-time Pro Bowler Maxx Crosby for helping him last season.

He said he plans on learning from new teammate Harold Landry this year.

“Let’s not forget the tremendous talent that Maxx Crosby is on the other side as well. I think that was a tremendous boost,” Chaisson said. “Now, getting a chance to rush with Harold, who’s had multiple double-digit sack seasons in the NFL. That’s not something that is easy or you take for granted.”

K’Lavon Chaisson wants to bring ‘relentlessness’ to Patriots defense

By Bernd Buchmasser

As part of their efforts to revitalize a pass rush that fell short of expectations in 2024, the New England Patriots decided to open the checkbook this offseason. While a significant portion of the money went to Milton Williams and Harold Landry, the team also acquired K’Lavon Chaisson via a one-year, $3 million pact.

While less of a proven commodity than the others — despite being a former first-round draft pick — Chaisson will get an opportunity to prove himself as an impact player in New England. How does he want to do that?

By being a tone-setter and personifying what the Patriots want to do on the defensive side of the ball. The 25-year-old said so when asked about his play style during a press conference at Gillette Stadium on Tuesday.

“Just relentless — that’s the ultimate idea that I feel I want to portray, and the Patriots want to portray, really,” he said. “Non-stop, four quarters; if it takes a fifth quarter, we take it there. But it’s something that I embody. Just to be able to go every chance I get, just to be able to go non-stop.

“As a pass rusher you have an understanding that as much as you don’t want to settle, it takes one out of 60 plays to be a dominant pass rusher in this league. You get that going for 17 games, that’s a good setting that your team would be in.”

His pass rushing prowess is why Chaisson was picked 20th overall by the Jacksonville Jaguars in the 2020 NFL Draft. However, he never lived up to his draft status as a Jaguar: in 59 games over four seasons, he only registered five total sacks and was eventually not retained as a free agent in 2024.

Chaisson signed with the Carolina Panthers but was let go again after training camp, eventually ending up on the Las Vegas Raiders’ practice squad. From there, he went on to have the best season of his career: serving as a designated pass rush opposite Pro Bowler Maxx Crosby, he registered five sacks and a forced fumble.

Chaisson credited Crosby’s presence as making things easier for him, but pointed toward new teammate Harold Landry potentially doing the same in New England. Regardless of circumstance, however, he too felt like his growth as a player contributed to his positive development as a Raider.

“The approach is obviously gradually progressed and kind of matured as the time went and you got a chance to be and see different things, and to be a part of different teams and coaches,” he explained. “I just kind of take every nugget that I got each year and just put it into my game.”

WR Efton Chism III

Fueled by goals: Efton Chism III’s ‘superpower’ driving his Patriots dream

By Mark Daniels

FOXBOROUGH – The alarm clock sounds at 5 a.m. For Efton Chism III, there’s no time to be wasted.

As the son of a Marine Corps veteran and a schoolteacher, he understands the importance of a strong regimen. It’s why he rises early. It’s why he walks into Gillette Stadium at 5:50 a.m. on most mornings.

Chism enters the building with veteran receiver Mack Hollins and then makes his way to Patriots receiver coach Todd Downing's office. The rookie sits down with a notebook.

"He wants to sit there and watch me build the PowerPoint for the meeting that day," Downing said. "Just to get extra time or extra rep, the mental processing for the system."

Before taking a detailed series of notes, Chism grabs a pen and writes on the upper right corner of the page. It's here that he inscribes his goals. At Eastern Washington, he wrote four objectives: NFL. All-American, Walter Payton (Award). Legend.

After college, upon signing with the Patriots as an undrafted free agent, Chism updated his goals:

NFL. 53. Monroe. Legend.

Since the start of the season, Chism's goal has changed slightly.

"Right now, it says 46," Chism said.

That number represents the game-day roster. Teams historically dressed 46 players. With practice squad elevations, the rule changed to 48. Behind five receivers on the depth chart, Chism has been the odd man out this season.

This 23-year-old rookie has a history of overcoming expectations. Those who know him believe it's only a matter of time before he does the same in New England.

Efton Chism III
A young Efton Chism III, on the left, plays soccer with a friend.Courtesy of Efton Chism II

Chism's path
The athleticism was always there. The same went for his desire to play football.

For Efton Chism III, that dream had to wait.

Growing up in Monroe, Wash., his father, Efton Chism II, had a plan. He and his best friend, Derek Strey — who starred at Eastern Washington and played briefly in the NFL — didn't start football until eighth grade, and they wanted Efton to follow the same path.

"Our moms would only let us play when we were in eighth grade. They didn't want us to get hurt," Chism II said. "They said, 'Hey, go chase the soccer ball around. Go work on hand-eye coordination, playing baseball, and all that stuff.' So honestly, that's what we did with Efton. And his uncle Derek agreed with that too, because it worked out well for him."

Chism excelled at soccer, baseball, basketball, and track and field. As he developed into an outstanding athlete, the family's schedule filled up quickly.

The kid never wanted a break. He didn't want to slow down. One team wasn't enough. He wanted to play on several. Coaches would fight for Chism to specialize in their spot, but that was never going to happen.

"He doesn't have an off button," Chism II said. "He just has something different. He saw his family work hard, but there was just something that if he had a goal and he wanted to be very competitive at an early age. Why do I want a break? I want to run from basketball practice over to this baseball game because I can."

Football was always the goal. He grew jealous of his friends who played before him in middle school. By playing different sports, however, Chism developed into a well-rounded athlete.

"I was so involved in other sports that it didn't really make it too hard, but I wanted to play bad," the Patriots receiver said.

By eighth grade, Chism had his chance and joined two local football teams. His already well-known athletic gifts were on display in the first game he played.

"He came out on a wheel route, first play of the game, one-handed catch," Chism II said. "The very first time he touched the ball was a 20-yard touchdown catch. And I was just standing there going, 'O.K., I guess this might work.'"

Former Monroe High School coach Michael Bumpus understands what it's like to come so close to achieving everything a person ever wanted.

A standout receiver for Washington State, he played in four games as an undrafted free agent for the Seattle Seahawks in 2008. He caught five passes for 48 yards and a touchdown. After getting cut a year later and spending time in the CFL and AFL, Bumpus turned his attention to helping young athletes as a trainer and coach.

They met in middle school, and the two grew close when Chism was in eighth grade. Throughout high school, Chism would ask him about what it takes to make it in the NFL.

"I had a cup of coffee in the league. I always went back and thought about the things that I didn't do," Bumpus said. "I was early, but I wasn't the earliest. I stayed late. I didn't stay the latest, and always felt that if maybe I did some of those things, I could have gotten to a second contract."

The coach explained that the worst feeling he ever had was not being prepared. Chism took that to heart. The teenager was intrinsically motivated. He'd text Bumpus after most training sessions and games, asking what he could do better and what the focus would be the next time they got together.

After starting as a freshman, Chism finished his high school career with 166 catches for 2,581 yards. Parents would get mad at Bumpus for not spreading the ball around.

He'd tell them to come to practice. Come and watch Chism work and attack every drill. Watch him and then try to say their son deserves more. And then he'd tell them: "He's gonna make it to the NFL," Bumpus said. "And they'd call me crazy."

When they worked out, Bumpus pushed Chism harder than most. He wanted to see if he would break. It never happened. Chism kept pushing. He did the same this offseason after the receiver fulfilled one notebook goal by becoming an All-American in his last two seasons at Eastern Washington.

A 5-foot-10 receiver, Chism wasn't going to make it in the NFL relying on his athleticism. He excelled at route running, understanding leverage, and catching everything near him.

"I told him, 'When you're tired, that's where cowardice comes out. That's where you don't make the play. And I never want you to feel like you're tired," Bumpus said. "I've never encountered a kid like this before, and I've trained kids who have made it to the NFL and who have played college ball, but that's just in his DNA, and that's his superpower."

That mindset helped him in college.

Chism arrived at Eastern Washington with a chip on his shoulder.

Throughout high school, he heard plenty about his size. The subject became tiring, but his family leaned into it. For all his production, local PAC-12 and most Mountain West schools shied away. State schools like Washington and Washington State never offered.

"Even trying to get recruited, everyone's told him that he's too small and he's not fast enough, I mean, you're dang right we talk about that," Chism II said. "Let's prove them all wrong. Let's let them know that I believe in myself and I can do this."

Even after a standout career at Eastern Washington, Chism heard the same concerns before going undrafted.

"Everywhere I go, someone's got something to say. High school, college, here," Chism said. "Outside noise, whatever it is, or just extra motivation I can bring on with me throughout the day. And I feel like that's always pushing me to kind of get that 1% better every day."

To do that, he needed to gain an advantage. In college, he figured out how.

Chism wasn't the best athlete on the team, so he wanted to be the most prepared. Each morning, he'd arrive at the facility, take a seat on head coach Aaron Best's couch, and talk. Then, he'd meet with his receivers coach, Jeff McDaniels, and offensive coordinator Jim Chapin.

“I was in there every day just kind of drawing things on the whiteboard,” Chism said. “Just trying to figure out new ways to do different things versus different people. I feel like it was just always chasing to be better.”

The early mornings turned into productive Saturdays. Chism finished his collegiate career by breaking NFL Pro Bowler Cooper Kupp single-season receptions record (120). His work ethic built his confidence. When he arrived at Gillette Stadium this offseason, it wasn’t long before Chism did the same.

He arrives at the facility early and leaves late.

“In camp, I wanted to get ahead on learning the new stuff and just kind of always being prepared,” Chism said. “I’m walking in the meeting room, at least I’ve already heard it once and, so now I’m hearing it two or three times before we put it as a whole. So that’s kind of how it started. And now it’s just kind of one of those things where I enjoy getting in there and just kind of figuring out new stuff and hearing things more than once.”

Chism’s goals
This offseason, before coming to New England, Chism was working out with Bumpus when his trainer, coach, and mentor gave him a harsh truth.

“I would tell him that you’re not supposed to make the team,” Bumpus said.

For Chism, the focus was to tap into his “superpower.” That’s his dedication, relentlessness, and ability to catch everything thrown his way. For those who know him, it wasn’t a surprise when he starred in the preseason with multiple highlights or made the Patriots’ 53-man roster.

He wants more.

To get on the Patriots’ game day roster, Chism will have to move past one of the receivers ahead of him: Stefon Diggs, Kayshon Boutte, Mack Hollins, DeMario Douglas or Kyle Williams.

Chism watched the Patriots’ first three games wearing street clothes, dreaming of donning his uniform and helmet. When he returned to Gillette Stadium, he did so bright and early, ready to learn and gain an advantage on his peers. Sometimes, those early morning lessons turn into late-night study sessions.

Last week, Bumpus texted Chism at 11 p.m. Eastern time. He received a response three hours later. It was a video of Chism studying.

He said five words: “Preparing like I’m a starter.”

Efton Chism III doesn’t know any other way.

The kid from Monroe always stayed focused and always surpassed expectations. And he never has to look far. All Chism needs to do is stare down at the top right corner of his notebook.

“I’ve always kind of been big into that, but I didn’t really start until halfway through college,” Chism said. “I was like, ‘I’m just going to write down my goals at the top of my notebook every day. No matter what’s going on, new notebook, whatever, I’m always in the top right corner writing all my goals. Boom, boom, boom. For the day, for the year, for whatever kind of just whatever is going on. And then just kind of kept rolling from there.”

This offseason, he wrote ‘NFL’ because he didn’t feel like he made it. He wrote 53 to visualize making the roster and updated it to 46.

He wrote ‘Monroe’ to carry his hometown with him. And Legend?

Because that’s what he wants to be.

CB Carlton Davis III

The Athletic

Lions' Carlton Davis on his free agency approach: 'This time, I ain't gonna settle for less'

By Michael Silver

Three years ago, Carlton Davis blinked. Set to enter free agency as one of the top cornerbacks on the market, Davis preemptively re-signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, choosing a familiar and secure setting and chasing another Super Bowl ring — and possibly leaving money on the table.

Davis, since traded to the Detroit Lions and once again headed for free agency, is taking a much different approach this time around. As he prepares for the start of the "legal tampering" period, with players allowed to agree to new deals as early as noon ET on Monday, Davis fully expects to relocate, and he insists he won't sign until the price is right.

"I feel like last time, I just kind of panicked," Davis told The Athletic on Saturday. "I was younger, and my mindset was, 'I need to go ahead and just choose.' At the time, the thinking was, 'This is the offer, and the more you wait, the more that number's gonna go down.' Yeah, that can happen, but teams know your value, and right now I'm playing my best football.

"This time, I ain't gonna settle for less."

Davis, 28, doesn't believe the Lions will make an aggressive effort to bring him back. He had a productive 2024 season in Detroit, giving up a completion rate of 55.3 percent and a passer rating of 77.0 while intercepting two passes before suffering a season-ending broken jaw in a mid-December defeat to the Buffalo Bills. The Lions spent their top two draft picks last spring on cornerbacks Terrion Arnold and Ennis Rakestraw Jr. and are reportedly seeking a veteran cornerback in the $12 million-per-year range.

Davis, having played out the three-year, $45-million contract he signed in 2022, is looking for more — much more. He said he wants to be paid like a "top 10 or top 15 cornerback"; according to the most recent salary figures, the Tennessee Titans' L'Jarius Sneed is the NFL's 10th-highest paid corner, with an annual average of $19.1 million.

The New York Jets — whose newly hired head coach, Aaron Glenn, was the Lions' defensive coordinator last season — and New England Patriots are believed to be among the teams who'll make a strong push for Davis before the start of the league year, which officially begins Wednesday at 4 p.m. ET. Charvarius Ward (San Francisco 49ers) and Byron Murphy Jr. (Minnesota Vikings) are the other top cornerbacks on the market.

It's easy to understand why the Jets and Patriots might be interested in Davis. Both teams recently hired head coaches (Glenn and Mike Vrabel) who had previous stints with those respective franchises as star defenders known for their physicality.

Davis, whose nickname is "C-Murda," is a hard-nosed player who has become progressively better as a run defender since the Bucs made him a second-round draft choice and immediate starter in 2018. The 6-1, 206-pounder had 56 tackles and two fumble recoveries in 13 games last season before breaking his jaw while wrapping up Bills running back Ray Davis.

"There are very few corners in the NFL — you can probably name five — who have the same presence in the passing game and the running game," Carlton Davis said. "I bring aggression and coverage skills, and I've been displaying both for years.

"Guys who know ball understand the impact that I have. Teams know about me. They scheme around me. They're scared of me. They know what's up. I'm playing my best ball, and I'm gonna be even better this year."

Like many successful corners, Davis has a brash personality that he considers an essential part of his makeup. Yet his quest to get paid is driven more by business sensibilities than emotion. As he prepares for his eighth NFL season, having already captured a championship and been part of five playoff teams, Davis sees a fertile market and fully intends to capitalize on his freedom.

“It’s not, ‘I need the money,’” Davis said. “I want to be happy. I’ve won a Super Bowl and I’ve already made a lot of money. If it was to end right now, I wouldn’t be disappointed. I would not be mad at all.

“But at this point of my career, I’m in my prime. The receiver market is going up, and the cornerback market is going up — and it’s going to keep going up in years to come. The (salary) cap is going up. The NFL TV deals are going to keep going up. There’s more than enough money for them to pay you what you’re worth.

“For me, playing at this high level, to take less than I’m worth, I’d be doing myself a disservice and my family a disservice. I’m not doing that this time.”

WR Stefon Diggs

The Boston Globe

Things ended badly in some of Stefon Diggs’s previous stops. Can he now be the veteran mentor the young Patriots need?

By Christopher Price

FOXBOROUGH — Few players have had as many labels slapped on them over their careers as Stefon Diggs.

In his 10 seasons in the NFL, Diggs has run the gamut. He started as an unheralded Day 3 pick who became a trusted No. 2 wide receiver and playoff hero with the Vikings. After things soured in Minnesota, he was hit with a reputation as a player adept at manipulating his way out of town when things went bad.

With the Bills, he was a transformative No. 1 acquisition who helped a young quarterback reach his potential … before things went south between him and the franchise.

Now, after a cameo with the Texans last season, Diggs stands on the cusp of a new chapter, this one with the Patriots after signing a three-year, $69 million free agent deal.

Having gone through so many iterations, it’s fair to ask: What is Diggs now? According to friends, teammates, and coaches, the 31-year-old is ready to fully embrace a new role, one that took root last season: mentor and esteemed veteran.

He’s one of four on the Patriots’ roster 31 or older. He’s a couple of productive years away from Hall of Fame consideration. And as he referenced in his introductory press conference at Gillette Stadium, he’s interested in securing his legacy.

Why the change in approach? In the eyes of some, the evolution was due at least in part to some forced perspective after a season-ending knee injury last year.

Heading into 2024, Diggs was one of the most durable receivers in the league, having played in at least 14 games every year from 2017-23. But a torn ACL in October limited him to eight games, the fewest in his career.

“I know that I’m 31 years old, and this is my first injury after 10 years,” he said. “I’ve [been a] little banged up [with] injuries, but never anything that serious. I look at [this] definitely as an opportunity. What could’ve been, could’ve been. At this point, I am where I am, and I’m thankful.

“I’ve [spent] 10½ years playing this game. It would’ve been 11 if I didn’t get banged up. So I definitely look forward to getting back on track. Young quarterback, a good team, a lot of pieces being added, everything trending in the right direction, something I wanted to be a part of.”

Those who witnessed things come to a less-than-ideal finish for Diggs in Minnesota and Buffalo see a new individual, due in no small part to last year’s time away.

“Seeing Stef as a little bit more mature version of himself on the visit here, it was so awesome to reconnect with him and see where he’s at in life and hear about some of his ups and downs throughout the years we were apart,” said

Todd Downing, a former assistant in Minnesota who joined the Patriots this offseason as the wide receivers coach. “[I’m] excited to be back with him.”

“While I think public image of him in Buffalo wasn’t great, I think he probably learned a ton from that experience,” said former Vikings wide receivers coach Drew Petzing.

“I think he got a bad rap just by the media and by people,” Texans quarterback C.J. Stroud said in October. ”He’s been nothing but just amazing to this team and to his teammates.”

‘He just took off’
The 146th pick in the 2015 draft, the Maryland product took three healthy scratches to start his career. But he wasn’t discouraged.

“He listened and worked his ass off,” said Petzing.

Diggs saw action in Week 4, catching six passes for 87 yards. He followed that with back-to-back 100-plus-yard performances and ended his rookie year with a team-leading 52 receptions for 720 yards.

“He just took off,” Petzing said.

One of the things that helped his early ascent was his ability to connect with other receivers, including Adam Thielen. Thielen, who was signed as an undrafted free agent by the Vikings in 2013 and is three years older than Diggs, was soon on a parallel track; the duo combined for 153 catches, 1,870 yards, and 8 touchdowns in 2016.

“He watched Adam do his thing,” Petzing said. “Adam was just starting to make his rise when Diggsy was in the building. The thinking was, ‘I’m just going to do what this guy does. I’ll just copy him, and that’ll be a role model for me.’ ‘’

Things crested for Diggs with the Vikings in 2017-18. He was the hero of the Minneapolis Miracle during the 2017 postseason, and he used that as a jumping-off point for his first career 100-catch, 1,000-yard season in 2018.

But things soured between Diggs and the Vikings. He was fined for missing meetings and practices, and in March 2020, after five seasons, he was shipped to Buffalo for three draft picks.

‘I’ve got a quarterback who’s balling’
Heralded as the final piece of the puzzle for the Bills, Diggs had the best season of his career in 2020, helping Josh Allen through a breakout campaign, all while gleefully torching the Patriots.

“I’m new to this team, so I’m basking in [the] ambience of everybody,” Diggs said after catching nine passes for 145 yards and three touchdowns in a 38-9 blowout of New England. “I’ve got a young quarterback who’s balling.”

But by 2023, there were dropped passes, sideline rants, and playoff losses. Diggs was caught on the sideline airing out Allen during a January 2023 game. The occasional shot at coaches and Allen from Diggs’s brother Trevon didn’t help matters either, as well as the change in offensive coordinators. (Diggs’s targets took a dramatic dip after Joe Brady replaced Ken Dorsey.)

After four seasons, the Bills sent Diggs, a 2024 sixth-round draft choice, and a 2025 fifth-rounder to the Texans for a 2025 second-round pick.

“Happy for Stef,” Bills coach Sean McDermott said last month. “I know he went through that serious injury last year, that’s tough to watch. He’s a great player, and he’ll be a great addition to [the Patriots].”

In Houston, he was named a captain and played a sizable role in the maturation of the offense.

“It was a pleasure working with Stefon,” Texans coach DeMeco Ryans said. “He was one of the best competitors I’ve been around. Brings a ton of great energy to practice. Being a veteran guy, he shows up every day playing hard in practice, and it shows up in the game. A guy you can count on, especially in those third-down critical moments.”

It would be easy to classify Diggs’s one year in Houston as a honeymoon. Based on his history, who knows what might have happened if he stuck another year or two? But Ryans sounded as if it wouldn’t have been an issue.

“You don’t want to get rid of good players, and Stef is a good player,” he said. “It’s hard to see him go. Wanted to get him back, but it didn’t work out that way, but wishing him well in New England.”

‘He looks great’
Last month, Diggs indicated his rehab was ahead of schedule. The receiver has been working with Dr. Sharif Tabbah, who co-owns and leads Alkemē Sports RX in Florida. Tabbah deferred to the team when it came to a long-range plan, but “wholeheartedly” believes Diggs will be ready for training camp.

“Those words were indirectly from my mouth,” said Tabbah with a chuckle when told of Diggs’s quote about being good to go. “We’re always checking on how he’s doing, and he’s truly ahead of schedule. It’s 4½ months now, something like that. And he looks like he’s six months out.

“He looks great; he looks like he’s really moving well. He’s continued with balance and jumps and working back into cutting and change of direction. All sorts of stuff.”

This spring, Diggs has managed to check all the rehab boxes. He’s impressed new and old teammates alike; Patriots center Garrett Bradbury played with him in Minnesota. Late last month, Bradbury was asked about the Diggs experience, and what his new team should anticipate.

“When you have these superstar receivers, I mean Justin Jefferson, Adam Thielen — I’ve played with some good ones," he said. “You want them to be like that. You want them to have belief in their talent. You want them to want the ball. When [Diggs] is rolling, he’s hard to stop. So, it’s how can we all work together?

“We need to get him the ball, right? I know the coaches are going to do a good job of that. But you want competitive teammates. I see that in Drake [Maye]. I see that in Diggs. I saw that firsthand. I love getting in the huddle with guys like that.”

That confidence and competitiveness isn’t a problem for coach Mike Vrabel.

“Stefon brings an energy to him,” Vrabel said. “I think it’s fun that I coach players like that, guys that have a confidence to them, that understand the game of football, that have been around, that developed.

“This isn’t like a first-round draft pick. Stefon went later in the draft and continued to improve and has done that. Has been productive each and every year.”

Ultimately, it’s a gamble with the Patriots and Diggs in the same way it is when any new veteran is introduced during a key part of a delicate rebuild. Surrounded by mostly younger teammates, Diggs’s résumé and powerful personality suggest he’ll play a sizable role in shaping the offense.

So far, it’s been all good, according to Maye.

“It looks like he’s doing great,” he said. “I think it’s going to be cool to throw to a receiver who has made plays like he has; made big plays in playoff games. Who’s been in a lot of different schemes and played with high-level quarterbacks to see a point of view from different stuff. It’s my job to give him a chance and go get it.”

Teammates and coaches say Diggs has all the requisite team-building talents needed to serve as a mentor for younger players who can help get the Patriots’ offense on track.

“Everybody wants to have success in this league. Everyone wants to play at a very high level,” Diggs said. “But I feel like I can help more so with the lows, just because I’ve experienced them myself on a personal level.

“The first three games in my career, I wasn’t playing at all. It wasn’t until the fourth game when I got my opportunity and taking advantage of the opportunity, and learning that sometimes the timing is off.

“When it’s your time to shine, shine.”

QB Joshua Dobbs

The Boston Globe

The Patriots are Joshua Dobbs's ninth NFL team, and his fellow quarterbacks are benefitting from all that experience

By Christopher Price

FOXBOROUGH — If you can link just about every major actor or actress back to Kevin Bacon, any self-respecting football fan can probably do something similar with Patriots backup quarterback Joshua Dobbs.

Most everyone in the NFL can either count the 30-year-old as a former teammate or has played with someone who played alongside Dobbs. Even though Dobbs has only been in the league since 2017, the Patriots are his ninth team. A fourth-round pick of the Steelers, he's been with Pittsburgh, Jacksonville, Cleveland, Detroit, Tennessee, Arizona, Minnesota, San Francisco, and now New England. (He's had multiple stops with the Steelers and Browns.) He's played with so many teams, he's a walking Immaculate Grid cheat code.

Along the way, he's cultivated a reputation as a standout teammate, and someone who's flexible enough to quickly master any system.

"I was with Dobbs for a little bit in Cleveland," said Patriots quarterbacks coach Ashton Grant. "I got to know him there. I think just the experience that comes with a guy who's been in the league for a handful of years for a bunch of different organizations has been great.

"Because he has all these experiences and has been in the league, he's a good shoulder to lean on for Drake [Maye] as a starting quarterback. If there's something Drake is seeing for the first time, Dobbs has probably seen 20 times. So now Drake can ask Dobbs how he handled it, and different tools and different things to think about. So I think adding him to the room in that aspect has been great."

"Dobbs has seen it all. He's been around forever," said rookie quarterback Ben Wooldridge. "Really, I've learned a ton from Dobbs. Just the little conversations we've had about his process. Going into the preseason game last week, it was about his process. How early does he get to the stadium? What does he do before a game? Does he change his routine from practice to the game? How does he prepare for a preseason game? Just picking his brain. I feel bad for him because I ask him about a thousand questions a day."

Last season, Maye was shepherded through his rookie year with assistance from veteran Jacoby Brissett. While there was some debate on who should be under center, Maye deferred to Brissett to open the year, before eventually taking over as the starter.

This summer, there's been no doubt as to who will be the starter to open the season. While Dobbs makes it clear that he's always competitive and will always stay ready, the veteran is going into the season with his eyes wide open.

"Obviously, there has to be a depth chart. And we understand that," said the 6-foot-3-inch, 220-pounder. "I've seen different places and situations. I just really like our room.

"I think each year . . . it's not that you never know what you're going to get in a quarterback room. It's, as you can imagine, quarterbacks are dynamic personalities. Everyone wants to play and be out there on the field. But we have a great room."

That doesn't mean Dobbs is content to hold a clipboard. He has been called upon several times over his career to step in for starters, and while he's never posted overwhelming offensive numbers, more often than not he's excelled. Two years ago, he was dealt from Arizona to Minnesota, and he led the Vikings to a pair of surprise wins.

Dobbs said the life of a backup is like being a student.

"It's like you're in math class every single day," he said, "and you're learning algebra. And then every Friday there's a test. But one week, you don't take it, the second week you don't take it, the third week you don't take it. You can get lulled into that rhythm of being complacent. 'I'll never take the test.' And it's right when you get comfortable with that, bang, you know you've got to ace the test.

“Just always being prepared no matter what the circumstances are, so it’s all about your daily mind-set. If you’re ready to go every single day and you’re confident in your skills and abilities, no matter what happens when you’re put out there, you’ll be able to go out and execute well.”

Related: Sure it’s been a good training camp, but Patriots face many questions that could prevent quick turnaround Dobbs, who finished 5 for 12 for 45 yards and a 2-yard rushing touchdown in the preseason opener, is cognizant enough to understand a sizable portion of his value is his experience. On Monday, Wooldridge recounted a story about Dobbs’s background with Commanders cornerback Bobby Price as part of their approach.

“Going into Washington last week, Josh had played with one of the corners we faced, and knew his ins and outs. Just little things like that,” said Wooldridge. “You can never get enough stuff like that. To be successful, you need stuff like that.”

Dobbs — nicknamed “The Passtronaut” because of his past internship at NASA and love of all things air and space — is set to return to Minnesota this week with his new team for a pair of joint practices and a preseason against the Vikings. There are a handful of players on the defensive side who were there when Dobbs was with the Vikings. Don’t be surprised if he drops a little knowledge in quarterback meetings about the Minnesota secondary that ends up being filed away by Maye and/or Wooldridge.

“It’s a process,” Dobbs said. “You just want to focus on one thing each day to kind of hammer out and understand, especially when you go to a new offense. That’s why I think camp is a great opportunity to do that. You get reps, you get good looks. You get some tough looks. And it’s all about managing the offense, making sure the ball is in the right place. It’s been good.”

ESPN

How Josh Dobbs wowed teammates through his NFL journey

By NFL Nation

Perhaps you've heard: Joshua Dobbs graduated from the University of Tennessee with a degree in aerospace engineering and a 4.0 GPA. The Minnesota Vikings quarterback has done an externship with NASA twice, worked on the site of a SpaceX rocket launch and inspired the nickname "Passtronaut."

It is selling Dobbs short, however, to suggest his intelligence alone has powered his NFL run, joining the Vikings in Week 9. He has navigated a wholly unique experience not only with smarts but also a work ethic that has gone largely unnoticed amid the fascination with the rest of his story.

Those who work inside the Vikings practice facility get it. Late in the afternoon on Nov. 3, defensive coordinator Brian Flores was leaving the building for the day. It was a Friday, a day in the regimented NFL schedule that typically allows for an early departure and a deep breath as game preparation winds down. As he passed the indoor practice field, Flores noticed Dobbs and assistant quarterbacks coach Grant Udinski working alone.

"I looked over and said, 'I'm going to go pick up my kids.' You guys can do that," Flores said. "I was not in awe, but you could see the work he was doing to get himself ready."

This was not an ordinary work session between coach and player. The Vikings had acquired Dobbs three days earlier from the Arizona Cardinals because they needed a backup for rookie Jaren Hall, who would be making his first NFL start that week in place of the injured Kirk Cousins. They did not plan to play Dobbs against the Atlanta Falcons, despite his experience in assimilating offenses in six other NFL stops. But they did need him to have at least some grip on their offense in case Hall was injured against the Falcons.

Over the course of nearly six hours, Dobbs and Udinski went through every play on the call sheet coach Kevin O'Connell planned to have at his disposal against the Falcons -- more than 100 in total.

"We were trying to uncover every single stone," Dobbs said. "Basically doing a research project ... to try to get up to speed on the offense and generate maybe some extra reps I would have missed from camp and OTAs and get on the same page with everyone to get the offense rolling in the right direction."

As it turned out, the Vikings needed Dobbs before the first quarter in Atlanta ended. A concussion sidelined Hall after the team's third possession, but Dobbs entered to lead the team to an improbable victory, accounting for 224 all-purpose yards and two touchdowns even before he knew the names of most of his teammates.

The Vikings are 2-2 since Dobbs entered that game in Atlanta. Despite a rash of turnovers that contributed to consecutive losses before the Week 13 bye, he has kept them in the NFC playoff race under circumstances that usually scuttle a season. O'Connell decided against replacing him for Sunday's game at the Las Vegas Raiders (4:05 p.m. ET, Fox), saying the Vikings need to "dive deeper into what helps him be the best version of himself" -- a vote of confidence that provides an opportunity to trace Dobbs' journey through nearly a quarter of the NFL's 32 teams

Pittsburgh Steelers

The Steelers selected Dobbs in the fourth round (135th overall) of the 2017 draft. He spent parts of five seasons in Pittsburgh from 2017-2021 but never started a game.

Stats: 10-of-17 (58.8%) passing for 47 yards, 1 INT; 31 rushing yards

When offensive tackle Chukwuma Okorafor joined the organization as a third-round draft pick in 2018, Dobbs had already been in Pittsburgh for a year. The two became fast friends when Dobbs introduced himself to Okorafor.

"First day I came here, he came up to me, was like, 'Hey, I'm Josh,'" Okorafor said. "As time went on my rookie year, he was always helping me or whatever I was doing with the scout team or just showing me what to do, taking me around town all the time."

It didn't take long for Okorafor to realize that Dobbs was a smart guy -- and not because he bragged about being a real life rocket scientist. He was adept at assimilating to any group in the locker room, a sort of chameleon in social situations. It's a trait, Okorafor said, that's undoubtedly helped him as he's ricocheted around the league.

"He just thinks about stuff a whole different way, but you can tell he's not a guy who always tries to sound smart ..." Okorafor said. "He can legit hang out with anyone, like a P-squad guard that just came in the first day. He's going to be best friends with him or a vet like Cam Heyward. He can hang out with anyone anytime."

Heyward is a big fan of Dobbs, too. He vividly remembers the final 2018 preseason game against the Carolina Panthers where Dobbs completed 8 of 12 attempts for 121 yards and scored two touchdowns.

"That game always meant a lot to us, because it really determines if you make the team or not," Heyward said. "And just the way he played that game, you could tell he was seizing the opportunity. He's a team player that a lot of guys love to be around. When his number's been called, he's always answered."

Jacksonville Jaguars

The Jaguars got Dobbs in a Sept. 2019 trade with the Steelers for a fifth-round pick. He spent a season in Jacksonville before being waived on Sept. 5, 2020.

Stats: Dobbs never appeared in a regular-season game for the Jaguars.

Jaguars left tackle Cam Robinson knew who Dobbs was because he played against his Tennessee Volunteers three times while he was at Alabama. And Robinson knew, from the stories in the media, that Dobbs was intelligent.

Joshua Dobbs backed up Gardner Minshew for a season in Jacksonville. AP Photo/John Raoux
Which is why Robinson was a little surprised when he first met Dobbs after the Jaguars traded for him after quarterback Nick Foles suffered a broken collarbone.

"I remember everybody always talking about him being incredibly smart, so the first time I met him, I don't know if I had a preconceived notion of what to expect, but he was the most laid back and the most chill person ever," Robinson said.

Robinson has been incredibly impressed with what Dobbs has done, especially the way he stepped in and played just five days after joining the Vikings.

"I don't even think people have an idea of how -- I mean, obviously we know it's hard -- but bro, that s--- is hard," Robinson said. "To be able to just go to a new team and pick it up is unbelievably hard. Indescribably hard, and he just rolls. It's incredible to see."

Cleveland Browns

The Browns initially signed Dobbs on March 14, 2022, before waiving him that November when quarterback Deshaun Watson came back from an 11-game suspension. They re-signed him to back up Watson in 2023 before trading him and a seventh-rounder to the Cardinals on Aug. 24 for a fifth-round pick.

Stats: Dobbs never appeared in a regular-season game for the Browns.

Dobbs, the lone Volunteer on a Browns roster full of Alabama alums, would get into plenty of college football arguments with his Cleveland teammates.

Dobbs at one point quipped back with the exact point differential in the drives he was on the field as Tennessee's quarterback in two games against Alabama while Browns wideout Amari Cooper starred there.

Dobbs came in during the 2012 meeting after the Crimson Tide already held a 35-0 lead and fought Alabama to a 10-10 stalemate for a 45-10 final. The next season, Dobbs subbed in again, this time with a 14-0 deficit. The final score ended up being 34-20, once again giving Dobbs the technical tie against Cooper.

"He's one of those guys that looks at life from the perspective of, how you do anything is how you do everything," Cooper said. "I know a lot of football players who want to be great at football and excel at football but didn't do so well in school. [Dobbs] is the complete opposite. He's more so like I'm going to be great in football, I'm going to be great in school, I'm going to be great in every aspect of life."

Over his two-time stint in Cleveland, Dobbs became one of the most popular players in the locker room. Last year, Cleveland waived Dobbs after Watson returned, clearing the way for the Tennessee Titans to pick him up.
The Browns were at their hotel in Pittsburgh last year for their regular-season finale, when Dobbs was making his second career start for Tennessee on a Saturday night.

Several Cleveland players, including guard Joel Bitonio, running back Nick Chubb, tight end David Njoku and quarterback Jacoby Brissett gathered in the hotel meal room for a Dobbs watch party.

"We're getting hyped and screaming and people are like, 'What are these guys getting so pumped about?'" Bitonio recalled. "They ended up losing the game, but he played really well and we were so pumped for him because we saw the work he put in behind the scenes.

"He had that ability to relate to anybody. Just a guy that everybody gets along with."

Browns rookie quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson said Dobbs taught him how to be a professional during their time together in the offseason and training camp before Dobbs was traded to the Cardinals.

Thompson-Robinson said Dobbs showed him how to take notes in meetings with Browns head coach and offensive playcaller Kevin Stefanski.

"[Dobbs] asks the right questions," Thompson-Robinson said. "And then how to operate, how to handle the iPad, how to handle just being a pro."

Detroit Lions

After he was cut by the Browns in 2022, the Lions signed Dobbs to their practice squad on Dec. 5, 2022. But he wasn't there for long.

Dobbs was never on the Lions' 53-man roster.

Lions wide receiver Donovan Peoples-Jones played with Dobbs with the Browns, and was impressed with who he was away from football.

"In Cleveland, he took us all to basically a NASA station to learn about the planes and learn about what they were doing in that NASA situation and it's kind of a testament to the type of guy he is off the field, which I feel like helps him on the field," Peoples-Jones told ESPN.

Peoples-Jones said Dobbs offered a signup sheet for players to attend the NASA field trip.

"It was great because it's not something that you get to do often," Peoples-Jones said. "You don't get to learn about the things that they use in space and be able to go into a room and see all the different controls and things that they get to do without someone like him helping bridge that gap, so it was a nice experience."

Tennessee Titans

The Titans added Dobbs to their 53-man roster on Dec. 21, 2022, signing him off the Lions' practice squad. Eight days later, on a Thursday night against the Dallas Cowboys, Dobbs was tabbed to start. He also started the Titans' season finale against the Jaguars.

Stats: 40-of-68 (58.8%) passing for 411 yards, 2 TDs, 2 INTs, 44 rushing yards

It took until his sixth NFL season for Dobbs to get his first start. Like many former teammates, wide receiver Nick Westbrook-Ikhine was blown away by how quickly Dobbs was able to assimilate a new offense.

"It really didn't seem like he skipped a beat. It was almost like he was with us during those minicamp and training camp times."

Tight end Chigoziem Okonkwo was also in awe of Dobbs' ability to adapt.

"I just remember being impressed with how he came in. I think it was like a Thursday or Friday morning. He learned all the stuff he needed to learn in like a day or two ... I was like, 'Damn. How the hell did he do that?'

Arizona Cardinals
The Cardinals traded for Dobbs on Aug. 24, 2023, and he was quickly named the starter while Kyler Murray recovered from offseason ACL surgery on his right knee. It was Dobbs' first chance to lead an offense for a prolonged stretch, starting eight games before being traded to the Vikings.

Stats: 167-of-266 (62.8%) passing for 1,569 yards, 8 TDs, 5 INTs; 258 rushing yards, 3 TDs

Geoff Swaim had seen it before.

The Cardinals tight end was with the Titans in 2022 when Dobbs arrived in Nashville in Week 15, learned the offense and then started a week later. So, when Swaim welcomed Dobbs after he was traded to the Cardinals on Aug. 24, he watched Dobbs do the same thing -- he learned an offense, albeit one he was familiar with from his time with the Browns, in a couple of weeks and then went out and started after just a handful of practices.

"He just jumps right in, picks the offense up, starts rolling and operated really efficiently," Swaim said. "I'm not sure I could do that playing tight end, and now imagine playing quarterback. I'm fairly certain I couldn't do that in a week to play my position, but him doing that at quarterback is just remarkable."

From the time Dobbs sat in his first QB meeting in Arizona, he fit in, Cardinals quarterback Clayton Tune said. It didn't take long for Dobbs to start teaching things about the offense to Tune, who had been working in it since he was drafted in April.

What stood out to Tune was how well Dobbs was able to digest and deploy Arizona's game plans without the months of work to learn the intricacies of the scheme.

"I feel like our game plans were just as complex as they would've been with a quarterback that had been here for much longer than him," Tune said. "So, picking up the complex game plan and knowing all the run checks, the pass checks was impressive."

His former teammates in Arizona have been watching Dobbs.

"It's great," Murray said Dobbs' opportunity in Minnesota. "For him to be in the league this long and to finally kind of get his opportunity to show people his ability and how he can put a stamp on a game is good for him."

Minnesota Vikings

After losing quarterback Kirk Cousins in Week 8 to an Achilles injury to his right foot, the Vikings acquired Dobbs and a conditional seventh-rounder from the Cardinals for a sixth-round pick. Dobbs was forced into game action five days later.

Stats: 63-of-96 (65.6%) passing for 647 yards, 4 TDs, 1 INT; 131 rushing yards, 3 TDs

Upon his arrival in Minnesota, Dobbs was assigned a locker that had been previously occupied by a practice squad running back. One of the first personal objects he put into it was a rugby ball.

The purpose was simple. In baseball, players routinely place a weighted donut around their bats for practice swings. When they're removed, the bat is lighter and seems easier to generate speed in the swing.

"A rugby ball is a little bigger than a typical football," Dobbs said, "and it's a little slicker. So then when you put a nice QB ball in your hand, it feels pretty good."

Dobbs uses the ball during prepractice warmups. As tempting as it is to attribute the habit to engineering or physiological research, however, Dobbs said it isn't that complicated.

"There's no science," he said. "I'm not going to sit up here and act like there is. It's just something I started doing one offseason. I saw a receiver coach who was throwing the ball to receivers, so then ... I was throwing the rugby ball a couple times, and I switched back to the football and it felt good. So, I incorporate it."

At the time of his trade from the Cardinals, Dobbs had reached a personal milestone: He had been with a team long enough to move all of his personal items into a home. Just as he had settled into a Phoenix suburb, however, the Vikings came calling.

So Dobbs hopped on a plane with enough clothes for a week or so and prepared to resume the itinerant hotel life. He didn't have his car yet and didn't bother to rent one, instead camping out in a hotel that is in the same complex as the Vikings' practice facility. He ate every meal in the team's cafeteria, he said, before signing an apartment lease at the end of his second week in Minnesota.

On one of his final days in the hotel, Dobbs stumbled into the Vikings' annual gathering of former players and other organizational alumni. He got on an elevator with several of them -- he isn't steeped enough in team history yet to know who they were -- and had a "pinch me" moment.

"They were, like, 'Oh, you're the quarterback,'" Dobbs said. "And they were so excited just to be here in Minnesota, be back around football and back around the facility. And just feeling that energy, man, and feeling that recognition from guys that have played a lot more snaps than I have, have had illustrious careers. And just to see that excitement, it meant a lot to me.

"And so, yeah, in the moment it was a cool moment just to be able to take it all in and enjoy that quick fellowship with them just as football players but also [for them to] respect the position that I'm in."

The Athletic

Josh Dobbs' rise to NFL prominence is hard to believe — unless you know him

By Alec Lewis

The retired professor set his laptop aside and reached for the remote. For more than an hour, Chris Pionke had paid little attention to the NFL game on the television in front of him. The teams moved back and forth across the screen and the announcers provided analysis, but Pionke was scrolling mindlessly on his laptop. That changed when he heard the name.

Josh Dobbs.

Pionke, who taught engineering at the University of Tennessee for nearly three decades, perked up and increased the volume. He wondered if the announcers were just mentioning the former Volunteers quarterback, or if Dobbs was

actually in the game. He squinted at the screen and spotted a tall, lanky, familiar-looking player wearing the No. 15 in Minnesota Vikings white and purple.

Pionke hollered to his wife who had been sitting over in the kitchen.

“Cindy!” Pionke said. “Josh is in!”

Their Knoxville, Tenn., home livened immediately with football noises. Dobbs barked the pre-snap cadence. Linemen crashed into one another. Announcers yelled, astonished at what they were watching. Pionke listened intently while Dobbs orchestrated a thriller of a victory in relief of rookie Jaren Hall despite having fewer than five days of preparation with his new team.

The professor cheered excitedly but was not shocked. Those who knew Dobbs well — his former coaches, advisers, mentors, family and friends — felt much the same way.

Their reaction to Dobbs’ public introduction is best summed up by former Pittsburgh Steelers general manager Kevin Colbert, who reiterated the same message five times in a 10-minute phone call:

“If you know Josh, this is not surprising. This is not surprising at all.”

Josh Dobbs showed up in Knoxville wearing a baby-blue suit. Personalized business cards filled his pockets. A detailed schedule laid out his entire day.

Long before he became Tennessee’s starter, months before he even committed to the university, Dobbs took a tour. Alongside his parents, Stephanie and Robert, Dobbs was chaperoned across campus. They visited the football facilities as well as the engineering lecture halls.

Behind the scenes, the athletic department had orchestrated a meeting with Matthew Mench, then the head of the aerospace engineering department.

Toward the end of their conversation, Mench tossed out a question.

“What math are you currently taking?”

Dobbs deadpanned, “Differential equations.”

Mench’s eyebrow rose as if to say: “How in the hell?”

Differential equations, mind you, typically follows Calculus 1, Calculus 2, Matrix algebra and Calculus 3. A high schooler taking such an advanced class was unheard of.

Why was Dobbs so advanced?

Stephanie, a former UPS executive, and Robert, a longtime banking executive, intentionally exposed Dobbs to an array of subjects as he was growing up in Alpharetta, Ga., outside of Atlanta. They parented with a general creed: The world is yours, and you can do anything you choose.

“To be able to do that,” Stephanie said, “you have to know what’s available.”

Stephanie and Robert sparked the younger Dobbs’ curiosity through yearly trips. They visited different colleges. They explored museums. They wanted their son to absorb it all.

On many of those trips, while sitting idly in bustling airports, Dobbs stood starry-eyed and watched as beautiful machinery disappeared into the sky. Airplanes became a fascination. As a youth, Dobbs asked his parents endless questions about what they were and how they worked. Years later, he would stand at the window and recite the make, model and size of every plane in sight.

As Dobbs reached middle school, his parents pushed him to try numerous activities. They allowed him to play football, basketball and baseball, as opposed to specializing in one. They suggested he try the saxophone. He joined

the debate team. Stephanie thought it'd be great for Josh to try the chess club. That is, if he was actually serious about beating her.

"He eventually did," Stephanie said. "Oh my goodness, I was heartbroken."

As Dobbs reached high school, math came naturally. Dobbs enjoyed problem-solving and was so proficient that he began taking higher-level math classes at a local community college as an upperclassman. Realizing he could pair his love of flight with his aptitude for math, Dobbs decided to pursue aerospace engineering in college, which Mench described as a subject centered around the physics, materials, structure and propulsion of everything that flies in space.

Advisers tried to talk him out of it, outlining the schedule constraints and workload, but Dobbs would cut them off. Stephanie and Robert backed their son's vision because they believed in the reward of passionate pursuit. And they knew their son was committed, doubts be damned.

Two days into Dobbs' first training camp as a freshman at Tennessee, Antone Davis, a UT football staffer, spotted Dobbs sitting on the floor inside the facility.

A playbook was sprawled out on the carpet beside him. Dobbs scanned the pages. Davis thought he'd play a joke on the newbie, so he hollered down the hallway.

"Hey rookie," he yelled, "you about to learn those plays yet?"

Davis thought Dobbs would squirm. Instead, he looked up and nodded convincingly.

"Yes sir," Dobbs said. "I know all of the concepts, and I know what they're trying to do."

Davis nodded awkwardly and stepped back into his office.

"I was, like, 'Uhh, OK then.'"

Preparation was never a problem for Dobbs. He awoke at 6:30, attended class from 8-2, practiced and watched film from 2:30-7, then finished his homework in the academic building from 7:30-10. If need be, he'd find extra time for classwork or film study earlier in the morning or later in the evening.

College football fans heard about this the first time Dobbs played a college football game. It was October 2013, and Tennessee's starting quarterback, Justin Worley, had injured his right thumb. The Vols turned to Dobbs, then a freshman, on the road against Alabama, the best team in the country. On the television broadcast, CBS sideline reporter Tracy Wolfson shared an anecdote that had been relayed to her by a Tennessee staffer.

A few weeks earlier, Tennessee had played Oregon in Eugene. The Vols lost the game and flew home late at night. All of the cabin lights on the flight were dark — except for one. Tucked in the middle of the plane was Dobbs, who sat in the aisle and flipped through thick engineering books.

As Wolfson shared the story, Dr. Christopher Pionke listened and thought: Now I understand how he completed his assignment in honors Engineering Fundamentals 157.

The class, to use Pionke's own words, was "relentless." Students attended lectures Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Tuesday and Thursday were reserved for labs, projects and problem sessions. That semester, Dobbs also took four-credit math and chemistry classes.

A rough draft of the four-year plan created by Dobbs, his mother, Stephanie, and his academic adviser at Tennessee, Brian Russell, prior to his freshman year. (Courtesy of Russell)
Backing up Worley helped Dobbs' prioritization early on even if, away from the cameras, coaches already were making a case for him to play.

During one meeting of the coaching staff, Davis said, a coach interjected: "Guys, who are we going to get to play quarterback?"

Silence enveloped the room for a few seconds, then a defensive coach blurted out, "Josh can do it."

"He can't run," another coach jawed back. "Josh can't run."

“Coach!” another defensive staffer said. “We can’t catch him on the scout team. We can’t catch him.”

“I’ll never forget that,” Davis said. “That’s when (head coach) Butch (Jones) decided to give him an opportunity.”

Dobbs played five games his freshman season and entered spring practice in a full-on quarterback competition. Away from the field, he was constructing Olympic medal stands out of foam core and working his connections to secure an internship for the summer.

Late in the spring, Jerry Wheeler, a longtime director of military engines at Pratt & Whitney and a Tennessee alum, received a phone call from a mutual friend of the Dobbs family.

“There’s a member of the football team at Tennessee who would like to intern at Pratt & Whitney during the summer,” the friend said.

“I only know one guy on the football team who is an aerospace engineer major,” Wheeler responded.

“Yeah,” the mutual friend said, “it’s Josh.”

A few months later, while Dobbs could have been enjoying his short break from school, he showed up every day to a control room in West Palm Beach, Fla., to monitor computer display screens that filtered data on an engine mounted in front of them.

Dobbs went 22–15 between 2013 and 2016 as the Vols’ starting quarterback. (Kevin C. Cox / Getty Images)
Those who knew Dobbs at Tennessee often feel as though they have to offer a clarification.

I swear, they’ll say. He really did all of this!

Sure, in his four years with the Vols, he completed 61.5 percent of his passes for 7,138 yards and 87 touchdowns (53 passing, 32 rushing and two receiving). He led the team to 9-4 marks in his junior and senior seasons, setting several school records along the way. He graduated in 2017 with a perfect 4.0 GPA and won Tennessee’s 2017 Torchbearer Award, the highest honor for an undergraduate student.

But there’s so much more.

One example: the semester Dobbs met one-on-one with a professor each morning because the class was at 3 p.m., the same time as UT’s football practice.

Another example: the time Dobbs left practice immediately to go speak at a Boy Scouts of America banquet three hours down the road in Atlanta. Brian Russell, the team’s academic adviser, drove Dobbs, who sat in the backseat and furiously tapped away at his computer. Upon arrival, he changed into a suit, spoke to the kids and then slept in the car on the three-hour drive back so he could attend class in the morning.

Another example: the time Dobbs held up the Vols’ buses before a road trip because he was spending time with a young girl who had been diagnosed with Alopecia areata, just as he had. Davis had informed Dobbs that spending five minutes with the young girl would suffice. Forty-five minutes later, Dobbs was laughing with the young girl inside Tennessee’s indoor practice facility. She’d worn a wig, nervous about her condition, but Dobbs had made her feel comfortable enough that she took it off just for him. Coaches noticed Dobbs was missing and yelled for him, only to find out later what he’d been up to.

“That was one of the coolest moments,” Davis said. “It was a time where he didn’t have time. And he took time to make time for the little girl.”

In four years, he became a spokesperson for the engineering school. He visited with prospective students, spoke at banquets and met with donors. He mastered time management in a way Russell hadn’t witnessed before (or since) with a student athlete.

“It was like you were dealing with a CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company,” Russell said. “And I mean that seriously. The young man was one of the most special human beings I’ve ever had the opportunity to work with.”

The dynamics of Dobbs' pre-NFL draft preparations only furthered that feeling. In the spring of 2017, Dobbs split time between Knoxville and Bradenton, Fla., at IMG Academy. A couple of credit hours remained, so he would train at IMG from Friday through Tuesday and attend classes in Knoxville from Wednesday to Friday.

The travel? The mayhem? The different environments? Fulfilling obligations? Working with others? Operating in high-pressure environments?

This is all Josh Dobbs has known.

Dobbs and Tennessee teammate Curt Maggitt with engineering professor Christopher Pionke. (Courtesy of Pionke)
This past weekend, as Pionke nestled into his recliner to watch Dobbs start another NFL game against the New Orleans Saints, he thought to himself: Finally. The world is getting to see who Josh Dobbs is.

For years, the professor had followed Dobbs' path and waited for him to get his chance. The Steelers drafted him in 2017 as a developmental option behind Ben Roethlisberger. Colbert, the former GM, said Dobbs wowed the team with his on-field performance. It's just that the Steelers had a Hall of Famer standing in his way.

Cleveland signed Dobbs to a one-year, $1 million deal in 2022, but cut him late in the season. The Browns asked to bring him back on the practice squad, Stephanie said, but Dobbs felt that joining the Lions' practice squad would give him the best chance to succeed long term.

Needing a quarterback late last season, Tennessee identified Dobbs as a player who could learn the Titans offense quickly and "erase the gray when things didn't play out clean," said one coach who had a role in the signing. In fact, Dobbs acclimated more quickly than they expected, the coach said, and spoke steadfastly to coaches about tailoring the offense to the players already in the system — not him.

According to agent Mike McCartney, even though Dobbs finished his two Titans starts a mediocre 40-for-68 passing (a 58.8 percent completion rate) for 411 yards, two touchdowns, two interceptions and two lost fumbles, one coach told Dobbs after his final game, "You're going to be our guy next year."

In his first game with the Vikings, Dobbs, who had just arrived via trade, went 20-of-30 passing for 158 yards, ran for 66 yards and totaled three touchdowns in leading Minnesota to a come-from-behind win in Atlanta. (Dale Zanine / USA Today)
A regime change in Tennessee altered those plans, and the Titans ultimately drafted quarterback Will Levis. Only two teams expressed real interest this offseason, according to McCartney: Cleveland and Arizona.

"I remember thinking to myself: 'Did anybody watch these two Tennessee games?'" McCartney said. "'Do we not watch the tape? Not one pre-snap penalty in two games with a guy who just arrived nine days before his first start?' It just didn't completely make sense that only two teams had interest."

After reviewing both teams' infrastructures, Dobbs, now 28, signed with the Browns. During the preseason, though, they traded him to the Cardinals, where finally, after six years of spotty playing time, a game plan was built around his skill set. Eight starts later, following admirable showings against several of the NFL's best defenses, Dobbs was on the move again.

He flew to a new city. He buried himself in a new playbook. He stayed at the facility with Vikings assistant quarterbacks coach Grant Udinski late on Friday afternoon to ensure he could operate the game plan.

In the eyes of Dobbs' parents, that, really, is the story here. Eschewing the path of least resistance. Exhausting all available resources. Preparing yourself for the opportunity so that when the time comes, the only people who are surprised are the ones who don't know you at all.

NFLPA

Josh Dobbs: #AthleteAnd Rocket Scientist
By Brandon Parker

Josh Dobbs's love for space dates back to his days as a six-year-old, when his strong appetite for math problems and science experiments kept his parents on their toes.

His skills on the football field began to surface not too long after that, setting into a motion what would become a rare formula – a highly touted college football prospect who majored in aerospace engineering at the University of Tennessee.

Since being drafted into the NFL in 2017, Dobbs has deftly managed to further his football career while continuing his pursuit of rocket science. Earlier this year, the Jacksonville Jaguars quarterback spent a month at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida as part of the NFLPA Externship, an experience that culminated with him being on site for the historic SpaceX launch to the International Space Station.

What was your experience like during your externship on the Space Coast?

Going into it my goal was to get a fully encompassing experience. To be an aerospace engineer at NASA and go in daily and take on daily engineering tasks at Kennedy space center. I definitely accomplished that. I originally started in the instrumentation department and them from there, my experience really varied through everything space. I was in the instrumentation one day. Another day I was at the launch pad. Another day I was at launch cove center. It was a very broad experience and I was able to see the entire experience of everything that goes on down there.

Which part of the experience stood out to you as the most memorable?

It's hard to pull out one thing. I did everything from the swamp works, where I was seeing the futuristic moon rover, seeing different tools they'll be taking to space like a 3D printer that's able to combine moon dirt regalift (?) and literally make anything you could need to survive. I was around a lot of the experimental groups like the trash to gas group where you take trash you accumulate in the space craft and convert it to gas you can use to power your space craft. I was able to see a launch down there. See the mobile launcher that the new rocket is going to be on. The biggest rocket ever made. I was able to see the crawler. The cool thing to be able to say is that I was able to see the big picture and see how all the parts of the space center work together, and to be around those great engineers down there.
I think you have to have a plan at the end of the day to see the bigger picture and take advantage of the opportunities you're given.

What was it like to be a part of and witness history for the SpaceX launch?

To be able have that experience after my externship put everything in perspective. It was intense. A lot had been building up to that moment, especially with a commercial company launching on US soil and launching live astronauts for the first time in nine years, so it was a very intense moment. The vice president and president were in attendance as well as several members of Congress, so it was cool from a legislative side. It just shows as a country and human race when people come together and combine their minds and put combine different ideologies and experiences and all work together for a common goal, it really shows what we're able to achieve.

Typically, when football players major in something during college, that career interest gets put on hold while you focus on playing in the NFL. But you've been able to juggle both very well. Have you been pleasantly surprised with how it's all worked out or have you been deliberate in seeking opportunities?

I've been deliberate. I think you have to have a plan at the end of the day to see the bigger picture and take advantage of the opportunities you're given. I've worked hard for everything I've accomplished and I've set myself up a lot for the opportunity. Being a part of the NFL, the NFLPA and going to the University of Tennessee while making connections along the way, it definitely helped in your process. Being able to be blessed with those opportunities as well as being prepared and qualified for them, you can go in and take advantage of them. Maximizing my time all the time. On the field and in weight room. Then off the field, maximizing my time to enjoy those other interest while also setting myself up with opportunities to build myself as more than an athlete.

ESPN

Vikings QB Joshua Dobbs boosts NASA profile with NFL success
By Xuan Thai

For Minnesota Vikings fans, the emergence of 28-year-old journeyman quarterback Joshua Dobbs these past few weeks has been exciting to watch, not to mention fodder for a fresh round of memes, the appearance of space-suit-themed outfits in the stands and the craze over the coolest new nickname in football: "The Passtronaut."

But for NASA, Dobbs' meteoric rise has created a different kind of buzz. And while "The Joshua Dobbs Effect" might not be an actual scientific finding, there is some evidence that Dobbs, a quarterback and aerospace engineer who is now 2-1 with the Vikings heading into Monday night's game against the Chicago Bears, has generated a wave of new excitement -- in science.

When NASA's Glenn Research Center in Ohio posted about Dobbs on X in early November, user engagement soared. The post received more than 3 million views, and the account's followers increased by 216% compared to the previous week's gain. In 2022, the center said, the average number of engagements per post was 176.

And since Nov. 5, when Dobbs stepped in for injured rookie backup Jaren Hall and guided the Vikings to a 31-28 win at Atlanta, U.S. searches for phrases such as "Is Josh Dobbs an astronaut" and "Josh Dobbs NASA" have skyrocketed, according to Google Trends.

Those in the space business have taken notice.

"Nerds are cool," said Scott Colloredo, director of engineering at NASA's John F. Kennedy Space Center in Florida. "Josh has made engineering cool. We want to ride this wave as long as we can."

Though he isn't an astronaut yet, Dobbs has said publicly that he wants to go to space. If he does, he wouldn't be the first professional football player turned NASA scientist to do so. That honor goes to Leland Melvin, who graduated in 1986 from the University of Richmond with a degree in chemistry. The Detroit Lions selected him in the 11th round of the draft that year.

Melvin suffered repeated injuries and eventually was traded to and then released by the Dallas Cowboys in 1987 before ever playing in a regular season NFL game. That's when he decided to focus on his "fallback" career as a NASA scientist, eventually becoming an astronaut.

"When I was growing up, some of the teachers said, 'You can either be a jock, or you can either be a scientist or engineer.' And people don't see that you can do both," Melvin said. "It's just powerful and beautiful to see this right now."

After his short pro football career, Melvin continued his studies, graduating from the University of Virginia in 1991 with a master's degree in materials science engineering. He then began working for NASA. Less than a decade later he applied and was accepted into the 1998 astronaut class. Melvin flew two missions on the Space Shuttle Atlantis, worked on the International Space Station and has logged more than 565 hours in space -- with 23 days, 13 hours and 28 minutes.

As for the comparisons between football player and astronaut, Melvin knows them well. Now retired, he has a deep understanding of the two highly competitive worlds and said the two fields have much in common.

"You train and practice so much that on the field or in space, you get into this zone where you know exactly what that person is going to do. If a coverage rolls up on you, you know you're going to do a post corner instead of doing a 10-yard out," Melvin said. "And in space, in the shuttle, if something fails, one system fails, you know what you're going to in the next system."

He pointed to the data analysis required in football, studying game film, identifying trends such as knowing how often opposing teams run certain plays in certain situations, is similar to what NASA scientist do in analyzing their data points. Beyond the academic study, Melvin said he sees other parallels.

"When you walk out on the field in the crowd, crowd aspect of it. Oh my goodness," Melvin said. "Everyone is screaming. ... But you get to this place where you have to get this tunnel vision and you get all of that stuff out of your head because you've got to hear the cadence, you got to hear the snap. And if they're so loud, then you go by nonverbal cues to go off the ball.

"The same thing we do in the space shuttle when you're launching in space. There's so much noise, maybe there's a comms outage and you use hand signals."

Even diet and exercise regimes are similar. Astronaut training is notoriously difficult.

"You think about your free weights, your running, your cardio, all the nutrition, all these things that are so important for being a professional athlete. You need to do the same thing for space," Melvin said. "You're doing spacewalks in this suit, and it's pressurized and it's very tiring. It's critical that you have the same kind of cardiovascular shape and muscular shape that you have while you're on the football field."

Retired astronaut Leland Melvin was the first pro football player to become a NASA scientist and go to space. He sneaked his dogs into NASA for this official photo, which went viral years after it was taken. Courtesy NASA
Dobbs' sudden success with Minnesota has been one of the best stories of the NFL season so far, and those who know him are not surprised that he has learned the Vikings' playbook so quickly and with such proficiency, given his academic background and how often he's changed teams and had to learn new playbooks.

"Football is very complicated and maybe it's not rocket science," Colloredo said with a laugh. "[But] I'm impressed watching how fast they adjust and so many reads and so many audibles and so many formations. It's actually pretty incredible to watch it."

Dobbs graduated with honors from the University of Tennessee in 2017, with a degree in aerospace engineering. He also minored in business administration and carried a 4.0 GPA.

Dobbs himself has drawn parallels between his two paths, telling reporters he sees similarities in the mental preparation. Melvin also noted the parallels between being an elite athlete and a rocket scientist, and described an "information overload" in both fields.

It's the cadence and rituals of preparation, Colloredo said, that serve Dobbs well in both his role as an NFL player and an aerospace engineer. He pointed out that in both jobs, the training, the contingency planning, and the systems check-downs require some of the same skill sets.

Add to that the number of stops on NFL teams Dobbs has made since the Pittsburgh Steelers drafted him in the fourth round in 2017, and it's a lot of learning and adjusting. Pittsburgh traded him to the Jacksonville Jaguars in 2019. After a second stop in Pittsburgh, he signed with the Cleveland Browns, then joined the Detroit Lions' practice squad, then the Tennessee Titans' practice squad. He returned to Cleveland, and during the 2023 preseason was traded to the Arizona Cardinals, where he went 1-7 before the trade to Minnesota. In between it all, he externed twice with NASA.

In his NFL career, he's played in 19 games, completed 280 of 447 pass attempts for 2,672 yards and 14 touchdowns. He's rushed for 464 yards on 84 carries, with six touchdowns.

"It's not so much the physics. I mean, to me, a lot of the physics that goes on in sports is just pure athleticism," said Colloredo, a fellow Tennessee engineering graduate who recruited Dobbs to NASA. "The closer analogy from what he's doing on the football team, especially an elite level in the NFL, to compare with what we do with rockets, which is also an elite level with NASA, is the training that goes into it."

Dobbs likely would need to earn a master's degree before applying for NASA's highly competitive astronaut program, but he already has experienced some of the thrills of being a part of the NASA program. During his externships, Dobbs worked with the instrumentations group at Kennedy Space Center.

"I would say it's almost like your car tells you what's wrong with it, what's right with it: voltages, pressures, flows, temperatures, those kinds of things that you have automatically from a car," Colloredo said. "Probably the best way to describe it is the folks that work in instrumentation measure those things, just like your car would."

Once word got out that Dobbs was the newest extern, Colloredo said, people "came out of the woodwork" to meet the quarterback, who was gracious with his time.

"He generally wanted to dive into engineering discussions. A lot of folks wanted to talk football, and it didn't seem to matter to him," Colloredo said. "He would talk either subject just as happily, and he's very humble. Folks just really took to him."

In Minnesota, Dobbs already has created excitement in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education among young students and educators.

Farzad Sadjadi, director of STEM education at the Science Museum of Minnesota, said educational research shows the importance of role models and how young people see themselves in STEM fields or professions. He said the museum is beginning to address the interest by planning new educational programs centered on "The Passtronaut."

The museum, which has a partnership with the Vikings, recently held a program at the stadium where Dobbs joined for a Q&A session. Sadjadi said students seemed significantly more engaged than at past events.

"I think it helps broaden the expectations that students have. There's a lot of stereotypes around science [and] around engineering, about who is and who isn't sort of welcome in those fields," Sadjadi said. "I think having someone like Josh there, sort of in the public space, it allows us to draw examples. And I think when he's able to be directly interacting with students, drawing those connections himself, it's even more powerful."

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 handing over me as I was meeting him for the first time. I hate it because I wasn't able to be really present."

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

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

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

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

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

The Providence Journal

COMING OF AGE: Kyle Dugger went from a Division II player to a second-round draft pick of the Patriots

By Mark Daniels
Sep 25, 2020

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

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

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

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

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

That spring, Jim Nagy, the executive director of the Senior Bowl, was in the process of identifying players for the next college All-Star game, which features prospects for the upcoming draft. Nagy scouted in the NFL for 18 seasons, including for the Patriots. He worked with Florence in Seattle and called to ask about Dugger after an agent tipped him off.

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

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

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

Early impressions

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

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

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

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

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

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

"(When I recruited him), he was probably 6-foot, 185 pounds," said Cronic, who now coaches at Mercer. "When I saw him again, he was 218-220 (pounds) and he looked like he belonged at Clemson or Alabama. Then they start talking

about him returning punts. I'm going, 'OK, whatever, a 218-pound guy returning punts.' Then I watched film on it. And I got to see it live and in color that fall ... and I was a believer."

The NFL soon was as well.

All the right things

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The final testing ground

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

Still, they needed more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DT Joshua Farmer

Built in the Trenches: Joshua Farmer's Journey to the NFL

By Mike Dussault

Joshua Farmer wasn't supposed to wait this long. The 6-foot-3, 295-pound defensive lineman from Florida State entered the 2025 NFL Draft as one of the most productive interior defenders in the ACC — twitchy, powerful, and battle-tested. Analysts had projected him as a second-day selection. So as the third round came and went, and his phone remained silent, a familiar feeling crept in.

"I think it was probably 17 defensive tackles taken in front of me," Farmer said. "Everybody in the world knows that's not how it's supposed to go."

But when the New England Patriots called after trading up to the 137th overall pick in the fourth round, frustration gave way to purpose.

"Honestly, man, I'm just blessed," he said. "My whole life, I just had to come behind the sticks. Once I got past round two, I just knew I wanted to be at a great organization — and I got that."

For Farmer, overcoming obstacles is nothing new. It's what shaped him — long before college football or draft boards ever entered the picture.

A Journey Defined by Resilience

Farmer's football journey began in the small Panhandle town of Port St. Joe, Florida, but it was marked early by profound personal loss. His father, Greg, died when Joshua was just two years old after complications from stomach surgery. When he was 11, tragedy struck again when his mother, Pauline, passed away from a brain aneurysm. Left without parents, Joshua was raised by his grandmother, Ruby Lee Farmer, who helped push him towards his ultimate goal.

"(My grandma) would take me to the track, I would run, run, run, run, run, run every day for three weeks. She just told me, 'If this is what you want, this is what you've got to do,'" relayed Farmer to The Tallahassee Democrat in 2021.

Ruby Lee gave him discipline. Football gave him structure. And over time, Farmer gave himself a chance at a bright future.

After two productive seasons at Port St. Joe High School, where he played running back and linebacker, Farmer transferred to Gadsden County High School for his final two seasons and blossomed into a three-star defensive lineman recruit with multiple FBS offers.

Florida State saw the potential and made him a priority. Happy to stay close to home, Farmer committed, grew into his frame, and became one of the program's most important interior defenders over the next four seasons.

"I'd describe me as a tough, relentless player," Farmer said in his post-draft conference call. "I'm just ready to give my all. My best football is still ahead of me."

That belief — in growth, in process, in striving — drives everything he does. It's what helped him through adversity, what made him a leader at FSU, and what now fuels his entrance into the NFL.

A Draft Day Detour — and a Perfect Fit

Farmer's production at Florida State speaks for itself: back-to-back 32-tackle seasons, 21 career tackles-for-loss and 11 career sacks, culminating in a 2024 Honorable Mention All-ACC. He has disruptive quickness off the line, and enough pass-rush juice to command double teams. His NFL.com scouting profile cites his explosive get-off, violent hands, and positional versatility.

When New England made him a Day 3 pick, it wasn't a surprise. He had visited Foxborough as part of the Patriots' limited top-30 pre-draft visits — and felt an immediate connection.

"No other visit I went on was like that," he said of his trip to Foxborough earlier this spring. "Coach Vrabel — I remember him coming to Florida State my freshman year and putting pads on, letting the guys strike him. He's a trench guy. Then Coach T [Terrell Williams], Coach Clint [McMillan] — Coach Clint was my first coach at FSU, gave me my first offer. What other situation could I ask for?"

During the visit, he sat with Patriots defensive tackle Milton Williams for 30 minutes. "He was a later-round guy like me. He told me to stay ready," Farmer recalled. "It stuck with me."

A Room of Dogs — and a New Era in New England

Farmer joins a defensive front in transition. Anchored by Christian Barmore and Keion White, and bolstered by coveted free agent Williams as well as mammoth space-eater Khyiris Tonga, the Patriots' remade D-line now boasts a nice mix of upfield explosiveness and trench-dominating power.

It's a group that Farmer should complement and fit in well with.

"We got some dogs now," Farmer said. "It's not going to be the same. We're bringing back the old New England."

Farmer's path — one marked by adversity, effort, and self-belief — fits the Patriots' DNA. He doesn't shy away from competition. He embraces the grind. And he sees Boston not as a destination, but a proving ground.

"It's a perfect place to go and just focus," he said. "It's not Florida. It's a place where you can just thrive."

His goals are simple: earn his reps, bring intensity every day, and validate the belief the Patriots have placed in him.

"I'm just ready to get there, take over, and give my all to the team," he said. "God did this for a reason. I wouldn't want it to go any other way."

WBZ NEWS

Patriots draft pick Joshua Farmer bringing big chip on shoulder to NFL after falling to fourth round

By Matt Geagan

Defensive tackle Joshua Farmer was drafted by the New England Patriots in the fourth round of the 2025 NFL Draft. The former Florida State Seminole believes he should have gone a lot earlier, which will give him a big chip on his shoulder when he gets to the NFL.

The Patriots traded up to get Farmer, sending a fifth-round pick (No. 144) and a seventh-round selection (No. 238) to the Seattle Seahawks to draft the big defensive tackle at No. 137.

This isn't how Farmer expected the draft to go. His family held draft parties for him on Thursday and Friday night, but he didn't hear his named called during either evening. He was projected to be a second-round pick, but had to sit back and watch as 16 other defensive tackles were taken ahead of him.

"Everybody in the world knows that's not how it's supposed to go. I'm just ready to get there and prove everybody wrong and be the best me every day. That's all I can say," said Farms.

That being said, he's thrilled to have landed in New England. Farmer said that once the second round came and went, he just wanted to go to a great organization.

"I'm just blessed and God did this for a reason. Everything happens for a reason and I wouldn't want it to go any other way. I'm blessed," he said. "Honestly, I'm just ready to get to work. It's been great and I love what you all got going on in New England. I'm just ready to get to work."

Who is Joshua Farmer?
The 6-foot-3, 305-pound Farmer will give the Patriots a stout run defender who can line up in multiple spots along the defensive front. He was a three-year starter at Florida State and racked up 11 sacks in 38 games over that span. He had four sacks, 32 tackles, and eight tackles for a loss as a senior in 2024.

Farmer was a team captain for the Seminoles, and will give Mike Vrabel and defensive coordinator Terrell Williams another violent defender in the trenches. He'll look to join Christian Barmore, Milton Williams, and Keion White along the defensive front, with Jeremiah Pharms, Khyiris Tonga, and Jaquelin Roy also on New England's depth chart along the D line.

Farmer said he spoke with Williams for over 30 minutes in his pre-draft visit to Foxboro, and added that he can't wait to play for Vrabel.

BOSTON.COM

Four things to know about new Patriots DT Joshua Farmer, who overcame adversity to reach NFL

By Conor Roche

The Patriots doubled down on defensive help in the fourth round of the 2025 NFL Draft, trading back into the round in order to select Florida State defensive tackle Joshua Famer with the 137th overall pick.

Farmer, who spent all four years of his college career at Florida State, was productive for the Seminoles over the last couple of seasons. He had 32 total tackles and four sacks this past season, adding 26 pressures.

The 22-year-old was measured at 6-foot-3 and 305 pounds at the NFL Scouting Combine, with his hands coming in at a massive size of 10 1/4 inches. He also ran a 5.11 40 time to go with a 29-inch vertical jump and a 9-4 broad jump at the combine.

Farmer, who is the youngest of eight kids, lost both of his parents when he was a kid. His father, Greg, died from complications following stomach surgery when he was 2. When Farmer was 11, his mother, Pauline, passed away from a brain aneurysm.

While Farmer doesn't have many memories of his father, he recalled the night his mother died in an interview with the Tallahassee Democrat's Curt Weiler in 2021.

"She came home at night and she said her head was hurting. She asked me and my sister (Jazmyne) to help her up, she wasn't feeling good and she hit the floor," Farmer said.

"We had to call our older sister to come help us. My older sister and my brother, they were in the room, they had to come help us. We called the ambulance, but it was taking too long so we got our car, put her in there and took her to the hospital."

Farmer moved in with his grandma, Ruby Lee Farmer, after his mother's death. He credited her for his football journey, sharing that she got him in shape when he wanted start playing as a kid.

"(My grandma) would take me to the track, I would run, run, run, run, run, run every day for three weeks. She just told me, 'If this is what you want, this is what you've got to do,'" Farmer told Weiler, recalling that he needed to lose 11 pounds in order to be able to play football in the league he signed up for.

“I stepped on the scale and I had lost 13 pounds. I was like, ‘This is what I want to do. This is for me.’ I just knew ever since then that it was for me.”

Farmer also keeps both of his parents close to heart. When he attended ACC Media Days last summer, he wore a special necklace that paid tribute to them.

Farmer also credited his sibling for helping to build a strong support system, telling reporters Saturday that they were the ones who decided to throw him a draft party.

“I didn’t even want to do a party, but my brothers and sisters, they’re still happy,” Farmer said. “They treated me like I’m a top-five pick and I’m just thankful and I’m blessed.”

The Patriots traded back into the fourth round in order to get Farmer, who some had tabbed as a Day 2 talent. NFL Network’s Daniel Jeremiah had Farmer as the 77th-best prospect on his big board.

“This was about some injury concerns with some durability and longevity. But this is a player that deserved to go much higher than this, who’s got some pop in his hands, got a quick first step,” Jeremiah said on NFL Network’s broadcast of the draft. “He can win early. I think with what we saw at the Senior Bowl, there’s more pass rush upside.

“[Some might wonder] how long this guy’s going to play. With this guy, give me him for the next five years. If that was all I was going to get, that would be a heck of a pick at this point in time.”

ESPN’s Louis Riddick said that the Patriots’ selection of Farmer was a “nice value pick,” noting that the Florida State product has a “real sudden first step and very twitchy body.”

“The kind of guy that the flashes were outstanding. He could’ve shown a little bit more consistency,” Field Yates added on ESPN’s broadcast of the draft as he ranked him 73rd on his big board.

The Athletic‘s Dane Brugler gave Farmer a third-round grade, ranking him as the 76th overall prospect in the draft.

“Overall, Farmer goes through too many quiet stretches on film, but he is a force creator with his natural power as a two-gapper and promising pass-rush tools,” Brugler wrote of Farmer. “He should step into a rotation as a rookie and has the potential of a full-time starter.”

The Patriots got pretty familiar with Farmer during the draft process. They hosted him for a top 30 draft visit, which allowed him to reunite with Patriots defensive assistant Clinton McMillan, who coached Farmer at Florida State. He also got to meet Mike Vrabel during his time in Tallahassee, too.

“I love Coach Vrabel,” Farmer told reporters. “I remember him my freshman year, coming to Florida State and putting on the pad and letting them guys strike him. He’s been catching my eye. I just remember seeing him. He’s a guy that wants to feel you out and I couldn’t be more thankful. I got Coach Vrabel, Coach T and Coach Clint. Coach Clint was my first coach. What other situation can I be in?”

Farmer was also able to get acquainted with one of his new teammates during his trip to Foxborough. Milton Williams was in the building the day he at Gillette Stadium. Farmer flashed a picture he took with Williams during his video press conference on Saturday.

Farmer expressed an appreciation for Williams.

“[Williams] sat down and talked with me for at least 30 minutes,” Farmer said. “It was just me and him. He was a later-round guy, kind of like me in the third round and fourth round. He just sat down and talked to me. No other visit I went on was like that. He’s just a great guy. Awesome. Fantastic.”

Farmer kept count of how many defensive tackles were selected before him in the 2025 NFL Draft, and it didn’t sit well with him.

“I think it was probably 17 defensive tackles taken in front of me,” Farmer said. “Everybody in the world knows that’s not how it’s supposed to go. I’m just ready to get there and prove everybody wrong and be the best me every day.”

Technically, Farmer was the 17th defensive tackle picked in the 2025 NFL Draft based on how the players were announced. Still, he's ready to get to work with a couple of players he'll likely share some time with in the defensive interior.

"I'm in the right situation," Farmer said. "Me and Milton and Christian [Barmore]. We got some dogs now. It's not going to be the same. We should be bringing back the old New England."

Boston Herald

Why Patriots DL Joshua Farmer wants to 'prove everybody wrong'

By Andrew Callahan

In their only trade up of the NFL Draft, the Patriots jumped seven spots Saturday to select Florida State defensive tackle Joshua Farmer late in the fourth round.

Farmer was a projected top-100 pick according to most media experts, including the NFL Network's Daniel Jeremiah, an ex-scout for three teams. Farmer believed he was destined to go in the top three rounds and even held parties at home on Thursday and Friday night anticipating his selection.

After falling to pick No. 137, and waiting for a call that never came over two straight nights, Farmer had one thing on his mind Saturday.

"Everybody in the world knows that's not how it was supposed to go," he told reporters via video conference. "I'm going to get (to New England) and prove everybody wrong."

The 6-foot-3, 305-pounder was a rugged player at Florida State, where he posted six or more tackles for loss in each of his last three seasons. He was also named a team captain in 2024 and tallied a team-high four sacks.

In college, Farmer demonstrated a versatility that surely appealed to the Patriots. He can play multiple spots along the defensive front and even two-gap as a run stuffer. He has prototypical size and exceptional length for the position.

Farmer took a pre-draft visit to New England and raved about his interactions with head coach Mike Vrabel. He also expressed excitement over playing for defensive coordinator Terrell Williams, a longtime defensive line expert, and new Pats defensive line coach Clinton McMillan, whom he knew as a high school recruit.

During his pre-draft visit, Farmer said he connected with new free-agent defensive tackle Miltion Williams. He shared the two of them shared a half-hour conversation, and that he now hopes to emulate Williams, a former third-round pick who became the third-highest paid defensive tackle in the NFL earlier this spring.

In Foxboro, Farmer figures to contribute right away in a rotation behind Williams and fellow starting defensive tackle Christian Barmore, presuming Barmore successfully recovers from his recurrence of blood clot-related symptoms last December.

MASS LIVE

Joshua Farmer comes to New England with massive chip on shoulder

By Karen Guregian

Joshua Farmer thought he might be a first or second round pick. That's where many evaluators had him pegged.

The Florida State defensive lineman, however, had to wait until the fourth round. That's when the Patriots moved up the board, making a trade with Cleveland, to snag Farmer with the 137 overall pick.

Speaking via Zoom call with the media, Farmer bemoaned the fact there were quite a few defensive tackles taken ahead of him.

"I think there was 17 defensive tackles taken ahead of me. Everybody in the world knows that's not how it was supposed to go," he said. "I'm just going to have to get there and prove everybody wrong and just be the best me every day. I wouldn't want it to go any other way. I'm blessed."

The Patriots probably think they got a steal. They had some inside information when it came to Farmer.

Defensive line coach Clint McMillan was part of Florida State's coaching staff a few years back before heading to Tennessee, and now, New England.

"It's a great fit for me," Farmer said, alluding to his relationship with McMillans. "It's the perfect place to go. I love what we got going in New England. I'm just ready to get to work."

Farmer, team captain, was a productive player for the Seminoles. Last year, he finished with 32 tackles, eight for loss, with four sacks.

He had a 30-visit with the Patriots.

"I loved it," Farmer said of the visit. "I love Coach Vrabel. I remember him my freshman year coming to Florida State and putting on the pads, letting them guys crack him."

LB Jack Gibbens

Forbes

Ex-Titans Linebacker Jack Gibbens Brings More Than A Nickname To Patriots

By Oliver Thomas

An old nickname could be back in circulation for Jack Gibbens.

"Dr. Gibby."

The New England Patriots linebacker acquired it from past and present head coach Mike Vrabel as an undrafted free agent with the Tennessee Titans in 2022.

"I guess it was my rookie year. He just started calling me 'Dr. Gibby,'" Gibbens told reporters during his Thursday press conference at Gillette Stadium. "Like in rookie minicamp and stuff, he likes to ask a lot of questions, quiz people. And I answered a few right and he started calling me 'Doctor.' I had to let him know that I didn't study medicine in school, but yeah, he let me know it was a joke."

Gibbens, 26, held a 4.0 GPA as a double major in accounting and financial management at Abilene Christian University. Twice a first-team CoSIDA Academic All-American, he went on to earn his master's degree in accounting as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota.

Earning a 53-man NFL roster spot was up next for the former All-Big Ten honorable mention.

After clearing waivers at the end of his rookie preseason, Gibbens made his way on the practice squad before being promoted to the active roster as fall turned to winter. The 6-foot-3, 242-pound off-the-ball linebacker went on to appear in 29 games during his run in Nashville, starting 20.

He had a hand in 167 tackles, 1.5 sacks and one interception across 1,078 snaps on defense as well as 466 snaps on special teams.

“It’s kind of been a crazy journey for me,” Gibbens said. “Coming in as an undrafted guy, had to kind of fight and scratch for every opportunity I got. And I got the opportunity to get on the field a little bit in Tennessee, felt like I had some success, and last year was kind of a rocky year for me with some stuff happening kind of outside of my control.”

On the heels of a breakout 2023 season under Vrabel, Gibbens’ 2024 under new Titans head coach Brian Callahan ended in November due to ankle surgery. In the weeks prior to being carted off and placed on injured reserve, he tallied a team-high 14 tackles against the Patriots and split a sack on rookie quarterback Drake Maye.

“Then I got my opportunity, felt like I was playing good and then go down with an injury. So that’s kind of been the story of my career,” added Gibbens. “But just trying to stay resilient, keep working hard and just continue to fight and earn any opportunities that I can get, and then make the most of them when I get them.”

After not being tendered by Tennessee as a restricted free agent in March, Gibbens visited Foxborough. A one-year contract followed. It brings a $1.1 million base salary and a cap charge of $1.365 million, per OverTheCap.com. It also brings connections.

Defensive coordinator Terrell Williams, defensive line coach Clint McMillan, inside linebackers coach Zak Kuhr, cornerbacks coach Justin Hamilton and safeties coach Scott Booker are among the Titans ties with the 2025 Patriots.

“The big reason I wanted to come here was just familiarity with this coaching staff,” Gibbens said. “With the type of football they want to play here, I feel like it aligns with who I am and the type of player and person I want to be. I wanted to get back in that environment.”

Time will tell whether the old nickname from Vrabel spreads.

“Not many other people have caught onto it, but yeah, he still calls me ‘Doc’ every now and then,” Gibbens said.

MASS LIVE

Patriots veteran linebacker earned ‘doctor’ nickname from Mike Vrabel

By Mark Daniels

Jack Gibbens was an undrafted free agent trying to prove himself. It took that first rookie minicamp for him to make an impression on Mike Vrabel.

In 2022, coming out of the University of Minnesota, Gibbens caught the attention of the then-Tennessee Titans head coach. Vrabel likes to question and quiz his players in meetings. He’ll often bring up what he said in an earlier meeting to his players to see who’s paying attention and retaining information.

During that first rookie minicamp, Gibbens aced the test over and over again. That’s when Vrabel started to call him, ‘Dr. Gibby.’ The joke went over the young linebacker’s head and he told the coach he wasn’t a pre-med student in college.

Now with the Patriots, Gibbens has reunited with Vrabel – and the nickname still stands.

“That was my rookie year. He just started calling me Dr. Gibby, like in rookie minicamp itself,” Gibbens said Thursday. “He likes to ask a lot of questions and quiz people, and I answered a few right. He started calling me ‘doctor.’ I had to let him know that I didn’t study medicine at school. He let me know it was a joke.”

That first year, Gibbens was cut at the end of training camp and eventually signed to the Titans practice squad. The linebacker was eventually signed to Tennessee’s 53-man roster and played in five games, making two starts, as a rookie.

The next year, in 2023, Gibbens was a starting linebacker for Vrabel. He had the best season of his career, making 95 tackles to go with a sack and three pass breakups. Last year, Gibbens played in 10 games, finishing with 44 tackles, before an ankle injury ended his season.

When he became available in free agency, the Patriots were a natural destination due to his relationship with Vrabel.

“I definitely just really appreciate the type of program that he builds, where it’s built on effort and knowing what to do, playing really hard, being accountable to your teammates,” Gibbens said. “He holds everyone to the same standard, and I think he gives opportunities. He always says that they’re going to treat you how you treat the team. And I really appreciated that with my time in Tennessee, and that’s a big reason why I wanted to come out here. I just love the accountability and you get what you work for here.”

Back in 2022, Vrabel explained he started calling Gibbens ‘Dr. Gibby’ because of how smart he is and how quickly he picked up the Titans defensive scheme. Now in New England, Gibbens said Vrabel is back to using the nickname.

“Just him, really,” Gibbens said. “Not many other people have caught on to it, but he still calls me Doc every now and then.”

New England Patriots ON SI

Could Patriots See LB Renaissance in 2025?

By Mike D’Abate

Is “Dr. Gibby” ready for a career resurgence this season with the New England Patriots?

Linebacker Jack Gibbens, who was first provided the nickname synonymous with earning a tertiary level of higher education by Pats’ head coach Mike Vrabel, is seemingly in the right spot to ressurect his game in 2025.

Gibbens first played under Vrabel in 2022 as an undrafted rookie with the Tennessee Titans. Although the 26-year-old’s penchant for ‘Q and A’ initially caught Vrabel’s eye, he was ultimately cut at the end of training camp. Following a brief stint on the Titans’ practice squad, the University of Minnesota product was eventually promoted to Tennessee’s 53-man roster. He played in five games, making two starts, as a rookie.

By 2023, Gibbens had earned a starting linebacker role in Vrabel’s defense. The 6’3” 242-pound defender compiled 95 total tackles, three passes defensed and one sack in his best statistical season as a pro. Gibbens logged 44 tackles and 1/2 sack before an ankle injury ended his 2024 season after 10 games — his first NFL campaign devoid of Vrabel’s tutelage.

Still, Vrabel’s impact on Gibbens remained strong enough for the Bulverde, Texas native to sign with the Patriots in the offseason. With the start of training camp fast approaching, both sides are hoping that the reunion will help to recapture the on-field prowess and meeting room chemistry that yielded their past success.

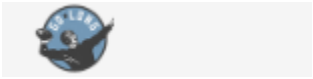
“I definitely appreciate the type of program that he [Vrabel] builds, where it’s built on effort and knowing what to do, playing really hard, being accountable to your teammates,” Gibbens told reporters during OTAs in May. “He holds everyone to the same standard, and I think he gives opportunities. He always says that they’re going to treat you how you treat the team. And I really appreciated that with my time in Tennessee, and that’s a big reason why I wanted to come out here. I just love the accountability and you get what you work for here.”

Despite being previously considered a bit small compared to typical Patriots linebackers, Gibbens’ frame projects as a strong fit within Vrabel’s defensive system. In conjunction with new coordinator Terrell Williams, Vrabel is implementing a more aggressive style on defense — one which utilizes agile and more athletic linebackers such as Gibbens, Christian Elliss and Robert Spillane. Accordingly, each of the aforementioned defenders have made their respective presences felt during the team’s offseason workout program.

Still, it will be Gibbens’ skill, tenacity and determination which ultimately earn him a significant role within the Patriots defense this season.

Fortunately for both sides, Gibbens’ potential “renaissance” may be exactly what the “doctor” ordered.

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 irrelevent. 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

OREGONLIVE The Oregonian

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.”

CBS TEXAS

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.

BOSTON.COM

21 things to know about Patriots rookie Christian Gonzalez

By Khari Thompson
June 28, 2023

Patriots rookie cornerback Christian Gonzalez turned 21 on Wednesday, so here are 21 things to know about New England's most recent first-round pick.

1. He's the first defensive back to be selected in the first round by the Patriots since Devin McCourty.

2. He's the fourth Oregon player ever drafted by the Patriots and the first since Patrick Chung in 2009, per the school's athletics website.

3. He's likely going to be a perimeter cornerback in the NFL, Patriots coach Bill Belichick said earlier this month, but there are some situations where he could play inside or in the deeper part of the field, depending on the game plan.

4. Gonzalez is 6-foot-2-inches, 201-pounds, with a 4.38 40-yard dash time and a 41.5 inch vertical leap. "If you were building a player in Madden, you'd create them very similar to Christian, especially for the corner position," Oregon coach Dan Lanning said during an interview with NBC Sports Boston.

5. Gonzalez's sisters, Melissa and Samantha Gonzalez, were All-Americans during their college track and field careers. Melissa competed in the 2020 Olympics, representing Colombia.

6. His father, Hector Gonzalez, who is 6-feet-9-inches and played college basketball at UTEP, was born in Colombia before moving to the United States as a teenager.

7. Representing Colombia at the NFL level "means the world" to Gonzalez, he told reporters on draft night when he wore a suit with the Colombian flag's colors on the inside.

8. Gonzalez was a projected top-10 pick, but slid to the Patriots at No. 17. There was less than a 1 percent chance he was going to be available that late in the draft, according to ESPN. ESPN's Mike Reiss reported that questions about his physicality may have been a factor.

9. Gonzalez is the youngest player on the Patriots' roster. Rookie receiver Kayshon Boutte is also 21, but his birthday was last month.

10. Gonzalez almost quit football after his sophomore year in high school because his coaches thought he wasn't strong enough and put him on the JV team. He ended up transferring to another school instead.

11. He originally committed to play college football at Purdue, where his brother-in-law (Cardinals quarterback) David Blough played.

12. After decommitting from Purdue, Gonzalez signed with Colorado and played two seasons there.

13. Gonzalez followed his position coach, Demetrice Martin, to Oregon, where he finished his college career. "I don't even look at him as a coach." Gonzalez said at the time, according to Sports Illustrated. "He's more like my uncle."

14. Patriots offensive line coach Adrian Klemm was on the staff at Oregon while Gonzalez was there. Klemm described Gonzalez in April as a natural leader who didn't say much, but stood out because of the way he practiced.

15. Gonzalez started the first 12 games for Oregon last year, but opted out of the team's win over North Carolina in the San Diego County Credit Union Holiday Bowl.

16. Gonzalez wore No. 50 during OTAs and minicamp. The Patriots have given No. 50 to their first selection in the NFL Draft in recent years.

17. After one of the OTA sessions, Kyle Dugger told reporters that Gonzalez is light on his feet and moves fluidly. "It's pretty effortless just the way he does everything," said Dugger.

18. Gonzalez told reporters that he wants to “follow in the footsteps” of former Patriots cornerback Stephon Gilmore.

19. Gonzalez is the second-tallest cornerback on the Patriots’ roster, behind fellow rookie Ameer Speed, who is listed at 6-feet-3-inches.

20. Gonzalez said he loves seafood. When asked about a pair of New England favorites, lobster rolls and clam chowder, Gonzalez said he’ll “stick to the lobster.”

21. When asked to sum himself up, Gonzalez said: “I’m just somebody that’s extremely trustworthy. Somebody that’s just loyal and keeps a pretty tight circle. Really all about ball. Ready to just learn. I just love to learn.”

RB TreVeyon Henderson

Henderson hoping to be next back to catch on

By Paul Perillo

The Patriots have had a impressive history of pass catching backs that can impact the offense. From Kevin Faulk to Danny Woodhead to Shane Vereen and James White, New England has seen more than its share of big plays from that position.

Mike Vrabel and his personnel staff may have found the next one in TreVeyon Henderson, and he may be the most explosive of the bunch.

Henderson was selected in the second round, 38th overall, after a solid career at Ohio State. The 5-10, 202-pound running back was productive both as a runner and receiver, but it's his ability to turn in big plays that allows him to stand out in the pack.

During his college career with the Buckeyes, Henderson averaged 6.4 yards per carry and that number rose to 7.1 last season. He also averaged 11.1 yards per reception over his four seasons. With year-by-year long carries of 68, 41, 75 and 66 yards, plus receptions of 70, 31, 65 and 75 yards, it's clear he has the ability to make big plays.

"That's not being fair to him," OSU running backs coach Carlos Locklyn said with a laugh when it was suggested Henderson had some explosiveness to his game. "Don't put the word 'some' on there. He has a hell of a lot of explosiveness. He can take it to the house from anywhere on the field, and he has. But he has some power to him as well."

Henderson also excels in another area of the game that is vital to his role: pass protection. Locklyn says his pupil was the best pass protector in college football, regardless of position. A peek at his highlight tape shows numerous thundering hits on unsuspecting linebackers making a beeline toward Henderson's quarterback.

"In six-man pass protections he gets his hands on linebackers and gets great leverage," Locklyn said. "You'd think he was a 225- or 230-pound guy the way he rocks guys. I know [offensive coordinator] Josh [McDaniels] is going to tap into that. He hasn't even scratched the surface of what he can do as back.

"He's the best pass protector in college football, period. As a back, it wasn't even close."

As impressive as Henderson's work out of the Ohio State backfield is, he may be even more so off the field. Locklyn describes him as a selfless player with the team's best interests in mind at all times. Prior to the 2024 season, Ohio State head coach Ryan Day approached Henderson to ask how he would feel about adding running back Quinshon Judkins to the roster via the transfer portal.

Rather than viewing such a move as a threat to his playing time, Henderson embraced it and told his coach he would be in favor of doing anything that would help the team win. The Buckeyes went on to capture the national title with both backs leading the way.

"I've had a lot of backs in my career and TreVeyon is the best leader I've ever been around," said Locklyn, who also coached Patriots running back Antonio Gibson during his time at Memphis. "My wife, my kids … they absolutely love him. He's a hard worker. Everything about him is what you want in a person. He's just a great man.

"He embraces his teammates. He was always doing things with the younger backs, going out to eat together and things like that. He's a strong believer in the fellowship of being together. It's not all about him. He always says it's for the love of my brother. That's what makes him such a great pass protector. He'll play for 10 years and be a great organization guy, great in the community."

Henderson should get an opportunity to contribute to the offense immediately. Rhamondre Stevenson and Gibson top the returning depth chart at running back, with young Terrell Jennings is also set to return. Gibson has extensive experience as a pass catcher and showed the ability to be productive between the tackles last year, but he doesn't possess the kind of electricity Henderson can provide.

Locklyn often compared Henderson to White, who was immensely productive at Wisconsin before arriving in New England as a fourth-round pick back in 2014. But the rookie has the potential to be more dangerous than the ever-dependable White in the open field with his speed and explosiveness.

The one thing Locklyn says Henderson may need to solidify his game is improvement when churning out the tough yards inside. It's not that Henderson lacks the power to do so, but his coach believes his patience on such plays could be better.

"That's one thing when he was prepping for Combine interviews he asked me to help him with," Locklyn said. "I told him it's not always about being an on the outside getting the ball on the edge kind of guy. He understood that and he improved that this year.

"He's going to be fine running between the tackles. He has enough weight on him and has a very high IQ as a football player and understands how to set up blocks and the run schemes. He'll have every opportunity to be a three-down back. He's just scratching the surface of what he can be."

TreVeyon Henderson carrying lessons from Ohio State to New England in rookie season

By Brian Hines

Before running back TreVeyon Henderson announced his future at Ohio State prior to his junior season, his Buckeyes made a big-time move in the transfer portal to land fellow back Quinshon Judkins, who was coming off a season in which he ran for 1,158 yards and 15 touchdowns at Ole Miss.

But as Henderson ultimately returned for the 2024 season, the back, who dealt with injuries the year prior, was now set to become apart of a rotation atop their running back depth chart

While it was largely new territory for the duo, things worked out in the end as both Henderson and Judkins topped 1,000 rushing yards and double digit touchdowns for the eventual National Champion Buckeyes en route to being selected atop the second-round in the 2025 NFL Draft.

Joining the New England Patriots in the second-round, Henderson now finds himself in a similar spot he was a year ago apart of a backfield that already features Rhamondre Stevenson and Antonio Gibson. But following his season with Judkins, Henderson has learned how to handle the situation.

“The biggest thing that taught me last year is that I learned how to be unselfish,” Henderson said following the team’s minicamp. “I learned how to put the team over my individual goals and what I wanted to accomplish, and so that’s the biggest thing coming here. I just want to give it everything that I got to really help this team, however I can.”

With the near 230-pound Stevenson still primarily serving as an early-down option throughout New England's offseason program, Henderson's explosiveness served as a strong complement working in with him.

That especially rang true in the passing game — a part of the rookie's game that impressed at Ohio State where Henderson caught 77 passes over his collegiate career. As Henderson continues to find his role in New England's offense, his experience as a pass catcher will be counted on.

"Coach McDaniels, he's a great offensive coordinator. He does a great job featuring the running backs, and so the biggest thing is I just want to continue to listen as a player and take coaching," Henderson said.

"Just when I come into the building, just try to work on my game, work on my craft, especially running routes out the back field. The role that I can fit into the team to help the team win, I'm willing to do that."

The history of pass-catching backs in New England under offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels is well-documented throughout the years. Through Henderson's early film study, one back in particular has stood out to him.

"He dang near looked like a receiver, but man, he was a great running back here," Henderson said of James White. "Just his great receiving ability that he had. In one-on-one matchups, it seems like he was winning every time. But man, he was such a great player. He made a huge impact to help this team win games just running routes out of the back field and stuff.

"I really just want to continue to watch film, study, and learn and grow as a player."

WBZ NEWS

Who is TreVeyon Henderson, the pass-catching running back drafted by the Patriots

By Matt Geagan

The New England Patriots added an explosive weapon early on Day 2 of the NFL Draft, taking Ohio State running back TreVeyon Henderson with the 38th overall pick on Friday night. Henderson will give Patriots quarterback Drake Maye a dangerous pass-catching back out of the New England backfield.

"I'm fast, explosive, good in one-on-one matchups. My receiving ability and blocking – I can pretty much do it all," Henderson said confidently when talking with the New England media shortly after being drafted.

Henderson had a huge season for the Buckeyes in 2024 on their way to a national championship, and now he'll team up with Rhamondre Stevenson and Antonio Gibson in New England. The Patriots have needed a pass-catching running back since James White retired, and Henderson should fill that role nicely in the New England offense.

Henderson said he was pretty surprised to be drafted by the Patriots, considering he only held a Zoom call with running backs coach Tony Dews during the pre-draft process.

"Honestly I had no clue that New England was going to be the spot," said Henderson. "So it was definitely a surprise."

He was with his parents, two grandmothers, and his brother when Mike Vrabel (a fellow Buckeye) and the Patriots called him with the good news. He didn't even know who was on the clock when his phone started ringing, so he wasn't sure what to expect.

Henderson said it was an emotional moment for everyone, so much so that he doesn't even remember what his new head coach had to say after drafting him.

"I was so excited and it went by so fast. There was so much emotions I barely remember," Henderson said with a laugh.

Who is TreVeyon Henderson?

The 22-year-old running back was born on October 22, 2002 in Hopewell, Virginia. He was a five-star recruit out of Hopewell High School, where he ran for over 4,000 yards and 50 touchdowns despite not playing his senior season due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He helped Hopedale win a state championship in 2019, when Henderson was also the Gatorade Virginia Player of the Year. Nationally, he was the top running back of his class.

Henderson stands at 5-foot-10 and 202 pounds, and ran a 4.43 40-yard dash at the NFL Combine. He had the highest athleticism score of all running backs at the Combine.

TreVeyon Henderson put up big numbers at Ohio State

Henderson shared the backfield with Quinshon Judkins in 2024, but he still rushed for 1,016 yards and 10 touchdowns during his senior season for the Buckeyes. He averaged 7.1 yards per carry to lead the Big Ten, and also caught 27 passes for 284 yards and added another touchdown through the air.

Over his four seasons at Ohio State, Henderson ran for 3,761 yards and 42 touchdowns in 47 games. He also finished with 853 receiving yards and six touchdown receptions.

TreVeyon Henderson had a big playoff run for Buckeyes

Henderson had quite the run during the CFB playoffs last year, rushing for 265 yards (averaging 7.4 yards per carry) and four touchdowns while adding eight receptions for 149 yards and a touchdown in Ohio State's playoff wins over Tennessee, Oregon, Texas, and Notre Dame.

He rushed for two touchdown against both Tennessee and Oregeon, and then turned a short reception into a 75-yard catch-and-run score against Texas in the Cotton Bowl.

TreVeyon Henderson set an Ohio State rookie record

Henderson wasted no time making an impact at Ohio State, leading the team with 1,248 rushing yards as a freshman. He found the end zone 19 times (15 rushing, four receiving) to set a new school record for a freshman.

All those big numbers earned Henderson Second-Team All-Big Ten honors and a Freshman All-American nod.

Henderson also set a single-game rushing record in just his third game at Ohio State, when he ran for 270 yards and three touchdowns in a win over Tulsa.

TreVeyon Henderson is in the Ohio State record books

Henderson battled injuries during his sophomore and junior season, which limited him to 18 games over those two years. But he finished his Buckeye career with 3,761 rushing yards -- good for fifth-most in the Ohio State record books.

He is also No. 3 on Ohio State's all time touchdown list with 48.

TreVeyon Henderson has great hands

Henderson had 667 career touches at Ohio State. He fumbled just twice, and recovered both of them himself. Throughout his college career, Henderson lost zero fumbles at Ohio State.

He also caught the top portion of the national championship trophy when Vice President JD Vance fumbled it during Ohio State's visit to the White House. The kid has great hands no matter the situation.

What will TreVeyon Henderson bring to the Patriots?

Henderson will give the Patriots a lot of dynamic speed out of the backfield with some big-play capability as both a rusher and a pass-catcher. At Ohio State, Henderson had 11 plays from scrimmage that went for over 50 yards.

He's also a pretty solid blocker, which is always a big plus in Mike Vrabel's book. Henderson could also potentially return kickoffs for New England at the NFL level.

TreVeyon Henderson on providing for his mother, who no longer has to work two jobs

By Dave Biddle

There is a lot of complaining from college football fans about the new age of players profiting off their name, image and likeness (NIL). However, there are some very positive stories out there as well. Take Ohio State running back TreVeyon Henderson for example. He is known best for his prowess on the gridiron as he won the Buckeyes' starting RB job as a true freshman and had a fantastic season. He rushed for 1,248 yards (6.8 yards per carry), hauled in 27 receptions for 312 yards (11.6 yards per catch) and scored a total of 19 touchdowns (15 rushing).

However, what Henderson is accomplishing off the field is even more meaningful to him.

Henderson's family did not have much money when he was growing up, and he shared a bedroom in a small house in Hopewell, Va., with his two brothers. His mother worked two jobs just to keep the family afloat.

She does not have to work two jobs any longer.

Thanks to NIL deals that Henderson has struck with a car dealership and a cryptocurrency exchange company, he can now provide for his mother. Last month at an OSU Board of Trustees meeting, Henderson told the trustees that NIL has "completely changed my life."

When Bucknuts got a chance to speak with Henderson last week, we were curious to hear more about his thoughts on the matter. It must feel very good for such a young man to be able to take care of his mom.

"Oh yeah, definitely," Henderson said. "I watched my mom have to struggle growing up and have trouble trying to take care of us and provide for us. But she always worked so hard and she always did whatever she had to do to make sure we were straight.

"And now, with NIL coming in, I can take care of her. Forever. Hopefully forever. But yeah, this is just the start now. She's straight now. She doesn't have to worry about anything."

Really though, how cool is that? Whatever you think about NIL, how can you not love that?

Henderson did not get specific about how much he's raking in, but it is clearly more than pocket change.

"Oh yeah, being here at The Ohio State University and being a running back here, yeah, I make lots of money," he said. "So, whatever my mom needs, whatever my grandma needs, whatever those two need, I send it right to them."

Henderson is a serious young man and rarely cracks a smile when talking about football. But he was smiling ear-to-ear regarding this topic.

"Yeah, it makes me feel great," Henderson said. "I love giving back. And not just to my own mom and grandma and stuff, but if I'm out walking and I see someone in need, I'll always give back to them and go get them something to eat and stuff like that. But that stuff I don't usually talk about or brag about, I just do it from the heart."

Continuing His Run: Origin Of Patriots' TreVeyon Henderson

By Sean McGuire

TreVeyon Henderson is a folk hero in his hometown.

"He's a legend here," said Ricky Irby, the head football coach for Henderson's three seasons at Hopewell High (Va).

Henderson was the top running back in the country, even though he barely played the position in high school. He didn't move into the backfield until his junior season when he compiled nearly 3,000 yards from scrimmage and scored 50 touchdowns. His older half-brother, Ronnie Walker Jr., who played at Indiana and Virginia, was the starting running back during Henderson's freshman season. Robert Briggs, who went on to play college football himself, was featured in the Blue Devils' backfield during their sophomore campaign. They were always a stellar running back-wide receiver tandem, Irby said.

Henderson, however, was very much on the radar.

"He had major Division I offers at four different positions," Irby said of the New England Patriots second-round pick in the 2025 NFL Draft.

Notre Dame recruited Henderson as a cornerback, Clemson wanted him as a safety and Tennessee and Syracuse targeted the five-star prospect as a wide receiver. Those offers — and others — came in the spring of 2019. The second-ranked player in Virginia and 23rd national recruit received 39 offers in total, per 247 Sports.

"I had Lincoln Riley call me when (Henderson) first started getting recruited," said Irby, referencing the then-Oklahoma coach. "He's talking to Trey and said, 'Man, you can come here and be a kicker if you want to be a kicker. You can play anywhere you want.'"

Those types of conversations ended a few months later.

"By the time he made the full-time transition to running back, everybody wanted him at running back," Irby said.

Henderson's performance as a wildcat quarterback the season prior put those wheels in motion. The wildcat package for Henderson initially was inserted on short notice after Hopewell's quarterback suffered an injury two days before the Blue Devils traveled to face Dinwiddie High, which was riding a 35-game home win streak.

In a scoreless game late in the fourth quarter, Henderson took a direct snap and went 80 yards for a touchdown. It looked a lot like his track meets when he ran sprints and relays. He secured the 7-0 victory with a game-sealing interception.

"That was his coming-out party right there," Irby said. "It was, 'OK, this kid's special.'"

Henderson's junior season stats are so ridiculous that they look fake. He ran the ball 198 times for 2,424 yards (12.2 average) with 45 rushing touchdowns and added 18 receptions for 283 yards (15.7 average) and five receiving touchdowns.

The craziest part?

"Most of the games he didn't even play the second half," Irby said.

Henderson was named the 2019 Gatorade Virginia Player of the Year after he led Hopewell to a 15-0 record and second straight state championship. Unfortunately for Henderson and the Blue Devils, the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled the 2020 campaign. Hopewell would've earned itself a three-peat that season, Irby believes.

Henderson, who was a straight-A student and graduated with a 4.0 GPA, enrolled early at Ohio State. That was always his plan, Irby said, and understandably so.

Henderson burst onto the scene as a freshman in Columbus when he compiled 1,560 yards from scrimmage with 19 touchdowns. He recorded 1,000-plus yards from scrimmage in three of his four campaigns against Big Ten competition, including his senior season when he rushed for 1,016 yards on 144 attempts (7.1 average) with 10 of his 11 touchdowns coming on the ground.

"The biggest strength of his game is his short-area burst and overall speed," said Ohio State running backs coach Carlos Locklyn. "Once he gets his foot in the ground and gets his shoulders square, his speed can actually translate to power. He's not a big, big, big guy, but he runs with so much speed and has so much velocity."

Locklyn recruited Henderson out of high school when he was on the Florida State staff.

"The kid is an elite running back," Locklyn said. "He has great hands. He can run routes. He's the total package."

Part of that package, of course, is Henderson's ability in pass protection. Henderson was the best in college football when it came to pass blocking, Locklyn said. Others, including Indianapolis Colts general manager Chris Ballard, agree.

"We had two rules in the running back room," said Locklyn, who also coached Bucky Irving at Oregon and Antonio Gibson at Memphis. "We don't put the ball on the ground and we don't give up sacks. Trey didn't do neither one of them. So he's like the poster child for me saying that."

His work ethic and character are what really makes him great.

Those who know Henderson won't let you forget who is off the field. They paint the picture of the exact kind of player any team should want in its building, which played into New England's selection.
"We have all these football questions, but I think the thing that makes him such a wonderful football player is he's such a wonderful young man," Locklyn said. "I'm going to miss him. I'm going to miss his leadership. I'm going to miss him being in the room, he's the ultimate professional."

Irby added: "His work ethic and his character are what really makes him great."

Irby also recited the story he told college coaches.

When Henderson was a junior in high school, he and another Hopewell teammate were invited to the local market for a "grocery dash" before Thanksgiving. The store specifically asked for Henderson, the star football player, to be there. Well, Henderson's teammate won the competition, earning both himself and Henderson a $50 gift card.

"Everyone's celebrating, and I look around and Trey is gone," Irby said.

Irby then saw Henderson in the back of the store, and an elderly woman who lost the "grocery dash" was near him.

"I said, 'You gave her your gift card, didn't you?' And he said, 'Yeah, coach. She needed it more than me,'" Irby recalled. "It just speaks to the character of a kid at 17 years old to think about others the way he does.

"Even to this day, what he gives back to our community — he's a legend here. He's a folk hero. He's an inspiration to everybody in our city."

Perhaps he'll continue such a run in his new home.

TE Hunter Henry

ESPN

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.

WR Mack Hollins

People

Bills' Mack Hollins Shows Up Barefoot to Snowy, 31-Degree Game — Here's Why It's a Ritual for the Wide Receiver

By Natasha Dye

Bills wide receiver Mack Hollins sent a chill down the spines of Sunday Night Football viewers when he showed up to their snowy game in Buffalo sans shoes. Yes, we're talking skin to snow.

Donning a wintery, all-white ensemble, Hollins, 31, was noticeably without any footwear when he arrived at Highmark Stadium on Dec. 1.

According to Complex Sports, Buffalo recorded a temperature of just 31 degrees when the players made their entrance to the stadium.

Some comments showed concern for Hollins catching frostbite when his cool game-day look went viral online, while others teased the wide receiver for having "gross" hygiene and being "corny."

But Hollins has spoken about his choice to go barefoot on multiple occasions before his Dec. 1 look sent fans into a frenzy.

In an interview with NBC in Feb. 2023, Hollins said he's "been shoeless" for roughly 4-5 years, admitting that he's been "kicked out of places" that require shoes.

Hollins told NBC that he thinks "everyone should be barefoot" and that he washes his feet "all the time," for anyone concerned about his hygiene.

"It's so funny that people look at me like that because shoes are definitely dirtier than feet," Hollins added, per NBC.

Going around barefoot isn't Hollins' only quirk, however.

In June 2024, Hollins addressed his unique personality in a profile by Spectrum Sports Net. "Going with no shoes, having wild hair, eating with my hands instead of utensils, that type of stuff, that’s not bothering anybody. That’s who I am," he said.

"That’s what makes me happy. Do the things that make you happy in life. Like I said, life’s too short to be worried about what other people think," the wide receiver added.

And during training camp this season, he told Sports Illustrated that there are multiple health benefits to going barefoot.

Hollins listed: "Strength of the foot, strength of the knee, strength of the ankle. Free electrons from the body, so you feel more grounded. You're cleaner. You move faster. You strengthen the whole body, so your knee doesn't have to take so much pressure, and your ankle is more developed."

"Shoes are a tool," he continued. "You wouldn't walk around with a hammer just because you might nail something every once in a while. Why walk around in shoes just because you might step on something every once in a while?"

Boston Herald

Mack Hollins seems like perfect mentor for Patriots young wide receiver corps

By Doug Kyed

There were times last season when the Patriots’ young wide receivers could have used some tough love.

It sounds like veteran wide receiver free-agent pickup Mack Hollins could provide that this season for a group that includes Ja’Lynn Polk, Javon Baker, DeMario Douglas and Kayshon Boutte.

Hollins, 31, believes he can provide “a lot” of leadership for a group that was lacking in that department last season.

“I think what I’ve learned in my time in this league is that every room is different, every guy is different. But that’s also helped me learn how to adjust with different guys – this guy likes this way of conversation, or likes to get pushed in this way, or likes to practice this way or recover this way. But then also being able to bring the things that I’ve taken from my different teams in my years in the league, and allowing them to, hey, try the things I do. If you don’t like them, that’s fine, but at least you’re learning what you do like, what you don’t like, and what can help you play a long time and play at a high level.”

The Patriots signed Hollins to a two-year, $8 million contract this offseason, reuniting him with offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels. Hollins’ best career season came in 2022 with the Raiders with McDaniels as his head coach. He caught 57 passes for 690 yards with four touchdowns that season.

Hollins said he sometimes pushes his teammates “to a fault.”

“I am a big believer in ‘break it and build it back better,’ but that’s how I was raised,” Hollins said. “So I will push guys to their limits, for sure, but I’ve learned over the years how to not push them too far. I think when I was younger, I would push guys too far. I would, like, relish breaking people. And I’ve kind of learned over the years that that’s not always the best is to push guys. There are some guys that need that in life, need when we’re working out or we’re practicing, like to be in their head the entire time, and they’ll have the best practice ever. And there’s some guys that will shut down for me, but those are things that I’ve learned. But yeah, pushing guys is something I enjoy, because I know not only will it make them better, but it will make me better, because now, if I ever stumble, they’re like, ‘Oh, you talking all that now here you go.’ So it’s kind of a two-way (street).”

Hollins has worked with a number of young wide receivers throughout his multiple stops in the NFL. He entered the league in 2017 as a fourth-round pick with the Eagles and was claimed off waivers by the Dolphins late in the 2019 season. He was with the Dolphins through the 2021 season and believes Jaylen Waddle was a player who benefitted from his leadership but said, “by no means am I responsible for his success in this league.”

Hollins joined the Raiders in 2022 and said he was able to learn from Devante Adams. He spent the 2023 season with the Falcons, who had Drake London, then a second-year pro, on their roster. He shared a wide receiver room with rookie wide receiver Keon Coleman on the Bills last season.

“I think the the game is not transactional, but you take things from guys,” Hollins said. “I’ve taken things from O-linemen, from D-linemen, little things like that that have changed my game, and I hope that guys later in their career, can say, ‘Hey, Mack helped me do X, Y, Z.’ ”

The Patriots got little out of Polk or Baker, both 2024 draft picks, last year. Boutte and Douglas fared better, but as a whole, assistants on staff felt the group showed a lack of maturity at times – ranging from displays of on-field frustration and comments to the media – during a difficult season.

Hollins will help, but so will having a hard-nosed head coach in Mike Vrabel, and experienced assistants on offense like McDaniels and wide receivers coach Todd Downing.

The wide receiver corps is rounded out by Kendrick Bourne, JaQuae Jackson and John Jiles. They could use more help via free agency, trade and the 2025 NFL Draft.

TE Austin Hooper

The Athletic

‘Perfect practice makes perfect’: Austin Hooper’s rise to NFL’s elite
By Jason Butt

During the summer, when he was back in his home state of California, Austin Hooper would rise early at 6:45 a.m. to ensure he could make it through Los Angeles traffic to Golden West Junior College for an 8 a.m. workout. At the small school waiting for him would be Matt Ryan, who happened to be in town looking to put in some extra offseason throwing.

It didn't matter what was previously on Hooper's schedule. If Ryan was nearby and wanted to throw, Hooper's prior plans were canceled. If there was any extra work Hooper could get with Ryan, he was going to ensure it happened so the two players would be in sync once the regular season rolled around.

"It's something you have to work on consistently over time," Hooper said. "That's what these past two offseasons were about. It's putting in the work. Instead of enjoying my vacation across the world, it's grind it out with Matt in SoCal at 8 in the morning during your offseason. Wake up at 6:45, drive an hour south."

But those trips — which usually came with Hooper staying at his brother's apartment near UCLA — to Huntington Beach, Calif., during the summer were worth it for Hooper, who is in the final year of his rookie contract. Through seven weeks, Hooper ranks 11th in the NFL in receiving with 526 yards and four touchdowns. His yardage total is second among tight ends — Kansas City's Travis Kelce leading the way with 541 — and his touchdown total is the best at the position. His 46 catches are also the most of any tight end and rank fifth overall in the NFL.

Hooper ramped up the offseason workouts with Ryan leading into the 2018 season. Those continued going into 2019. On the field, the chemistry between quarterback and tight end has been undeniable. And as a result, Hooper has found himself the target of many of Ryan's passes.

"We put in all that work," Hooper said. "It's nice to see it pay off."

Athletic family history
The genetics were put in place for Hooper to become a pretty good player. His father, Michael, played college football at San Diego State from 1983-88. His uncle Greg was a fullback at Stanford when John Elway was at the school. His other uncle, Chip, played professional tennis and reached No. 17 in the world at the peak of his career. His mother, Lillian, played high school basketball.

His brother, Justin, played baseball at UCLA and was drafted in the 14th round of the 2019 MLB Draft by the Kansas City Royals. His sister, Alexis, played college basketball at Reinhardt University, an NAIA program in Waleska, Ga.

Needless to say, there were a lot of summer trips to various tournaments and camps.

"Thank God I travel for work, and I have all the points and the miles," Michael said.

Austin didn't begin playing football until after the age of 10. Before he got into the sport, Michael told his son that if he wanted to pursue it, he was going to do it the "right way." When Austin said it was time to start playing football, the two immediately got serious about it. Austin said Michael would help train his technique with a big pad in the backyard.

Michael wouldn't take it easy on Austin either, considering the physical nature of the sport. Growing up with two athletic brothers, in his father's eyes, there was only one way for Austin to approach the game.

"An expression we use is, 'Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect,'" Michael said. "If you're going to do it, do it 110 percent and be the best."

As Austin started playing high school ball for De La Salle in Concord, Calif., Michael backed off and let the coaches take control. And it was at De La Salle where the attention to detail and time devoted to studying film truly began to take flight.

But at De La Salle, Austin was a star defensive end who could rush the passer. He didn't play much tight end and caught eight passes as a high school senior. He actually played some quarterback, too, on offense.

During his recruitment, Austin received 23 offers to be a pass-rusher. Among those were most of the Pac-12 programs and Notre Dame. At 6-foot-5 and 240 pounds, Austin fit the bill as a pass-rushing defensive end or outside linebacker as an incoming freshman.

Stanford and Oregon, however, recruited Hooper to be a tight end. And in the end, Stanford won out for one reason — academic prestige.

“I knew if football didn’t work out I’d have a good shot at being successful in something else,” Austin said. “That’s why I chose to go there.”

Said Michael: “He got recruited by everybody. Everybody wanted him either as a defensive end or stand-up linebacker. One of the things in our house, it was, ‘Get the best education you possibly can and leverage whatever athletic ability you have to get that piece of paper.’”

Falcons safety Ricardo Allen was asked whether Hooper would have made a good NFL defensive end. Based on his attributes, Allen believes he would.

“He’s athletic. Essentially, being a tight end you have to have some of the same characteristics,” Allen said. “You have to fight big dudes. You have to have a special skill of being athletic, but also being strong and fast. He has that funky mix of it. His technique, he used to get in a three-point stance, and I think the only thing he’d have to work on is his get-off.”

When looking at Hooper as a fourth-year pro in the NFL, it’s remarkable to see that this is only his seventh full year at the position. But his upbringing, with two athletic parents and a private high school known for being a football powerhouse, helped establish a blueprint for any challenge that might present itself.

“It’s little things where when your parents lived the athlete life, they’ll teach you little tricks for more efficient ways to practice, more efficient ways to train,” Hooper said. “A lot of these youth coaches don’t know what they’re talking about. I was very fortunate to have a dad who did it at the highest level. He actually was able to teach me things that are still applicable in my life today, that I learned as building blocks in my technique when I was 12 years old.”

Contract year
Clearly, Hooper made the right decision by becoming a tight end at Stanford. Based on this season, Hooper has set himself up for a major payday, whether it is with the Falcons or elsewhere in free agency.

During the past 23 regular-season games, which includes the entire 2018 season, Hooper leads all tight ends by catching 81.8 percent of passes thrown his way. During that same stretch, Hooper ranks fourth among tight ends with 117 catches for 1,186 yards. Those ahead of him are Kelce (141 catches, 1,877 yards), George Kittle (122 yards, 1,753 yards) and Zach Ertz (151 catches, 1,567 yards).

Of course, much of the offenses at Kansas City, San Francisco and Philadelphia run through their tight ends. In Atlanta, Julio Jones commands the bulk of the targets in the passing game. Mohamed Sanu — prior to his recent trade — and Calvin Ridley also have been frequently targeted by Ryan. But even with the star power at receiver, Hooper has been able to put up some impressive numbers, especially in the ever-important contract year.

At only 24 years old, Hooper is among the best young tight ends in the NFL. With Packers tight end Jimmy Graham’s contract — three years, $30 million — the most expensive for tight ends in average annual value, Hooper stands to benefit as long as his output continues. To compare, Hooper has put up 166 catches for 1,712 yards and 11 touchdowns since the beginning of the 2017 season. Graham has 130 catches for 1,370 yards and 15 touchdowns during this span.

With a tight end market that also could see the likes of Kittle and Evan Engram getting extensions this offseason, Hooper’s price tag could rise substantially if he hits free agency.

Ideally, the Falcons will be able to reach a new contract before the 2020 league year begins, which is something the club is still hopeful it can get done.

While the possibility of applying the franchise tag exists, that would only be good for one year and at a high cost. The franchise tag for a tight end in 2019 was worth $10.4 million. In addition, while other teams have expressed interest in Hooper previously, the Falcons have yet to suggest they would be open to moving him elsewhere.

Considering the contracts recent tight ends have received, Hooper is likely to receive more than $10 million per year. Behind Graham, the highest average annual value salaries for tight ends are Kelce ($9.37 million), Jordan Reed ($9.35 million), Kyle Rudolph ($9.025 million) and Greg Olsen ($8.55 million). Considering those numbers, Hooper has a great chance for a contract that surpasses many of his peers at the position.

Since his rookie year, Hooper has progressed — somewhat quietly due to the star power around him in Atlanta's offense — into one of the league's emerging tight ends. While Hooper makes a lot of plays as a checkdown option, offensive coordinator Dirk Koetter said he has been designing some plays with Hooper as the primary read.

"He's just in the right place at the right time," Koetter said. "Matt is hitting him a lot as a checkdown and he's also hitting him sometimes as a primary receiver. Hoop is getting himself open. He's got a good feel versus man, he's got a good feel versus zone. He's taking advantage of his opportunities."

'Thousands of reps'
About a year ago, the Hoopers were on vacation in the U.S. Virgin Islands when one of the siblings looked at their father and expressed how great this particular trip was.

The reason was that it was the first time since anyone could remember that this vacation had nothing to do with sports. The pro athlete sons had time off and no one had to worry about a game to catch.

"It was funny, but it was true," Michael said. "It's just how we grew up. We were always on the go. It's like any family that has athletic kids. You just want to give them every opportunity to succeed with whatever they wanted to do."

Austin has certainly made the most of everything presented his way since Atlanta selected him in the third round of the 2016 NFL Draft. And while Austin took some time off on that family vacation, many of his days each offseason are devoted to improving as a football player.

Michael said that when Austin is home during the offseason, he generally remains buried in his iPad, dissecting game film from the previous season.

"He's even explaining coverages to me and what tendencies are — if somebody opens their hips up a certain way, they gotta break their route off," Michael said. "People don't understand how intricate that game is and how if you want to be the best, you have to work hard physically and you also need to work hard with understanding your opponent and understanding how the plays develop. He enjoys that."

Austin has been a bright spot for a Falcons team that sits at 1-6. His rapport with Ryan is at the strongest they've enjoyed in their four years together. While Austin possesses all of the natural athleticism to be an NFL star, that's not how or why he is having the kind of season he is enjoying.

The extra work with Ryan and the added hours of studying game film have gone a long way to moving Austin into the upper echelon of NFL tight ends.

"It's not like I dropped three-tenths off my 40 in the offseason or gotten insanely stronger, or anything like that," he said. "It's just building a relationship with the guy who throws the football. It's doing those thousands of reps. He knows I'll be in a certain spot and he has confidence I'll make a play for him."

Akron Beacon Journal

'I'm never satisfied': Browns' Austin Hooper gains confidence training with Baker Mayfield

By Marla Ridenour

BEREA — For Browns prized free-agent tight end Austin Hooper, his 2020 appendectomy changed everything.

After spending four seasons with the Atlanta Falcons, Hooper seemed to have moved out of the transition phase in Cleveland. He caught 15 passes in three October games and totaled 22 receptions through the first six weeks. He began to display the form that made him a two-time Pro Bowler and earned him a four-year, $42 million contract with $23 million guaranteed. He proved to be highly underrated as a blocker.

Then came his Oct. 23 surgery.

"I felt like I was in a really good spot until my appendicitis," Hooper said Saturday. "I feel I was playing the best ball of my career, and ... that kind of threw a monkey wrench in my flow of the offense and my flow of confidence.

“I came back after internal organ surgery. I'd be lying if I said I was fully confident in running across the middle again with stitches in my stomach.”

Hooper missed two games after the appendectomy. He’d been back in the lineup for four when he suffered a neck injury that sidelined him against Baltimore on Dec. 14.

Hooper ready to take on bigger role expected by Browns, Kevin Stefanski
Now that he’s had an offseason to recuperate, Hooper is ready to take on what coach Kevin Stefanski said will be a bigger role in the Browns offense.

“It's been good to let that heal up over an offseason, get my neck together, make sure my vertebrae is all good to go so I can put my face in people,” Hooper said. “That's where your confidence gets, knowing your body is physically able to do everything you're asked.”

Hooper’s admission about how the surgery affected him surprised tight ends coach Drew Petzing.

“I was impressed with him the entire year,” Petzing said Saturday. “I thought he played at a really high level and was a huge part of our success on offense.

‘It’s funny to hear him say that. I know he holds himself to a very high standard. Anytime you can get a player like that and get him out on the field for 17 games, you are going to be better off than if he was out. Really looking forward to that.”

Hooper, 26, did more in the offseason than just heal. He trained with quarterback Baker Mayfield and teammates at the House of Athlete in Florida and in Mayfield’s hometown of Austin, Texas. He picked the brains of several of the league’s best tight ends at a summit June 23-25 in Nashville called Tight End University.

“Every year my goal is to improve, and I feel like I'm never satisfied,” Hooper said. “There are things in the offseason I made a point to address with myself and to get better. Spending more time with Baker definitely has helped me with my confidence more than anything and being in the same offense and knowing what to expect and what is expected of me.”

Asked if confidence was the motivation for working with Mayfield, Hooper said, “For sure. You're as confident as your preparation is, right? So I feel if you prepare, you should be confident.”

Hooper and teammate David Njoku took part in Tight End University, organized by George Kittle of the San Francisco 49ers, Travis Kelce of the Kansas City Chiefs and Greg Olsen, who retired from the NFL earlier this year.

“I just learned a lot. You see all these guys on film, but it's probably got to be the only time in NFL history when can you get 30, 40 tight ends all in one room talking about techniques,” Hooper said.

“Everybody's body is different. Everyone's skill set is different. Everyone's technique is different. So being able to have a room where everyone can go up and share, just trading their ideas and techniques, it was awesome.”

Hooper called the gathering “a first-class education unlike anything else.”

“To hear Travis Kelce speak about how to manipulate the defense using their own rules against them,” Hooper said. “Talking to George Kittle about his mentality in the run game. Darren Waller's choice routes. You can go on and on and on.

“Everyone brings something great to the game. So it was awesome to be able to get hours on hours with everyone talking about ball. And then after, it was a great time as well.”

Petzing said he spoke to Hooper and Njoku when they returned, hoping to pick up something he could pass on.

“Anytime you get that many guys sharing ideas, sharing what they’re doing, you’re going to get some pieces of information that are not going to not only help them but maybe help me as a coach and say, ‘I didn’t think about it that way’ or ‘I didn’t conceptualize it in that way,’” Petzing said.

Asked if he learned anything last season about Hooper that he didn’t expect, Petzing mentioned Hooper’s blocking. Hooper’s numbers during his four years in Atlanta made him sound like just a pass-catcher as he totaled 214

receptions (105 for first downs), for 2,244 yards and 16 touchdowns. In 13 games last season, Hooper finished second on the Browns in receiving with 46 receptions for 435 yards and four scores.

“One of the things coming out of Atlanta with the stats he has, I didn’t think he was as physical in the run game as we saw last season,” Petzing said. “I think he did a really nice job of embracing that role and excelling in that role, and it was a big part of our success. That really surprised me and I was really impressed by it.”

Stefanski also praised Hooper’s effort as a blocker.

“In a lot of big moments where we were running the ball, he was at the point of attack. He was making big blocks,” Stefanski said. “Think back to even Baker’s run at the end of the Pittsburgh game to seal the game — Hoop was at the point of attack.

“He did a lot of nice things for us. He really understands in Year 2 how we plan to use him, and I do believe his role can grow.”

As their relationships grow as well, Petzing learned that Hooper loves to travel.

“I think he went to Egypt this summer and had an amazing time. The pictures he had were just unbelievable,” Petzing said. “I’m not as big a traveler as him, plus with an 8-month-old, we’re pretty much stuck at home right now. But I’m all in on the pictures.”

LB Anfernee Jennings

The Boston Globe

Patriots linebacker Anfernee Jennings is finding a way to help his hometown heal

By Christopher Price
July 5, 2023

Anfernee Jennings’s hometown roots run deep.

The Dadeville, Ala., native, who received the key to the city in 2021 when it officially celebrated “Anfernee Jennings Day,” is part of a small community that’s still reeling after a shooting at a “Sweet 16″ birthday party on April 15 that left four young people dead and 32 injured.

In an attempt to bring some positivity, the Patriots linebacker is hosting a youth football camp in his hometown. Jennings sees it as a small way to give back to a place that worked to support him as a high schooler.

“Initially, last year was the first year of me hosting the camp for my hometown and my community, and it was a success,” said Jennings, who attended Dadeville High before playing for Nick Saban at Alabama. “This year, it hits different, with the tragedy that happened in my hometown with the shooting.

“For me to be able to have an opportunity to do something positive and be a light for my community at this time means the world to me.”

The scars from the shooting still run deep, a fact of life that was not lost on Jennings. He was not present for the start of the Patriots’ offseason workout program; instead, he was back in Alabama trying to do what he could to provide support.

“We’re all just continuing to take it day by day,” Jennings said. “My community is a strong one, with lots of hard-working people. I just want to do right by my community with something like this. We all want the best for our family and friends. Everybody is still grieving in their own way, which is something that’s understandable when a tragic event like this happens. I just want to give people some hope and bring a positive light to my community.

“I just hope it’s a safe and blessed day,” he said of the camp, which will take place Friday night at Dadeville High, “and everybody has a good time and enjoys themselves.”

As for Jennings's feelings about the 2023 Patriots, he remains optimistic. After spending all of 2021 on injured reserve, he saw action in 16 games last season, with three starts, as well as 36 percent of special teams snaps. He finished with 27 tackles, 4 quarterback hits, and 1.5 sacks.

The 26-year-old, who projects to be in a backup role behind Josh Uche and Matthew Judon, is heading into the final year of his contract. A stout presence on the edge, he knows 2023 is a key season.

"I'm extremely healthy, and really excited for the start of camp; this is my fourth year, and I'm very aware of that. My focus is just about what I can do to be better," Jennings said. "But in terms of personal goals, I don't have a lot of those. I just want us to get back to winning, and taking that next step into the postseason, and being the team we are capable of being.

"We're returning a lot of guys from last year [to the defense], but we're just in July and we have a long way to go to be the sort of team and sort of defense we ultimately want to be. I'm looking forward to seeing how it can all come together."

RB Terrell Jennings

MASS LIVE

From homeless teen to NFL end zone: The remarkable journey of Patriots RB Terrell Jennings

By Chris Mason

Natalia Gonzalez knew something was wrong.

Terrell Jennings had just helped carry the Mandarin High School Mustangs to a thrilling Florida Class 8A State Championship victory. The 18-year-old running back from Jacksonville was getting recruited by USF, Western Kentucky, UT-Chattanooga and other mid-major schools. College football was on the horizon.

But Jennings' grades began to crater out of nowhere.

At Mandarin, the "Adopt a Mustang" program has existed for decades, where faculty members are encouraged to choose a varsity athlete to mentor. "Mustang parents" might occasionally provide players with a snack or lunch, but the main priority is keeping tabs on grades and offering a sounding board for whatever the kids are going through.

Gonzalez, a health and physical education teacher, first had Jennings in her sophomore gym class. She quickly took a liking to the quiet, respectful football player. Jennings was rehabbing a broken tibia that he suffered on the field, so he couldn't participate, but was eager to assist Gonzalez with scorekeeping and things of that nature.

"I connected with him differently than other students because there were certain things that he couldn't do," said Gonzalez, who chose Jennings when the next Adopt a Mustang roster was posted. "It was an easy decision for me."

Even when he wasn't in her class as a senior, she was still his Mustang Mom. So when Gonzalez saw Jennings' grades nosedive, she was determined to get to the bottom of it.

It was crunch time for college applications. Jennings had so much to look forward to. Why was this happening?

Gonzalez sought out his teachers and the message was universal. The issue wasn't that Jennings suddenly didn't understand the material he was being given. He was getting zeroes because he hadn't been showing up to school.

Just months before graduation, the absences didn't make any sense to Gonzalez, so she kept investigating. Eventually, an assistant coach revealed the answer.

Jennings was homeless.

'What am I going to do?'

Senior year wasn't the first time Jennings had dealt with housing insecurity.

As a junior, his stepfather was unemployed and his mother, LaTonya Nelson, was working as a bus driver. They couldn't afford an apartment on that income alone and were forced to live in a hotel for two months. Jennings often slept on the floors and couches of friends so he could still get to school. It was far from ideal, but Jennings made it work and never revealed anything.

"Always had a smile on his face," Gonzalez said.

One of the houses that Jennings crashed at belonged to the grandmother of wide receiver DeMario Douglas. The two future New England Patriots were teammates and hung out almost every day. Douglas' grandmother's house was the type of place with a 24/7 open-door policy for friends.

"All our friends used to stay at our house just because that's how we were," Douglas said. "We were all close. So even on a school night, we'd have our friends stay over."

But in January of Jennings' senior year, things became unmanageable.

His mother couldn't work as she dealt with back issues. As she tried to navigate the disability benefits process, Jennings' stepfather, Clyde Nelson, was deported to Guyana. Suddenly, there was no income for rent at all.

"I was left in tears," LaTonya Nelson said. "Like, what am I going to do?"

Adulthood arrived early for Nelson.

A flag twirler in the William M. Raines High School marching band, she once dreamed of going to Florida A&M, whose music they often mirrored. When she was young, her father took her to the Florida Classic to see FAMU play Bethune-Cookman University in Tampa. One day, she wanted to be a FAMU Rattler.

But then Nelson got pregnant at 16, and those dreams were buried as she needed to figure out how to support a child. Her mother urged her to go to the local women's shelter where the staff might be able to help her find an apartment.

"I graduated high school with a 6-month-old," Nelson said. "I had to get out there and learn fast."

Almost a decade later, Jennings was born.

The baby of the family, Jennings was Nelson's fourth child. Through all of their financial hardships and housing upheaval, she was always there for her son.

Jennings fell in love with football early. As a 2-year-old, he'd run down the field with a ball almost as big as he was. Once he started playing, any time Jennings looked to the crowd, he knew his mother would be there watching him.

"Just to see her in those stands cheering me every Friday and Saturday throughout my life has just been amazing," Jennings said. "Because without her support, I don't know who would be out there supporting me on the field."

Now unable to work and with Jennings' stepfather gone, she couldn't support him off of the field. Trying to find a way to school was no longer a priority for Jennings. Finding a place to sleep was.

'The same heart as us'
Private by nature, Jennings kept the situation quiet. In fact, for a while Douglas didn't know even though Jennings was asleep nearby.

"I really didn't notice," Douglas said. "Just how he carried himself. You didn't notice until you really looked."

When Gonzalez discovered that Jennings was homeless, she had a message for the assistant football coach: Just find a way to get him to school so she could talk to him.

Gonzalez and Jennings had developed a close relationship, and the senior referred to his Mustang Mom as "Mama G." When he returned for a day, Gonzalez started to tread lightly.

"I let him know, 'Hey if you need anything, you know that I've got a fridge full of stuff,'" Gonzalez said. "'If you ever want to grab a Gatorade, a granola bar, a peanut butter sandwich, stop by.'"

Jennings began to open up a little.

He told Gonzalez his family was going through a difficult time, but not to worry because they were going to be OK. The conversation turned to improving his grades, scheduling SATs, and Gonzalez was optimistic they'd be able to get things on track.

But then she didn't see Jennings for days.

After a week, he called Gonzalez and told her everything that was going on. He hadn't been coming to school because he didn't have a ride.

"He flat out just said, 'Listen, I'm struggling right now, and would you be able to let me stay at your place for a while so that I could get to school?'" Gonzalez said. "I thought, 'Whoa!' That was unexpected, but at the same time without hesitation and without consulting with my family, I said, 'Yes, of course. Whatever you need.'"

Terrell Jennings
Mustang Moms Natalia Gonzalez (left) and Alissa Kester (middle) with their daughter, Mila and Terrell Jennings (right).Natalia Gonzalez

Gonzalez's wife, Alissa Kester, was welcoming of the situation even though the couple had an 18-month-old daughter, Mila. Kester is a social studies teacher at Mandarin, and also happened to be Douglas' Mustang Mom. She understood the dynamic.

Seeing a solution to his friend's problem, Douglas encouraged Jennings to ask the Mustang Moms if he could move into their spare bedroom.

"They're so caring and giving," Douglas said. "It felt like they had the same heart as us. Giving and making sure the next person becomes something. I felt like that was the right thing to do. They're very caring and they're very nice."

Gonzalez reached out to Nelson to make sure the arrangement would be OK with her. Nelson was extremely grateful. She'd stay with some family. She was just happy that her son would be in a great situation.

"She always makes Terrell a priority," Gonzalez said.

Nobody had any idea whether Jennings would be living with the Mustang Moms for a few days, weeks, or months. He was just thrilled to have a bed to sleep in.

"I appreciated them so much," Jennings said. "But it was surreal that I was in that situation. You see it on TV like, 'Dang, man, kids really go through this.' I was in that situation at that point. It was a good and a bad feeling, because while these people are here for me, they really care about me enough to bring me into their home, but still, my mom is still in this situation as well. She's staying with my grandmother, but that's not the ideal situation."

Weeks turned to months, and with things going well, Jennings stayed with "Mama G" and "Mama K" through graduation.

With a ride to school and a secure place to lay his head, his grades rebounded. The Mustang Moms got Jennings his tux for senior prom and helped him navigate his college search. They treated Jennings as a member of the family, and now he refers to Gonzalez and Kester as his godparents.

"Just because I felt like God sent them there to be those second parents that I never had," Jennings said.

With his academics and recruitment derailed for a bit, Jennings considered going to junior college, but ultimately chose Florida A&M, the school his mother once dreamed of attending as a teenager.

When it came time to move Jennings into Tallahassee, the car was packed. Nelson, "Mama G," and "Mama K" carpooled together to set him up at school. They all enjoyed the road trip to Florida A&M, and the day was especially meaningful for Nelson.

"Once he got there as a student, that was a dream come true for him and for me," Nelson said. "Seeing my children excel, knowing what I've been through, but watching them all grow and do positive things in life, I couldn't ask for anything better than that as a parent."

‘That’s my ball!’
The adversity Jennings conquered early prepared him to face whatever life has in store, on and off the field.

“It really just taught me never to stop,” Jennings said. “Always keep going because I have God and my family to help me right there. I have no other problems. That’s really what it is. Throughout this whole moment, I just keep going in my head. Even when I was going through those situations, I was just preaching, ‘Keep going,’ to myself. Just because I know that’s the biggest thing. Once you stop, you get stagnant. That’s when your mind gets messed up.”

As an FCS program, Florida A&M doesn’t often attract many NFL scouts. Though Jennings led the team in both rushing and touchdowns during his senior season and the Rattlers went 12-1, he wasn’t invited to the NFL Combine or any showcases like the East-West Shrine Bowl. His name was never called in the 2024 NFL Draft.

Still, Jennings found a way.

After receiving an invitation to rookie minicamp in New England, Jennings impressed Jerod Mayo’s coaching staff and earned a contract, reuniting with Douglas in an NFL locker room. When Jennings was released on cutdown day last summer, he signed with New England’s practice squad. In December, he earned a spot on the 53-man roster. After years of battling, Jennings had finally made it.

Then there was a regime change.

With Mayo gone and Mike Vrabel taking over, the veteran coach overhauled the organization, but opted to keep Jennings in the fold. Once again, the running back began the season on the practice squad, and then played his way onto the 53-man roster, earning another new coach’s trust along the way.

“He’s a great teammate. I believe that, I know that, I’ve seen that,” Vrabel said. “He cares about his teammates. Plays hard, unselfish, and then he runs hard.”

On Nov. 2, Jennings broke all the way through.

In a 24-23 win over the Falcons at Gillette Stadium, Jennings took a handoff from Drake Maye at the 3-yard line, was hit at the goal line, and powered through the contact for his first career touchdown. His teammates swarmed him in the end zone.

At home in Jacksonville, Nelson was overcome with excitement — and then texted the group chat she has with all of her children.

“I texted the thread immediately and I was like ‘Congratulations, Terrell!’” Nelson said. “And I was like, ‘That’s my ball! Just know, that’s my ball!’”

Before Jennings even checked his phone, he’d already earmarked the keepsake for the woman he’d been through so much with. It was going to be her football from the moment Jennings crossed the goal line.

“My mom did her best,” Jennings said. “She was always there with me.”

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 percenter. Like, literally. From a producer to a writer to an engineer to an artist, all phases of everything creatively, he embodied it.”

For Jones, 25, football remains the priority. The 2022 third-round draft pick is ready to return to the field after recovering from a torn labrum suffered in Week 2 last season. But music has been a passion — and something he is eyeing after his NFL days are over — since he started recording songs during his junior year in high school in Enterprise, Ala.

To hear Jones discuss how he builds a beat around his vocals, how he can mix and master, and how he pays attention to music trends, Freeman couldn’t help but be impressed.

“He was really in the know of what his sound was,” Freeman said.

Freeman, a 2012 graduate of Berklee College of Music in Boston, is well-versed in the business. He and fellow Berklee alum Keithen Foster started the band Elevation Theory in 2007, and they toured with Jordan Knight from “New Kids on the Block.” The duo has since launched the Covered by Music Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering future musicians and industry professionals through mentoring and education.

Jones does not have formal training. After messing around with his father Marc’s turntables, synthesizers, and mixing boards as a teenager, Jones attended what he calls “YouTube University,” where he learned how to use audio software such as Ableton and Pro Tools.

A formative part of the learning process, though, proved to be trial and error.

“At the end of the day, you could watch a lot of videos, but you have to learn how to make things click,” Jones said. “You have to end up hearing the music, finding different textures and sounds, making your own sound. You can watch a whole bunch of videos, but if you’re not hands-on, it’s not going to work.”

Jones never shared the first song he recorded, during his junior year of high school. He just wanted to get a feel for the process. He continued to develop his sound through college — his roommates would always hear him experimenting with concepts — and eventually released his first song while at the University of Houston.

Now, Jones is working to release an EP, most recently dropping a single called “Come Thru” on June 7. He plans to follow a waterfall release strategy, which means he’ll continue to add tracks individually until the project is complete.

“Of course it’s vulnerable, but I don’t see it from the sense of like, ‘Oh, my goodness, I’m scared of what people are going to say about it,’ ” Jones said. “Music is music. At the end of the day, one person may not end up liking it, but another person is going to like it.”

“Come Thru” and another one of Jones’s singles, “Make It Right,” have been played on the radio, with a dance remix of “Make It Right” reaching the ninth spot on Music Week’s commercial pop chart in the United Kingdom in October 2023. But Jones isn’t preoccupied with attaining commercial success.

After the NFL, Jones would love to explore the music industry further, with hopes of entering the sync placement world to have his songs used in TV shows, movies, commercials, and video games. He hired Freeman as his brand manager to assist him with other goals, too.

For now, the offseason is Jones’s opportunity to spend time in the studio and work on the ideas that bounce around in his head. He’ll pore over sound libraries or contact producers in search of a compelling sample. Sometimes he’ll move on after creating just a hook or a verse, before finishing the song months later. Sometimes a song stays incomplete.

The process is what excites Jones. His face lights up when discussing why he isolated a instrument off a sample, or why he pitched his vocals up or pumped up the beats per minute. He can break down every decision with ease.

“If you can be three people in one song, it helps out because the ears don’t get fatigued,” Jones said. “If you always have the same tone throughout a song, then people are going to be like, ‘OK, I hear it,’ but then they start zoning out.”

Jones isn't beholden to a specific genre, saying his goal is to get people's heads "bopping" before they hear any words. He is toying with country, excited about the possibility of incorporating foot stomps into a track he's working on.

"People are scared to make mistakes, but at the end of the day you just never know what's going to end up hitting," he said.

Freeman has done his best to connect Jones with other music minds. He introduced him to Foster, a Grammy-nominated songwriter and producer for the R&B artist H.E.R. He brought him to a songwriting session with Rico Love, who is credited as a producer on Beyoncé's "I Am . . . Sasha Fierce" and Usher's "Raymond v. Raymond," among others.

"Rico went in and he just did the hook and said, 'All right, man, I need somebody to go in and cut the verse,' " Freeman recalled. "Marcus walked right in the booth — no pen, no paper, no phone — and just completely freestyled it and was cutting it in real time."

Freeman remembers the sound engineer looking at Jones, asking, "Who is this dude?"

Although music takes the backseat during football season, Jones won't stay out of the studio for long.

"Now that I've gotten to where I am now, I've always wanted to let kids know there's not just one thing you're good at," Jones said. "There's multiple things you can do."

LB Harold Landry III

Harold Landry focused on refining pass rush in New England
By Mike Reiss

Harold Landry III and Patriots pass rushers were listening to assistant coach Mike Smith recently during the voluntary offseason program when the discussion turned to baseball.

The Patriots totaled the fewest sacks in the NFL last season with 28. Landry, who signed a three-year, $43.5 million free-agent contract in March after spending the first seven years of his career with the Titans, was brought to New England to change that.

"He's telling us, 'you're like a pitcher, you want to make everything look the same so the tackle doesn't know what's coming.' That's something I'm focusing on this offseason, making sure all my moves look the same initially until the move actually happens," Landry said.

The start of organized team activities last week, with reporters on hand for the second of three practices, provided an initial glimpse of what that might look like.

Landry, wearing No. 2, was a fixture on the edge. As part of a projected line alongside fellow edge Keion White and defensive tackles Milton Williams and Christian Barmore, the Patriots have the potential to play "on the opposite side of the line of scrimmage" which head coach Mike Vrabel has stated is one of his goals.

The practice also included a full-circle type of moment for Landry.

Prior to taking the field that day, Landry had been talking with Smith -- the outside linebackers coach who was one of the final hires on Vrabel's coaching staff -- about Landry's career at Boston College (2014-2017). Landry mentioned to him how former BC defensive line coach Paul Pasqualoni had played an instrumental role in his growth.

To Landry's surprise, Smith told him that Pasqualoni was visiting the Patriots' facility that day. Pasqualoni was among the guest coaches joining the Patriots' defensive meeting and later would attend practice.

"I was like, 'that's crazy' because ... he took my game to a whole another level going into my junior year of college. He definitely had that pro-like approach to coaching when he came to BC," Landry said, a reference to how Pasqualoni

had served as Texans' defensive line coach in 2015 alongside Vrabel, who was defensive line coach on Bill O'Brien's staff.

"He expected a lot out of you from a preparation standpoint, an effort standpoint, all of that. The main thing he helped me on was technique and fundamentals, and my rush plan -- how I'm attacking the tackle."

Landry stayed at BC the summer entering his junior year and fine-tuned those techniques, which resulted in him leading the country with a school-record 16.5 sacks that season.

The 6-foot-2, 252-pound Landry credited Vrabel and his Titans' staff for helping him continue to grow as a player in the NFL, and enhance his passion for pass rushing, which had initially captivated him at Pine Forest (Fayetteville, N.C.) High School when he would go 1-on-1 with teammate and future University of Georgia standout Lamont Gaillard.

Landry, who believes the most effective pass-rushing prowess begins with power, has totaled 50.5 sacks in the NFL. So when Vrabel was hired as Patriots head coach in January and envisioned the type of attacking defense and team culture he hoped to employ, Landry was an ideal target for him.

The Titans released Landry on March 7 in a salary-driven move after attempting to trade him. The Patriots signed Landry two days later.

Since the Patriots' voluntary offseason program began April 7, the soft-spoken Landry has been traveling from Tennessee each week, as his wife Danielle and children Greyson (8), Ollie (5) and Margo (4 months) have yet to make the permanent move to New England.

"I feel great. I'm definitely excited about this new opportunity to come back here. I'm just trying to play my ass off. I know my family is super excited to get up here and I can't wait for that," Landry said.

"Just in the locker room, I feel like I mesh well with everybody. I feel like we're building a great culture here right now. If we come out and take it one day at a time, and stack good days, and just come to work and everyone buys in, we have a chance to do something here. That's exciting."

Forbes

Harold Landry III Found ‘The Right Place’ With Mike Vrabel’s Patriots

By Oliver Thomas

Harold Landry III knew what was on deck well before the voluntary offseason program got underway at Gillette Stadium.

The veteran outside linebacker spent his initial six NFL years alongside the head coach that now resides there. And with Mike Vrabel’s New England Patriots, he believes he is in the right place.

“I think the biggest thing that we’re going to pride ourselves on is playing hard, playing fast,” Landry told reporters during his introductory press conference on Tuesday. “He really values effort and finish, especially on the defensive side of the ball. You want to see as many hats as you can in the picture at the end of the play around the ball. I think as long as we maintain the style of play that we’re trying to implement here — even if you might not have fit up a run gap perfectly or didn’t play with the greatest technique – that style of play is what’s going to result in wins.”

Taken No. 41 overall in the 2018 NFL draft, Landry had been a member of the Tennessee Titans until March. He appeared in 98 games, including 79 starts, during his tenure with the organization.

Landry tallied 397 tackles, 70 tackles for loss and 50.5 sacks over that span. Along the way arrived one safety, three forced fumbles, two fumble recoveries as well as two interceptions.

“I pride myself on being versatile and productive,” Landry said. “I want to be a guy that they can move around, but also, they can just keep me on the edge and I can win a one-on-one and I can go and be productive. But I want to be the Swiss Army knife.”

A torn ACL saw the former Pro Bowler miss the 2022 season, yet his second career campaign with double-digit sacks followed in 2023 before Vrabel departed from Nashville. After being released ahead of NFL free agency, Landry reunited on a three-year, $43.5 million contract in Foxborough.

“He’s meant a lot. He’s played a big role in my development as a player and also as a person,” added Landry. “And I was excited to come back because he knows my skillset, he knows how I operate, and I think throughout my career he and his staff have done a great job of putting me in positions to go out and be productive and help the team.”

The Boston College product’s agreement brings $26 million guaranteed. It also brings Landry into the fold for a familiar defensive staff that is overseen by coordinator Terrell Williams, who served as Tennessee’s defensive line coach and eventual assistant head coach under Vrabel.

That run gave way to a 54-45 record in the regular season and a 2-3 record in the postseason. A pair of AFC South titles and an appearance in the AFC title game were accrued.

“We really valued each other and we played hard for each other,” Landry recalled. “We didn’t want to let each other down. And I think that showed on the film, on the tape. But also, I feel like one of the main jobs for a head coach is to make sure your team is prepared situationally. And all I know is as long as I’ve played for Vrabes, there was never a situation I wasn’t prepared for. Like, I don’t care what the score was in the fourth quarter, I don’t know, we just always had a feeling like we was going to pull this out.”

Landry, who turns 29 in June, stands 5,293 defensive snaps into his run in the league. He led Tennessee’s defense in starts, sacks and tackles for loss last campaign while also tying for the team lead in quarterback hits.

Landry moves forward in New England with cap charges of $8.5 million for 2025, $16.5 million for 2026 and $18.5 million for 2027, according to OverTheCap.com.

“Once I saw how things were going and the writing was on the wall, this was definitely a place that I wanted to be,” Landry said. “I was getting excited about the staff he was putting together, and I just felt like this was the right place for me and I’m excited to be here.”

Boston Herald

Patriots’ Harold Landry always expected to win with Mike Vrabel

By Doug Kyed

The decision was an easy one for Harold Landry after he was released by the Titans in early March.

A free agent for the first time in his career, Landry liked what his former head coach, Mike Vrabel, was building with the Patriots.

So, he signed a three-year, $43.5 million contract with the Patriots on the eve of free agency.

“This was definitely a place that I wanted to be,” Landry said Tuesday. “I was getting excited about the staff he was putting together, and I just felt like this was the right place for me. I’m excited to be here.”

It helps that Landry, who was selected in the second round of the 2018 NFL Draft out of Boston College, is familiar with the area, as well. He drove around Chestnut Hill with his wife recently and was amazed at the renovations his alma mater had made.

It’s also obvious from hearing Landry talk about his experience with Vrabel why he wanted to play for the former Titans head coach again. The Titans were 54-45 under Vrabel during Landry’s tenure, making the playoffs three straight seasons from 2019 -21.

“I feel like one of the main jobs for a head coach is to make sure your team’s prepared situationally,” Landry said.

“And all I know is, as long as I played for Vrabes, there was never a situation I wasn’t prepared for. Like, I don’t care what the score was in the fourth quarter. I don’t know. We just always had a feeling that we was going to pull this out. Didn’t matter what the score was going into the fourth and we just always found a way to win. It’s crazy. We just found

a way to win. And that was just kind of the mentality. We just didn't think we could lose, to be honest, no matter what was going on in the game."

The Patriots didn't have reason to believe that last season when they went 4-13 under head coach Jerod Mayo. They went 4-13 under Bill Belichick in 2023, as well, and haven't made the postseason since 2021.

Patriots cornerback Marcus Jones had a more brief encounter with Vrabel, taking a pre-draft visit with the Titans in 2022. He's also come away with a strong impression of his new head coach.

"He's a great guy, when I met him back then, and I'm happy to be back in the building," Jones said. "And he brings that excitement. And then also he's one of those guys to where whenever we are doing something, he likes to be hands-on. So just having that in the building, and this, you know, the excitement, having the music playing and everything like that, in the hallways it's great to be around."

Jones expects Vrabel to keep up his tradition of getting involved in practice drills by grabbing a blocking pad to help out the defensive line.

Vrabel doesn't just bring the energy on the practice field. Landry sees his head coach as an "upbeat" personality.

"He wants everybody to be excited when they come to work," Landry said. "He's big on that. He's big on energy.

"Everybody looks at him as this head coach, but he really, he's really just one of the boys, a locker room guy. I really mean that. He wants to get to know you, know about your family and everything that goes along with being in a relationship with you. … He's big on treating you how you treat the team. You treat the team with respect, he's got nothing but respect for you."

Landry said another primary reason why he wanted to play under Vrabel again was the coach's ability to put him in the best position to succeed.

The edge defender played five seasons under Vrabel (he missed 2022 with a torn ACL) and registered 41.5 sacks, two interceptions, three forced fumbles, two fumble recoveries, 326 tackles, 55 tackles for loss and 87 QB hits from 2018 to 2023.

"I was excited to come back because he knows my skill set," Landry said. "He knows how I operate, and I think throughout my career, he and his staff have done a great job of putting me in positions to go out and be productive and help the team, and that's what I'm looking forward to, and that was one of the main reasons why I came here, because I knew Vrabes and his staff knew me, the familiarity with the scheme and all of it, it just fits."

T Vederian Lowe

WPRI.COM 12

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 named 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 important of staying true to oneself and never losing sight of how far work ethic can get you.

"Definitely to just keep grinding, keep working. I remember I never thought I would get this far," Lowe said. "When I first started playing, I never thought that I would get this far. I didn't put my mind to it as much. And I when I finally put my mind to it, this came to fruition, it became a reality. I would definitely let the guys know that with the work ethic and just working hard and continuing to be consistent day in and day out that your dreams can come true."

StarTribune

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

PATRIOTSWIRE

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.

CBS TEXAS

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

The Boston Globe

A star since high school, Patriots quarterback Drake Maye has never let success go to his head

By Nicole Yang

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — In between the student center of Myers Park High School and Gus Purcell Stadium, there’s a parking lot with about 100 spaces. For more than a decade, those spots would be fairly easy to snag on Friday nights for the school’s home football games.

Scott Chadwick, Myers Park’s football coach for seven seasons, estimates the program’s booster club sold only half of its season-long parking passes during his first year in 2014. The numbers continued to grow gradually as the team’s performance improved.

Then came Drake Maye.

“Those Friday nights at Myers Park were really, really special,” Chadwick said. “He just took us to a whole different level.”

Maye, already 6 feet 3 inches at 16 years old and still years away from the cusp of reaching the Super Bowl, transferred to Myers Park ahead of his sophomore season in 2018 — and almost immediately became a sensation. The next year, those parking passes sold out within 20 minutes.

The morning they went on sale, people staked out the front yard of the booster club's membership coordinator in fear that the website would crash. Some wanted not only a pass, but specifically one for a space that backed up to the grass so they could set up tents for tailgating.

Suddenly, the modest bleachers at Gus Purcell Stadium became the place to be on Friday nights. The crowds became standing-room only. For the team's biggest regular-season home game of the year, hundreds of fans started lining up at the gates two hours before kickoff.

By Maye's junior year, the school adjusted its ticketing policies to account for the high demand. Families with kids that already had graduated started going to games again. Folks that lived in the surrounding neighborhood, right outside of downtown Charlotte, stopped by, too. Everybody wanted a chance to see Maye, one of the top 50 high school prospects in the country.

"That was just a very special year that I don't think we'll ever duplicate," said Brian Poore, Myers Park's athletic director.

Myers Park emerged as the best team in North Carolina, even becoming nationally ranked. The offense, averaging more than 50 points per game, proved to be nearly unstoppable with Maye at the helm. Despite often sitting in the second half of games, Maye set school records with more than 3,500 passing yards and 50 touchdowns (with just two interceptions) in 13 games.

"I just remember throwing deep balls and the crowd would gasp," Maye said. "Just hearing that gasp was pretty cool, whether it's incomplete or not — hopefully, we completed more than we didn't — but hearing the crowd get into it, I think you always get excited."

Offers from elite college programs, including Alabama, Clemson, and Ohio State, started rolling in.

But what impressed those around Maye the most was not his monster production. Nor was it his arm strength, his mobility, or any of the other striking physical traits that made him such a compelling prospect. Instead, it was his ability to stay grounded, especially at a young age, amid the team's success and widespread attention.

"He knew he was really good, but he never came in with this cocky air about him," said Joe Evans, who served as an assistant coach for Chadwick for two seasons. "I mean, this kid is a high school football player and people are asking him for his autograph."

His success and popularity have reached new heights faster than anyone could have imagined.

When those back in Charlotte watch him, though, they see the same well-mannered, level-headed teenager who captivated their community not so long ago.

"I told Drake this last week," Chadwick said. "The thing I've been most proud of him this whole year is — you watch his interviews, you watch everything he does — he has not changed one bit."

Competitive environment
As the son of supremely athletic parents, and the youngest of four accomplished brothers, Maye almost seemed destined to become a competitor.

The oldest brother, Luke, sank an iconic shot that sent North Carolina's basketball team to the Final Four in 2017, a year the Tar Heels went on to win the national championship. The second-oldest, Cole, was a pitcher on the Florida baseball team that won the national championship that same year. Beau, the closest to Maye in age, walked on to North Carolina's basketball team as a junior in 2022.

Maye's father, Mark, was a highly acclaimed three-sport high school athlete who became the starting quarterback at North Carolina. His mother, Aimée, was a high school basketball standout who earned Mecklenburg County girls' player of the year honors as a senior.

“People say they’re North Carolina royalty, but the word ‘royalty’ is funny because they’re the most down-to-earth, sweetest people that just love to be a part of their community,” said Scott Taylor, who coached Myers Park’s boys’ basketball team for eight years, including two with Drake.

By the time Maye transferred to Myers Park, most of the school already was familiar with him. Although his three brothers graduated from William Amos Hough, the high school where Maye spent his freshman year before leaving for a better football opportunity, nearly all of Charlotte had heard of the Mayes.

“Everybody knows the history of the family,” said Michelle Richards, a longtime assistant principal at Myers Park.

Popular chants from opposing student sections at basketball games were, “Luke is better!” and “Luke Maye’s brother!”

“He wanted his own name,” Taylor said. ”He was able to create it pretty quickly.”

Related: How does Drake Maye compare with Tom Brady in their second seasons as starters with the Patriots?
Maye, the smallest of the siblings, always tried to keep up as the runt. In H-O-R-S-E and “King of the Court” on their driveway. In wrestling matches around the house. In races on the beach to see who was the fastest. In backyard football, where his brothers wouldn’t let him play quarterback because he was the youngest.

Things would often escalate physically — they called Beau “Double T” because he was the tattletale of the bunch — despite their parents’ best efforts. For years, Maye was accustomed not just to losing, but to getting beaten down repeatedly.

Those battles set the stage for Maye’s love of competition.

Inside the boys’ locker room at Myers Park, the basketball team kept an Xbox and would play NBA 2K before practices.

Maye went undefeated.

On the rare occasion someone came close to handing him a loss, the rest of the players would stand up and start cheering. But Maye always won.

When the coaches took away the Xbox for a period in the middle of the season, the other players joked that Maye requested they remove it so he couldn’t lose. Upon its return, Maye had no problem extending his undefeated record.

No matter the activity, Maye is invested in winning. Whether he’s playing Battleship with his wife (and middle school sweetheart) Ann Michael, Spades with his teammates, tennis, golf, pickleball, Spikeball, or laser tag — whatever the game, whoever the opponent — he wants to come out on top.

“It’s all fun and games playing pickleball until that game point comes up,” said Jeb Lloyd, who attended Myers Park and North Carolina with Maye. “He could always flip a switch. Even when it was fun and light, when it was winning time, there was a different Drake that would come out.”

As Maye and his brothers have gotten older, they don’t spend nearly as much time together. Luke spent the past year playing basketball in Japan for the Nagoya Diamond Dolphins. Beau recently returned to Charlotte as a math teacher and boys’ basketball coach at Hough.

When they are together, though, they certainly find the time to get back at it. The night before he walked across the stage at the NFL Draft, Maye rented out a court at the Detroit Athletic Center to play four-on-four basketball with his brothers and friends. The night the Patriots beat the Chargers in the wild-card round, Maye quipped that his plans for the rest of the night included staying up until 1:30 a.m. to play Ping-Pong with his brothers.

“Any time that the score is being kept, you want to win,” Maye said. “I’ve tried to keep that same mentality my whole life. That’s from my older brothers, to playing my wife in something, to playing out here, playing football. I think you want to win. If anybody’s keeping score, no matter if it matters or not, I think winning’s more fun.”

‘It is 100 percent not an act’
Ed Berry, a prominent NFL agent, called Chadwick one day in 2021, and asked him about representing Maye. Even though Maye had not played a snap of college football, Chadwick told Berry with confidence that Maye was going to be a first-round draft pick.

There was never any doubt in Chadwick's mind that Maye was going to become a franchise quarterback. Now, did he think it was going to happen as soon as Year 2 of his pro career? Admittedly, no. But any coach or player who had worked with Maye saw his potential.

"He looked the way he does now as a sophomore in high school," said Owen McCown, Maye's backup quarterback at Myers Park and son of former NFL quarterback Josh McCown. "He could throw it like he does now back then. Usually, you think people that develop early will either wear off or something like that. He never did. He just kept getting better at each level."

Related: On his 105th birthday, WWII veteran in Beverly honored by New England Patriots
During the pre-draft process, representatives from a dozen NFL organizations called Chadwick to ask about Maye. They barely talked football. Maye's talent was apparent. He earned ACC player of the year honors his freshman year at North Carolina and, as he did in high school, posted incredibly impressive numbers.

The most common question evaluators asked: Was Maye's personality a facade?

"They're like, 'Is this an act?' " Chadwick said. "It is 100 percent not an act. It is 100 percent genuine who he is as a person, who he is as a leader, and who he is as a teammate."

For those who didn't believe Chadwick, calls to others from Maye's past yielded the same answer. Maye was the guy who had a custom handshake with each of Myers Park's 10-year-old ball boys. He was the guy who made a point to introduce himself, "Hey, I'm Drake," to people that definitely already knew who he was.

"He would treat — well, I guess he was the most popular kid — but he would treat the most or least popular kid at school like they were just any other person," McCown said. "He would go talk to the guy that wasn't talking to anybody. He was super personable. He had a different level of care for people."

After his breakout college season in 2022, rumors ran rampant about Maye potentially leaving North Carolina for a seven-figure payday elsewhere. Teammates started calling, saying they'd follow him to whichever school he transferred. But Maye had no intention of leaving North Carolina, the school that convinced him to flip his initial commitment from Alabama and the place where his parents met. He set aside time with then-coach Mack Brown to reassure him there was no school where he would rather play.

The season didn't go as well in 2023, but the way Maye conducted himself still caught the eye of Patriots executive vice president of player personnel Eliot Wolf.

"He was one of the only quarterbacks in this draft that went up there after every loss and handled the media," Wolf said. "He handled it with grace, with class. Watching those press conferences, there were a lot of times where the reporters were trying to get him to throw somebody under the bus, and he wouldn't do it."

What you see really seems to be what you get with Maye. Yes, he really is that competitive. Yes, he also really is that, for lack of a better term, nice.

As the stakes and spotlight only continue to grow for Maye, he has stayed true to that identity.

'Money's not going to change him'
When Maye graduated from high school in December 2020, in order to enroll early at North Carolina, Myers Park didn't hold a traditional ceremony because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead, students drove to the school, hopped out of their cars to receive their diploma and take a picture with the principal, and then drove home. Everybody knew when it was Maye's turn because he pulled up in his white 2015 GMC pickup, a car he chose because he believed, at least at the time, driving a truck was part of being the quarterback.

That truck is the same one Maye drove to Foxborough after the Patriots drafted him with third overall pick in 2024, the one he drove back to Charlotte when the season ended in January 2025, and the one he drove to Gillette Stadium to start this season.

"You didn't get a new car or anything?" Chadwick asked Maye.

Even after signing his fully guaranteed, $36.64 million rookie contract, Maye felt as though he didn't need to replace his car just yet. He liked his truck. Why get rid of it?

"When people see what he's making money-wise, they're probably like, 'Yeah, he can get rid of that truck,' " Poore said. "But money's not going to change him, that's for sure."

The Athletic

Before Drake Maye took the NFL by storm, he would 'destroy everybody' in basketball

By Chad Graff

The tail end of the high school football season overlaps with the start of prep basketball in North Carolina. So students who play both have to join the basketball team a little late.

As winter neared in late 2018, 16-year-old Drake Maye was still a new student at Myers Park High, five miles south of downtown Charlotte, N.C. He'd transferred to the school that fall, and as the quarterback of the football team, he had little time left for basketball.

When the football season finally ended, he showed up to basketball practice the next day. It was an intimidating setting for a student still new to the school, pulling up to the gym after the basketball team had already played a handful of games. The plan, naturally, was for Maye to spend some time on the bench. Learn the plays. Figure out how to fit in with his new teammates.

The next game on the schedule was against a big rival.

"And, man, did we struggle," then-coach Scott Taylor said recently.

The offense was in a funk. Shots weren't falling. So Taylor threw Maye in the game, even though he didn't know the offense.

"It was like, 'Hey, man. Just go play,'" Taylor said.

Growing up, all Maye wanted to do was beat his three older brothers at anything. "If you're getting me," he said, "you're getting them."

Initially, Maye didn't want to ruffle feathers by hogging the ball. He was just a sophomore, his first game with a new team. He told Duwe Farris, a 6-foot-6 senior who went on to play at the University of North Carolina, that he'd try to get him some shots.

"I was like, 'Oh, that's pretty cool,'" Farris said. "And then by the second half, I was like, 'Drake, bro, forget it. You keep the ball.' He was that good."

In just 30 NFL starts, Maye has already taken the league by storm. He's a legitimate NFL MVP candidate and was recently named second-team All-Pro. On Sunday, he earned his first playoff win by knocking off Justin Herbert and the Los Angeles Chargers.

But long before he was the captain of the Patriots, bringing back memories of the team's heights under Tom Brady and now prepping for a divisional-round matchup against the Houston Texans, Maye was a high school hoops star, throwing down dunks, pulling down rebounds in traffic and kick-starting fast breaks. And he played for only those few winter months before returning to football.

"Which is unbelievable," Farris said, "because all these other guys like me would commit our whole lives to playing basketball, and then Drake would show up for four months and just destroy everybody."

The hard part for Maye's coaches, at least initially, was getting him to be more aggressive. Even at 6-feet-5, he was a distributor. At the high school level, conversations usually go the opposite way. But with Maye, his coaches actually wanted him to shoot more.

"He's coming in and facilitating, and that's who he is. He's getting everyone involved and was like, 'I don't want to come in and feel like I'm taking over,'" Taylor said. "And we were like, 'No, dude, we actually need you to score and score early.'"

That's part of what made Maye's game different from most of the football players who would pick up basketball in the winter. Football players usually fit into a stereotype on the hardwood. They rebound, play good defense and make use of their five fouls. But they don't usually have finesse or touch. Maye had both.

"When he hit you, you went backward," said Nick Jones, then an assistant coach at Myers Park. "He rebounded very physically. He was big. But he also had the touch and the skill of his brother Luke, who was obviously the basketball player in the family. So that's what made Drake so intriguing as a basketball prospect. Here you have this football body and football mindset, but with a Division I (basketball) skill set."

Colleges came calling during that sophomore season. They wanted him to consider focusing on basketball instead of football. Clemson, in particular, really liked him.

"But it didn't go any further than that because everybody knew he was going to be playing quarterback somewhere," Jones said.

Maye has taken a massive step forward in his second season and led the previously floundering Patriots back to the playoffs.
The Myers Park basketball team brought an Xbox into the locker room to play NBA 2K before practices. But everything with Maye has to be a competition. So he drew standings on the whiteboard for everyone to keep track of their season-long records.

"But he wrote his name in, like, 48-point font, 10 times bigger than everyone else, just to make sure everyone knew he was undefeated," Taylor said. "And he (played with), like, the Wizards, too."

College football coaches were showing up at Myers Park that sophomore basketball season for Maye, as well, part of the full-court press to try to recruit their next quarterback. Myers Park went from playing in front of family and friends to some of the biggest names in sports.

"You'd show up to a game, and Nick Saban is sitting there," Farris said. "Like, oh, this is different."

Maye was briefly committed to play for Saban at Alabama before flipping to stay home and play quarterback at UNC. But those basketball games stuck out to Saban.

"He really impressed me by the way he played basketball," Saban said on "The Pat McAfee Show" in November. "He probably could've played basketball at North Carolina, too."

The madness of Maye's run in basketball reached a fever pitch his sophomore season when Myers Park made the playoffs. Maye's brother Luke, who at the time was a senior at Chapel Hill, came to watch a third-round game and brought with him teammates Walker Miller and Cameron Johnson, who now plays for the Denver Nuggets.

"Pro sports down here are big, but college basketball is really big," Farris said. "So everyone was a little starstruck."

"It was a whole circus," Jones said.

That night, Maye went for 25 points and 18 rebounds. "And had some big dunks," Farris added.

Maye's midrange shot was impressive, coaches said, but he really stood out as a passer.

"He rebounded the crap out of it," Taylor said. "And once he got the rebound, especially in high school basketball, when your most skilled passer is also rebounding the ball, all of a sudden your break is taking off."

Maye played basketball as a junior at Myers Park, too, but his senior season was scrapped due to the pandemic. As a student at UNC, he ran full-court games with friends such as Farris at the basketball arena, one of the perks of

being the starting quarterback. But he also put together an intramural team with some other football players and showed up for games against frat bros and the like.

“It was a couple of your classic humungous football players who were going to foul the hell out of you, but then a couple who could really play,” Farris said of that intramural team. “And Drake gave some poor kids hell there. I’m sure those were some long days for them walking back to the dining hall.”

Maye has jokingly likened his basketball skills to “a poor man’s Jayson Tatum.”

Is the comparison legit?

“Absolutely not,” Jones said. “But that sounds just like him because he believed that any time he stepped foot in the gym, he could beat you in a shooting competition or one-on-one. That was his approach.”

Maye’s competitive basketball days are over, of course. He’s a star quarterback in the NFL who’s two wins away from taking the Patriots to a Super Bowl as this magical season rolls on.

But basketball will always be a part of Maye’s story.

On the eve of the NFL Draft in 2024, with the whole family in Detroit awaiting news of where Maye would play professionally, Maye got to pick that night’s activities, a rare treat for the youngest of four boys. Other players at the draft opted for a nice dinner to celebrate what was to come.

Maye wanted to hoop. So he rented a court at Detroit Athletic Center, right across from Ford Field, and put together a five-on-five game.

The next day, he became the Patriots’ quarterback of the future, and his life changed forever. But for one more evening, he was just a kid playing basketball.

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."

MASS LIVE

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.

MASS LIVE

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."

MASS LIVE

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.

FOX SPORTS

How Patriots QB Drake Maye's family shaped him to meet this moment

By Henry McKenna

Drake Maye sent a text to his brother, Luke, in Japan the other day. Drake is the newly minted New England Patriots quarterback after being the No. 3 overall pick in the 2024 NFL Draft. Luke is in Japan playing pro basketball. Big things are happening for both brothers.

But the text was about golf.

"Drake's talking about how he's getting a new driver for next time he plays," Luke said. "He needs it because I just beat him about two weeks ago."

Golf is the athletic Switzerland for the Maye brothers. Neutral ground.

Luke, 27, is a former North Carolina basketball national champion. Beau, 22, was a basketball walk-on for UNC. Cole, 25, won an NCAA baseball title at Florida. None of them ever played golf at the collegiate level. Cole is the most practiced player, the first one to get a custom set of clubs.

Football, basketball and baseball aren't really fair playing fields for the Maye brothers. Golf levels the competition — which is to say that golf fuels the competition. Most other sports are unsafe for these young men.

"I've watched them play two-on-two basketball, and it's a bloodbath," said Scott Chadwick, Drake Maye's high school coach.

Now, to be clear, the Maye family is as nice and polite as they come. They are "yes please, ma'am" and "no, thank you, sir" kind of guys. But they are also as competitive as they come. On the course, there are no gimmes. Drake will make his brothers putt everything out, even from four feet. It's 18 holes of trash talk, even when visitors join.

"I've missed a shot that cost us a hole," Chadwick said. "I wanted to apologize so badly to Luke because now Luke had to listen to Drake trash-talking."

There aren't many competitions that Drake would shy away from. In fact, only one comes to mind. And we'll get to that. But New England's new QB seems obsessed with winning.

"It doesn't matter if I'm racing you out the door, or if we're on the field competing. I think competing to win, that's what Patriots Nation is about," he said.

Patriots thrive in first NFL Draft without Bill Belichick

Just Tuesday, Maye was on Boston sports radio talking about rookie minicamp, where he'll see fellow rookie quarterback Joe Milton, New England's sixth-round pick. And while the 6-foot-4, 223-pound Maye had one of the strongest arms in the draft, Milton might have the strongest. So Maye fielded a question about whether he'd get into a distance competition with Milton.

"I ain't gonna turn it down." Maye said.

Of course not.

Drake's father, Mark, is a former UNC starting quarterback and NFL backup. Drake's mother, Aimee, was an excellent high school basketball player.

"She's probably the best athlete in our family," Luke said. "She doesn't play [in the competitions] sometimes because she knows she'd be in a bad mood if she loses. But she's been incredible. She's super supportive of all of us. And I just don't think she gets enough credit."

Everyone in the Maye family has some sort of superlative. Drake had been fighting for something other than "youngest." Being a top-three NFL pick isn't too shabby.

That said, the Maye family values team success over individual success. Two of Drake's brothers have championship rings.

"I'm gonna slightly hold my championship still above him," Luke said with a chuckle.

There's plenty of time for Drake to chase a ring, and everyone around him is expecting big things. Super things.

"He is a guy who can win a Super Bowl," UNC coach Mack Brown said this week. "Drake has really been groomed for this. I mean his whole family his whole life expects this. And the two brothers throw the rings in his face all the time. I've seen enough interviews where they say, ‘Yeah, look here big boy. I've got this.'"

Brown added: "I did tell him after the selection, ‘Neither one of them were first-round picks, so you've got a little something on them right now.'"

[McKenna: Why Patriots QB Drake Maye couldn't be more different than Mac Jones]

Drake's friends and family see the insane competitiveness everywhere, even in Ping-Pong. As a freshman at UNC, Maye challenged the team's starting QB, Sam Howell. When Howell beat Maye, the younger QB wouldn't accept defeat. It went from a best-of-one to a best-of-three to a best-of-five to a best-of-seven.

A few years later, Coach Brown walked into the players' lounge after hearing a commotion. There was a Ping-Pong paddle, shattered into pieces.

"The tight end beat me. Can you imagine?" Maye asked his coach.

"Well then, get better at Ping-Pong," Brown replied.

It's like that on the football field, too.

Sometimes, that competitiveness might be to his detriment. Last October, heading into UNC's game against Virginia, Brown tried to get Maye to take a few practices off. His response? "I can't miss practice. … I gotta get better." The Tar Heels took their first loss of the year to Virginia. In the regular-season finale against 22nd-ranked NC State, Maye suffered an ankle injury in the first half. By halftime, UNC was down 26-7. Maye wasn't playing in the bowl game. He could have easily bowed out and called it a career.

"I thought he was gonna be out [with the ankle]. They were telling me he's probably out," UNC offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey said. "It would have been really easy for him to kind of just ride off into the sunset. … I go see him at halftime. We're down and he's [reviewing the first-half plays]. ‘Coach, I like this. I like this. I like this. Let's go back to this.'

"He just never had any inkling that he wasn't gonna compete all the way to the end."

But then there are those special moments. Two stick out for his father, along with Brown, Lindsey and UNC Senior Advisor Clyde Christensen. The first is Maye's left-handed pass, akin to something Brett Favre or Patrick Mahomes might do.

In a game last September at Pitt, Maye was scrambling to his left with Panthers defenders closing in. It seemed like he planned on running for whatever he could get. But as a defender got a hand on Maye, the QB looked up and saw receiver Kobe Paysour put up a hand. He was wide open. So Maye lifted the ball in his left hand and chucked it up for Paysour. Touchdown.

That gives you a taste of Maye's flair for the dramatic — and for his creativity. But his coaches wanted to make clear how badly he wants to win and how calm, composed and confident he gets in gotta-have-it situations. So the second moment that stands out to them came during UNC's 47-45, double-overtime win over Duke last November.

On North Carolina's two-point try in double overtime, Maye's first option was a screen on the boundary. He didn't like what he saw. Then he had a one-on-one out of the slot. Again, he didn't like what he saw. So he decided to tuck and run.

"As many options as we had, none of that looked great to me from upstairs," Lindsey said. "He just decided to go run the draw after he looked this way. And then [the pocket] collapses and the guy that was one-on-one kind of just popped free. [Maye] just raised up and popped it to him. In a big moment, he never panicked and won the game."

OK, but what about the time Maye walked away from a competition? Well, it's a long story that starts back in 2019, when Maye was a recruit committed to Alabama.

Everyone thought he'd land at UNC like his dad and his brother. But during the recruitment process, Drake and Chadwick told scouts that the quarterback was not going to Carolina. Maye wanted it known that he was going to consider all his options — and he had great options. His top offers came from Alabama, Clemson and Ohio State. (He was the only QB in his prospect class to get offers from all three.) He made his decision to play for Nick Saban.

After Maye committed to the Crimson Tide, however, Alabama managed to flip Bryce Young's commitment from USC. He was going to the Crimson Tide — with Maye.

"[Then-Alabama OC Steve] Sarkisian had a long history with Bryce Young's family," Chadwick said. "So in Drake's mind [he thought], 'I'm not gonna get an opportunity there as long as Bryce Young is there.'"

Given the Sarkisian-Young connection, those close to Maye also wondered whether it would have been a real competition. Plus, according to Chadwick, Alabama had broken a promise to Maye that it wouldn't pursue another QB in his class.

All the while, UNC was jockeying for Maye, even after he'd committed to Bama. Former Carolina offensive coordinator Phil Longo — just coincidentally, surely — showed up at every Tar Heels basketball game that Maye attended to watch his big brother Luke. The arrival of Brown in 2019, too, seemed like a stellar addition at the right moment for UNC. It all changed Maye's mind.

Maye walked into Chadwick's office and told him about his change of heart.

"I'm not calling Coach Saban," Chadwick told Maye.

So Drake called Saban and told him that he was de-committing from Alabama and going to UNC. Maye skipped the competition with Young. Instead, Maye would head to UNC, where he'd take on Howell. If he didn't win the job, Maye figured he could at least see the field after Howell left for the NFL.

Was this shift an indicator of some underlying character issue? Doubtful.

"I would adopt him," Brown said. "He's that perfect of a kid."

In the end, even Saban understood Maye's decision to decommit.

"I should be mad at him," Saban said during the ESPN broadcast on draft night. "I get it, and it's a North Carolina family. He had a great career and he did a great job for the state and I have a lot of respect for this guy. This guy is wired right."

Given what happened to Maye at UNC in his final college season, it's fun to imagine him at Alabama. The Crimson Tide boasts an impressive supporting cast, with some of the top offensive linemen and receivers in the draft every year. That was not the case for the 2023 Tar Heels, whose offensive line allowed 37 sacks. Those protection issues compounded the footwork and decision-making problems Maye had in 2022, when he threw for 38 touchdowns with just seven picks. And so his film is probably better in his first season as a starter for UNC.

"He knows that he's got to tighten up his footwork and get himself aligned correctly and all the things that go into … just dropping from under center," Christensen said.

That's what Maye is working on now. He's in North Carolina with Christensen and Lindsey sharpening his footwork and protections.

"That's a major, major, major difference in college and the pros. How do I handle the protections? Because all of a sudden, it falls on you," said Christensen, who has 27 years of NFL coaching experience.

Maye has done some work with protections, but nothing at the level that he'll have to do in the NFL. Improving his footwork and protections should help prepare him for the smooth and steady transition he'll need to win the starting job for the Patriots.

New England signed veteran quarterback Jacoby Brissett in free agency. The team wants Brissett, Maye, Bailey Zappe and Milton to compete for the QB1 spot. Brissett is set to make $8 million for 2024, while Maye will make $9 million annually over his four-year deal. Maye has all the talent in the world, while Brissett is competent but not flashy.

New Patriots coach Jerod Mayo informed Maye in front of a few coaches that he would not automatically be the Day 1 starter. He'll have to earn the job. But given Maye's immense talent, his draft position and his salary, it would be hard to keep him off the field on Sunday. He'll get out there in 2024 — and likely in Week 1.

Will Patriots sit Drake Maye in favor of Jacoby Brissett?
[McKenna: Would Patriots really sit No. 3 overall pick Drake Maye to start the season?]

The main attribute that separates Maye beyond his mindset is his arm talent. But arm talent is a tricky thing. It's mostly based on the eye test. It's not like weight or height or even speed and agility, where you can measure and quantify a player's physical gifts.

"I always get mad when people start throwing around the term ‘arm talent,'" Christensen said. "I'm not 100 percent sure exactly what that means. For me, what I care about is: Have you seen him make every throw? Can he throw the ball accurately? Does he have enough arm to throw the downfield stuff? Does he have enough touch to drop balls over top of tight coverage? Does he have an anticipation with his arm?"

When watching Maye's film, the answer to every one of Christensen's questions is: Yes.

Maye has shown he can elevate an offense around him. That's what drew Patriots de-facto GM Eliot Wolf to the prospect. Maye will certainly need to do that with New England, which had one of the least-talented offensive units in the NFL last year. And while the organization did some roster reshuffling this offseason, it wasn't the overhaul many expected given how much cap space the Patriots had going into free agency. They still don't really have a WR1 — nor do they have a left tackle. (Is it veteran Chukwuma Okorafor or rookie Caedan Wallace — who played on the right in college — or someone not yet on the team?)

So many of the lessons Maye learned at UNC will be applicable if he takes over this season. No matter if he struggles or instantly succeeds, he's probably going to be a popular man in New England's locker room. He takes care of his own. When NIL money started pouring in at Carolina, Maye negotiated a sponsorship offer into a bigger deal involving his offensive linemen. When he got an offer for free seafood, he asked the company if it could include his receivers and their families.

Christensen, who worked with Tom Brady and Peyton Manning as an NFL coach, sees Maye's thoughtfulness and leadership as overlapping qualities with those legends.

"I think he has a lot of the same traits that give you a chance to be great," Christensen said. "He processes information extremely well — a lot like Peyton. He has a humbleness and humility like Tom that players played for. He has that kind of humility that just attracts teammates. He’s going to be a great teammate."

Maye knows when to show love for his guys. He knows when to encourage them to be better. And like Brady, he knows when and how to fire them up when they're not playing well enough to get a W.

"I don't think that's a small characteristic to share with Tom," Christensen said.

Maye is the future in New England. And the Patriots hope that future shares many characteristics with their past, especially their past with Brady.

How the Patriots decided QB Drake Maye was their future

By Mike Reiss

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Dressed in an off-white suit with a Carolina blue tie, Drake Maye walked into Gillette Stadium for the first time on Friday, still wearing a dark blue Patriots hat from the night before at the 2024 NFL draft in Detroit.

Owner Robert Kraft and team president Jonathan Kraft flanked him on each side, as Maye held up a blue Patriots jersey -- his name on the back, and the No. 1 underneath it, signifying his status as the team's first-round draft pick.

The Krafts have carried out this tradition for 31 straight years with their top draft picks, but there was something about this year that felt different; perhaps because Maye is the highest-ever selection in their tenure, No. 3 overall.

Kraft welcomed a group of approximately 60 media members, noting that he had seen the Boston Herald earlier that morning and how the words on the front of the newspaper caught his eye: Maye Day!

The words resonated and seemed appropriate -- his franchise has been in distress in recent years. Since quarterback Tom Brady left in free agency in 2020, the Patriots are 29-38 and have made the playoffs once, losing in the wild-card round. Coach Bill Belichick's 24 seasons as head coach and de facto general manager came to an end in January.

Now, with Jerod Mayo as coach, director of scouting Eliot Wolf given final personnel authority and Maye at quarterback -- a new era begins. The trio represent hope for a brighter future.

"It's pretty exciting," Kraft said.

It had been months (and years, for that matter) in the making.

The Patriots' last quarterback Mac Jones took the same photo as Maye as the No. 15 pick in the 2021 draft. After a promising rookie season where he looked like a capable successor to Brady, Jones was traded to the Jacksonville Jaguars in March.

The offense was stagnant in 2023 -- scoring half as many points (236) than in Jones' first season in 2021 (462). He was replaced four times in favor of 2022 fourth-round pick Bailey Zappe and threw 12 total interceptions in the 11 games he played.

Many figured the Patriots would prioritize a quarterback in the draft, but there were still questions. Would they trade down from No. 3, gather more assets for a depleted offense, and do it later? Did they like Michigan's J.J. McCarthy as much as Maye? Who would Washington take at No. 2?

By 8:35 p.m. ET on Thursday, they made the official "Maye Day" call.

Drafting Drake Maye with the No. 3 overall pick makes him the highest-drafted player in Robert Kraft's tenure as owner of the Patriots. Scott Taetsch-USA TODAY Sports

IN THE WEEKS leading up to the NFL draft, team sources acknowledged legacies would be tied to what they decided at quarterback. They were operating with the mindset that without a top quarterback, their regime wouldn't have a chance.

Mayo, a former linebacker who played with Brady from 2008-2014, had an up-close view of how Brady's impact resonated throughout the organization. As an assistant coach since 2019, Mayo has also seen first-hand how challenging it has been to fill Brady's void -- first with Cam Newton (2020) and then with Jones (2021-2024). Some of Belichick's decision-making with the hiring of offensive coaches, and personnel, contributed to the pain.

In March, Kraft said: "One way or another, I'd like to see us get a top-rate, young quarterback."

By the time their scouting process was complete for the 2024 draft, Mayo said the Patriots most liked three quarterbacks -- USC's Caleb Williams, LSU's Jayden Daniels and Maye. Thus, a trade package out of No. 3 would have had to blow them away to consider moving down to the next QB options.

A source said the New York Giants had offered the No. 6 overall pick and their 2025 first-round pick, while the Vikings were ultimately willing to part with No. 11 and No. 23, along with a 2025 first-rounder, in exchange for the third pick and two mid-round selections from New England.

But clearly neither of those proposals met the criteria for the "bag" that Mayo said the Patriots would have needed to be OK with trading the pick, and explains why the Patriots called Maye immediately when they were on the clock at No. 3.

"There were different points throughout the process where there were [offers]. All along, we knew we were in a unique opportunity to get a quarterback that we liked," Wolf said.

A key stretch for the Patriots and Maye was a 24-hour span between March 27-28.

That's when nine members of the organization -- coaches and scouts -- traveled to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, as Maye prepared to go through drills at his pro day on March 28. He performed well, yet it was the time around his on-field work that was equally, if not more, important in the Patriots' evaluation.

"They all sat down and interviewed Drake separately," North Carolina coach Mack Brown recalled. "I wasn't involved in those interviews -- I don't think that's my place; I think kids need to be able to sit down with the coach and share whatever they need to share. [Drake] had said it went really well."

The Patriots' contingent included Wolf, Mayo, offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt, quarterbacks coach T.C. McCartney, senior assistant Ben McAdoo, director of player personnel Matt Groh, senior personnel advisor Patrick Stewart, senior personnel executive Alonzo Highsmith and national scout Matt Evans.

"We started to feel more comfortable with him as we spent more time with him and visited with him at North Carolina," Wolf acknowledged. "Really just getting a chance to know him, see what he's about, see what his family is about and getting him on the board and seeing his high football intellect."

As part of the visit, Mayo also met privately with Brown, which Mayo said "really helped me get the full picture."

At that point, Mayo had already been intrigued after initially meeting Maye at the NFL combine in late February. Mayo called it a "fantastic interview," in part because of the composure the 21-year-old Maye showed.

"A lot of teams put up all the good plays, but Eliot and his group put tape together that had a lot of bad plays. He took a lot of that blame on himself when sometimes it wasn't his fault. A very accountable man," Mayo said.

While Maye's response registered favorably that day, Mayo had already come to appreciate his toughness on the field through film evaluation.

"The thing that most impressed me about him is that he would get smashed and just get right back up," he said. "I'm not saying he's Tom Brady, but just that mentality. Same thing with Joe Burrow. Those guys just keep getting back up and continuing to play at a high level and that was like the 'aha!' moment for me."

Maye said later he was equally impressed with Mayo.

"He's such a player's coach. I can see how all the guys attract to him."

The third notable meeting between the Patriots and Maye came April 5 at Gillette Stadium. That provided Van Pelt, among others, an extended opportunity to connect with Maye.

Van Pelt and Maye watched old tape of Aaron Rodgers from the Packers, when Van Pelt had been on the Green Bay coaching staff. Van Pelt detailed to Maye the "outside zone scheme" he plans to run in New England, and some of the play-action elements that can complement it, using Rodgers as an example.

As Maye envisioned what it would be like to play in Van Pelt's offense, the coaches also were assessing how Maye's footwork and fundamentals might look in the scheme, as that was an area Maye sometimes struggled in 2023. With Patriots coaches gaining more comfort, it strengthened Maye's position on the team's board as part of a collaborative process.

"Meeting with Coach Van Pelt, Coach McAdoo, Coach McCartney and talking through some of the development that he needed, some of the things they thought they could tighten up or fix in some cases, in the end we felt comfortable," Wolf said.

"Drake is a relentless worker from all indications that we have, and he's going to be able to overcome some of the things in the areas that he needs to improve."

WOLF HAD KNOWN for weeks how things would unfold Thursday, so all that was left was ensuring there was no surprise in the order of Williams No. 1 to the Bears and Daniels No. 2 to the Commanders -- or a big trade offer at the last minute.

Things went according to plan, and when it was their turn at No. 3, Wolf -- along with Mayo and Robert Kraft -- called and told Maye he was going to be a Patriot. The pick was followed by a round of applause in the draft room.

"The more exposure we had with Drake, the more comfortable we felt," Mayo said. "Honestly, not to talk about other players, but those top three guys -- we were comfortable with all three. It just happened to be Drake.

"We had time to think through the process. We went through various scenarios with the coaches and scouts. The organization was happy with Drake at 3."

Wolf also noted how the 6-foot-4, 223-pound Maye elevated his teammates at North Carolina over the last two seasons, which is a top trait he looks for in quarterbacks. Maye started 26 games over the last two seasons and was 618-of-952 for 8,018 yards, with 63 touchdowns and 16 interceptions.

As for how quickly he might be in position to do so in New England, Mayo is leaving all possibilities open, pointing out the team signed veteran Jacoby Brissett to a one-year, $8 million deal in March. He views Brissett as a capable starter and mentor.

"I go back to Bill [Belichick's philosophy]; I don't think many rookies are ready to just jump in and play," Mayo said. "At the end of the day, our philosophy is the best players will play. Jacoby understands. He's very smart, has great leadership skills, and hopefully Drake can learn something from him as well. We will compete all spring, during training camp, and the best player will start."

Wolf added that part of supporting Maye is putting better players around him. Along those lines, the Patriots selected Washington receiver Ja'Lynn Polk in the second round (No. 37) and Central Florida receiver Javon Baker in the fourth round (No. 110), and also drafted two offensive linemen, Penn State offensive tackle Caedan Wallace (third round, No. 68) and Texas A&M guard Layden Robinson (fourth round, No. 103).

"A guy like Drake has all the natural ability that you want. He can make all the throws," Mayo said. "Really it's about getting to the playbook; it's going to be a different scheme. We're going to be a game-plan offense and will tailor our game-plan to whoever the quarterback is. We'll see how that pans out."

The uncertainty surrounding who will suit up in Week 1 doesn't faze Maye.

"I'll prepare and be ready to be the starter, but at the same time, as a young guy coming in there, it's not given to you. You've got to earn it. My job is to go in there and earn guys' respect, help whoever is the starter, if I'm not, be the best player they can. And help this team win."

NESN

Competitiveness Complements Character: Story Of Patriots' Drake Maye

By Sean T. McGuire

Drake Maye has been known to thread the needle in more ways than one.

Scott Chadwick, Maye's football coach at Myers Park High School in Charlotte, knows that as well as anyone. Maye is the type of guy you want your daughter to marry, he says. Yet, somehow, the New England Patriots rookie quarterback handles himself on the football field like an assassin in an action movie.

"That's Drake," Chadwick said.

NESN.com spoke with Chadwick, Scott Taylor, Maye's high school basketball coach at Myers Park, as well as members of the North Carolina Tar Heels staff, including head football coach Mack Brown, offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey and senior advisor Clyde Christensen, about New England's next franchise quarterback.

They all shared similar sentiments as Chadwick. They love his leadership, competitive nature, and coachability — all the things that drive Maye's opponents nuts.

Chadwick can still recall one of the first times he heard about Maye. The Myers Park Mustangs were set to face nearby Hough High in a 2017 North Carolina High School Athletic Association state quarterfinals matchup. Maye was Hough's second-string quarterback behind a junior signal-caller.

"A lot of coaches in the area told me, 'Hey, whatever you do, don't knock the junior out because the freshman they have is better,'" Chadwick said. "They said, 'You want to play against that kid and not the freshman they've got.'"

The Maye family was viewed as North Carolina royalty, similar to the Mannings in New Orleans and the Gronkowskis in Buffalo. Drake is the youngest of the four Maye boys, behind Luke, Cole and Beau, and he followed in their footsteps.

"He came with a lot of hype, no question," Chadwick said.

New England Patriots quarterback Drake Maye and family
Eric Canha/USA TODAY Sports Images
Chadwick's first chance to work with Maye actually came following the QB's freshman season. The coach ran a quarterback academy with former NFL signal-caller and current Minnesota Vikings assistant Josh McCown where Maye was a pupil. It didn't take long for Chadwick to see Maye's hype was legitimate.

Chadwick quickly formed a relationship with the Maye family. When it became clear Hough intended to start the rising senior for another season, Chadwick's relationship with the Mayes made Myers Park an ideal landing spot. Drake and his father, Mark, moved to the Myers Park side of Charlotte ahead of his sophomore year.

Chadwick and the Mustangs staff made Maye earn the starting job as a sophomore transfer, especially since they had their own rising senior on the depth chart. But it was clear Maye would take over. He finally did in late July when Myers Park went away for camp.

Maye played two high school seasons under Chadwick, his sophomore and junior campaigns. His senior season, a season where Myers Park had two nationally televised ESPN games on its schedule, was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was a disappointing lost opportunity for the coach-QB duo. Chadwick had a front-row seat when Maye threw 50 touchdowns and just three interceptions during his junior year. Maye completed 72.4% of his passes while Myers Park solidified itself as the top program in the state.

Chadwick saw Maye as an unrivaled competitor behind center. As a sophomore, Maye struggled in their only regular-season loss, throwing three of his five picks in defeat against Butler. Given a chance at revenge in the playoffs, Maye promised his teammates it wouldn't happen again. He threw four touchdowns in a 33-8 playoff win the night after Thanksgiving.

Then, a year later, it was Maye who encouraged Chadwick to schedule Hough, giving him a shot at his former team. Chadwick obliged, and Myers Park filled an opening in its non-conference schedule with a Hough team that ranked top 10 in the state. Maye went off for seven touchdowns, throwing for six and running in another before leaving with a 68-7 Myers Park lead. The Mustangs, who averaged averaged 50 points that season, won 68-21.

That will to compete extended beyond the gridiron. Maye took no mercy on his high school basketball teammates in "NBA 2K" on Xbox, never losing and making sure his name and record were reflected on the team board, Taylor said.

Taylor also reflected on the times Myers Park went on the road and Drake heard chants like 'Stick to football!' and 'Luke is better!" — a reference to Drake's oldest brother, Luke, a national champion and hero at North Carolina after his game-winning bucket lifted the Tar Heels over the Kentucky Wildcats and to the Final Four in March 2017. Drake, the 6-foot-5 sophomore forward, would typically respond by converting an early bucket and shushing the crowd. Taylor also chuckled when he mentioned the time Maye heard chatter from a player on an opposing team. Maye responded by listing off that player's offer sheet, which was filled with Division II schools and programs that didn't hold a candle to the ones Maye heard from.

"Competition is fun to him," Taylor said. "I think that's when I see him smile the brightest."

I think that's when I see him smile the brightest.

Scott Taylor, Drake Maye's high school basketball coach
One moment that stands out most to Taylor, though, was during Maye's sophomore season. Myers Park traveled to Northwest Guilford for a playoff game. When the Mustangs held a two-possession lead in the final minute, Taylor figured he would call a timeout to run a good play. Before he could, however, Maye grabbed a rebound, ran down the court in transition and pulled up for a 3-pointer. Maye then stole the ball on Northwest Guilford's next possession, dunked it and hung on the rim as the buzzer sounded.

"For me, that's the one I'll probably always remember," Taylor said.

Taylor said Maye considered playing college basketball and had interest from a handful of ACC schools, including Virginia, Clemson and Notre Dame. Brown, the Tar Heels football coach, said Maye could have been North Carolina's sixth man.

The legendary college football coach was happy to have Maye on his own squad, even if the QB's fiery nature cost the program a ping-pong paddle or two. Maye's competitiveness was on display in some signature Carolina wins against Duke his sophomore and junior seasons — Maye led the Tar Heels on game-winning drives in those contests.

Maye's fire doesn't just burn on the biggest stage. Brown recalled a time he walked into the Tar Heels' players lounge to a broken ping-pong paddle. The visibly distraught Maye stood there after he went up against North Carolina tight end John Copenhaver.

'The tight end beat me!" Maye told Brown. "The tight end beat me! Can you imagine?!"

Lindsey recalled the midweek accuracy contests he held between Maye and the Tar Heels quarterbacks. Lindsey planned to cancel that target practice one time to concentrate on individual drills. Maye, though, pushed back.

"That was a big part of the week for him," Lindsey said.

Christensen, meanwhile, worked with Maye during the 2023 season and ahead of the NFL draft. However, he's known the Maye family for a long time given his relationship with Drake's dad, Mark. Tagging along for a family golf trip, Christensen got even more insight into what makes Maye tick.

"Probably one of my fondest stories would be one time I golfed with him and his brother," Christensen said. "His brother had a four-and-a-half incher, and Drake made him putt it out. 'Don't pick that up, you got to putt that out!' And it was probably under six inches.

"He just has a playfulness, he loves to compete," Christensen said.

That maniacal desire to compete might be why many find it hard to believe in the 'aw shucks' demeanor that comes with Maye's southern drawl.

But those who know him know that's how Maye threads the needle.

"He's got a unique character and ability to have a humility that carries with him, while also having a competitive nature," Taylor said. "I hope it's appreciated and seen. Because he is tenacious in how he works and how he approaches it, but there's a true sense of gratitude and humility towards everybody around him.

"That is not fabricated in any way. That is truly him, and it's unique. It's really unique."

The 72-year-old Brown, a veteran football coach of 46 years, said he wished Maye was part of his family. Brown told the Patriots he wouldn't want to have anyone else.

"I would adopt him," Brown said. "He's that perfect of a kid. It sounds kind of corny, but it's true."

I would adopt him. He's that perfect of a kid.

North Carolina Tar Heels head coach Mack Brown

Many credited Drake's parents, Mark and Aimee, both college athletes themselves, for instilling the right values in the four Maye boys. They have a healthy relationship with competition and can maintain a level of respect, humbleness and humility.

Taylor recalled when Maye joined the basketball team his sophomore and junior seasons. It came when the Mustangs were three or four games into the season, a product of the football team's extended playoff runs. Maye, Taylor said, didn't want to disrupt what Myers Park had going, and didn't want to overshadow the hoopers who spent the offseason on the hardwood.

"He was willing to do whatever it meant, come off the bench, take a little bit of a lesser role offensively, almost so as not to upset the guys that had been putting in the time and effort," Taylor said. "He was genuine with it."

Maye instead did the overlooked work. He'd make the extra pass, set screens and get rebounds for his teammates. He did the work of a role player despite having star talent. That was until his Mustangs teammates and coaches encouraged him to start playing to his full potential.

Lindsey, who took the offensive coordinator job at North Carolina after Maye's standout sophomore season, said one of the first things that stood out to him was Maye's humility. Entering his pivotal junior campaign, Maye told Lindsey he wanted to be coached and critiqued. It was a sentiment that doesn't always come from someone named the ACC Player of the Year the season prior.

"Sometimes you don't find that with these big-time players," Lindsey said.

Maye's sincerity has always stood out to Chadwick, too. Instead of rambling about his life-changing achievement and excitement, Maye in their first call after the Patriots drafted him, spent the first 10 minutes of their conversation asking his former coach about his current team's offseason.

During the pre-draft process, Chadwick was contacted by an NFL team. The team, which Chadwick didn't reveal, asked if Maye was similar to the Eddie Haskell character in "Leave It To Beaver." He pushed back.

"That is so far from the truth," Chadwick relayed. "He is completely one of the finest kids — I call him a kid — but he's one of the finest kids I've ever been around."

Christensen said he learned more about Maye's character when he watched him communicate with his North Carolina teammates. Christensen praised Maye for how he married positive reinforcement with constructive criticism. Christensen, who served as Tom Brady's quarterback coach in Tampa Bay before joining the Tar Heels staff, even said it was one of the traits Maye has in common with Brady.

"I don't think that's a small characteristic to share with Tom," Christensen said.

Those who know him know it's just another example of Maye threading the needle.

CBS NEWS

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.

DB Kobee Minor

Los Angeles Times

Kobee Minor, the 50th Mr. Irrelevant, celebrated as part of a special fraternity

By Sam French

Kobee Minor's first look at Orange County's coast reminded him of Netflix's shoreline-set, teen-drama series "Outer Banks." That's the closest he'd ever been to an actual beach.

Five days on the bay, in the surf, among those whose journey mirrors his own, and Newport Beach is now like a home away from home for the new Patriot.

The 50th Mr. Irrelevant. who hails from a town 35 miles northwest of Dallas, now understands what it means to enjoy five days on the bay and in the surf among others whose journey mirrors his own.

Minor this week joined a "brotherhood" he hadn't known existed, couldn't have aspired to and now cherishes. He's been steeped in the traditions of pro football's most whimsical culture, joining a band of others chosen with the last pick of five decades of National Football League drafts and the family tethered to it.

Irrelevant Week's mission — to fête somebody who wouldn't normally be celebrated just for the joy of it — and the amiably casual approach to maneuvering through it hasn't veered through its evolution from let's-try-this to a celebrated moment on the NFL's calendar. It's a bit of fun before the real business begins.

That's what Newport Beach's Paul Salata, who played for USC in the NFL in the late 1940s and early '50s, was seeking when in 1976 he introduced Irrelevant Week, whether he fully realized it or not.

It's what Melanie Fitch, Salata's daughter, has embraced in her 30-year stewardship of Mr. Irrelevant celebration. In an increasingly corporate sports landscape, Salata's (and now Fitch's) week-long (or thereabouts) parties are something else, something more meaningful.

"I had no idea," Andy Stokes, one of nearly two dozen Mr. Irrelevants present for Minor's coronation, said of the event. "I was just a kid trying to play football. This stays with you your whole life. It's a brotherhood. It's a club. You get a built-in community for the rest of your life."

There's a bit of teasing going on here, in celebration of the "last," and a celebration of the achievement, with rewards: for Minor, the key to the city, proclamations, a Newport Beach Police Department badge, personalized longboard, and, at Friday night's marquee banquet, the humorous Lowsman Trophy, its football player depicted fumbling the ball.

New England gave Minor his ticket, making a seventh-round trade with the Kansas City Chiefs for two picks and using the latter — No. 257 in the draft — to snare the defensive back from the University of Memphis. He spent his five days here mostly garbed in a Patriots jersey with 257 on the front and getting a taste of Balboa life.

He sailed in the weekly Beercans series on Balboa Bay, surfed off 30th Street under inaugural world champion P.T. Townend's tutelage (with a minute-long run judged a 6, highest of Irrelevant scores), took a restaurant crawl along the peninsula, worshiped at Mariners Church and spent a day at Disneyland.

"Everybody's been amazing," Minor said.

The OG

That's Salata's doing. He concocted Mr. Irrelevant, Fitch said, "like a spur-of-the-moment idea" to "do something nice for someone for no reason."

It was never meant to last forever, but it might.

“Fifty years is a long time,” said Fitch, who took charge of the Irrelevant Week organization in 1995. “When it started, I was younger than Mr. Irrelevant. Then I was Mr. Irrelevant’s age. Then I was the age of his mom. Now I’m the age of his grandma. It’s been a good run.

“We still really enjoy the idea of celebrating the underdog and celebrating the last player drafted. We think that he should be recognized just like the first player drafted, because it’s an honor to be drafted at all.”
There have been 14,156 players drafted over these 50 years. Some 14,106 of them aren’t “Irrelevant.” It’s “truly a fraternity,” says 2006 Raiders selection Kevin McMahan. It’s one that has, according to 1977 Vikings pick Jim Kelleher, “become such a significant part of life.”

Salata, who died a day shy of his 95th birthday in 2021, is warmly remembered within the fraternity.

“Paul was the OG,” said Ryan Hoag, a 2003 Oakland Raiders pick who parlayed his success into a stint on reality television show “The Bachelorette” and now is a pregame analyst for the team. “He was one of those guys that everybody kind of wanted to be around.

“He didn’t say a ton, but when he did, it spoke volumes. He was quick-witted. He was always cracking jokes. And he was just somebody that genuinely had the utmost respect for everybody and the biggest heart and just wanted to help people for no reason at all. It’s rare if you come across one of those people in your life, let alone a Paul Salata.”

Kelleher, the second Mr. Irrelevant, called Salata “unlike anybody I had ever met.”

“I was just in awe, the way he interacts with people, his sense of humor,” he said. “And then what he’s done, his vision of this. I can’t speak for him, but something tells me that what Melanie’s done and where Irrelevant Week is, here, 50 years later, is what he wanted.

“‘Just doing something nice for somebody for no reason.’ How good of a mantra is that for our country, for our world, for us all? It was a gift. We’re all blessed.”

Fitch this year joined her father as chief beneficiary of the Orange County Youth Sports Foundation’s Person of the Year, an honor she rebuked from the Lowsman Banquet stage, quickly shifting the attention back to the event.

“I didn’t know, I would have stopped it,” she said. “Maybe that’s why they didn’t tell me. I like to be under the radar. I like to do a lot of nice things for people, but I don’t want my name in the deal. I just want it to be a super time and super experience.”

She marshals a loosely organized, amiably casual team heavy on family members while steering from the behind, slipping in and out of the spotlight as needed, her constant, wry chatter a treasured soundtrack to the proceedings.

Everyone’s welcomed as “family” — that was Salata’s way, and like father, like daughter. The “fraternity” is constructed upon that foundation.

Hoag, who has returned to Irrelevant Week “10 or 11 times,” calls the relationship “special ... like family” and says his week, 22 years ago, “probably usurps every moment of my life.”

“This is pretty much at the top,” he said. “Having a full week dedicated to you, and they tailor anything and everything you’ve ever imagined. I mean, it’s like finding a genie’s lamp and having unlimited wishes.”

He’d known nothing of the tradition until a friend called him “Mr. Irrelevant” as they saw his name called on television.

“I heard you get a trip to Hawaii and a million dollars, and that sounded pretty good, let me tell you,” he said. “It turned out it wasn’t, but, honestly, I wouldn’t trade my experience of that week and the subsequent 22 years for a million dollars.”

It’s all for charity, and the Lowsman Banquet, the business end of the festivities, raised about $150,000, Fitch estimated, for the OCYSF.

Many of the Mr. Irrelevants returning this year for the first time, all of them except 2020 New York Giants pick Tae Crowder, whose party was canceled by COVID, carried tales of their weeks: the single Hoag’s “Miss Irrelevant” pageant, Kelleher accompanying Salata in his morning duties, 2005 Patriots pick Stokes’ hit-and-run after coach Bill

Belichick limited his trip to one day, 1992 Redskins pick Matt Elliott getting tossed from his hotel room bed by the Landers/Big Bear earthquakes.

‘I can’t let them down’

Minor’s experience — the adventures, sure, but more so the camaraderie with those who preceded him most of all — “really opened my eyes,” he said. “Just realizing this is actually a big event, and it’s bigger than all of us. Just fellowshiping with everybody has been amazing.

“Man, I can’t thank this family enough. They didn’t have to do this, man. They’re doing something nice for somebody for literally no reason. So hat’s off to them and their family, making me a part of their family.”

Minor dreamed from childhood of playing football or basketball professionally — “basketball didn’t work out; I’m not that tall,” said the 6-footer — and started to believe it could happen when he got his first college offers at Lake Dallas High School in Cornith, Texas, near Denton.

He was a three-star defensive back in high school, where the elite get five stars. He had (as he noted in his post-draft press conference) “never been a highly recruited guy ... never been one of the top guys,” and hadn’t had a satisfactory four years at Texas Tech, where he saw special-teams duty, and Indiana, where he was “let go” after a season.

Minor made an impact after portaling to Memphis, contributing 38 tackles, seven tackles for loss, two sacks, six passes defended and two fumble recoveries as the Tigers went 11-2 with a Frisco Bowl win over West Virginia just across Lake Lewisville from home. His dad told him he was Mr. Irrelevant.

“[Being ‘Irrelevant’ is] kind of normal to me, because I’ve always been an underdog, you feel me?” he said. “Just getting that call and knowing that I’m Mr. Irrelevant, the last pick of the draft, it kind of just adds fuel to my fire.”

He stepped into the Patriots’ June minicamp and began to “pick up on the small things I need to fix in my game and trying to focus on my technique and stuff like that, do whatever I can to earn a role on the team and whatever I can to help out.”

He’s not a certainty. Half of Mr. Irrelevants to date never saw action in an NFL regular-season game, only six have played in more than 50, and just 15 in 10 or more. Four others are on current NFL rosters (49ers quarterback Brock Purdy, Rams defensive end Desjuan Johnson, Lions linebacker Grant Stuard, and 2024 honoree Jaylen Key, a Bengals safety). Another, quarterback Chad Kelly, plays in the Canadian league, and three-year Giants starter Crowder is “trying to get back into the NFL” after a season in the second-tier United Football League.

“I’ve got to just go out there and prove that I’m a dog,” Minor said. “And not just prove to them, but prove to myself that I’m capable of playing in the National Football League.”

The support he’s found the past few days has made that all the more important.

“Now I know I’ve got a couple hundred more people that’s rooting for me,” he said. “I can’t let them down, so I’ve got to go back and work.”

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Mr. Irrelevant? Not to Lake Dallas: Kobee Minor's Journey to the Patriots

By Mike Dussault

On the final Saturday of the 2025 NFL Draft, as names dwindled and cameras prepared to sign off, Jason Young was in his backyard in Corinth, Texas, cooking crawfish and stealing glances at the TV. The longtime Lake Dallas High School head coach wasn't hosting an NFL watch party — just a staff gathering for his wife's coworkers — but one player still on the board had everyone in his orbit holding their breath.

"I'm cooking, TV's on, and I'm texting Kobee's dad like, 'Anything? Hear anything yet?'" Young said. "Then I see the Patriots have the last pick — and I knew Kobee had taken a visit up there. I told my wife, 'Oh boy, we've got a shot here.' And then they call his name."

Kobee Minor, cornerback out of Memphis — and formerly Indiana, Texas Tech, and Lake Dallas High — was officially selected by the New England Patriots with the 257th overall pick in the 2025 NFL Draft, making him the year's "Mr. Irrelevant."

"I just started screaming in the backyard," Young said, laughing. "My wife's coworkers thought I'd lost it. I thought the police might show up. But I was so dang fired up for that kid."

"I Love It" — Fuel, Not a Fluke

For Minor, the moment capped off years of quiet perseverance — being overlooked, underrecruited, and underrated. Being the final pick in the draft didn't dampen the moment. In fact, it fit the narrative perfectly.

"To me, I love it," Minor said in his post-draft press conference. "I've never been a highly recruited guy. I've never been one of the top guys. So really this isn't anything new to me. I'm going to just go out here and do what I got to do, put my head down and grind, like I always have."

Far from being bothered by the "Mr. Irrelevant" label, Minor embraced it.

"It's just fuel to my fire," he said. "I'm going to continue to work and I'm excited for this opportunity."

And while he may not have been a household name on draft boards, Minor had already made a name for himself in places like Lake Dallas, Lubbock, Bloomington, and Memphis — by being dependable, selfless, and relentless.

From the Backyard to the Back End

Minor was a staple in the Lake Dallas football program from the time he arrived as a freshman. A varsity starter by his sophomore year, he quickly became the Falcons' best defensive back and an all-purpose weapon.

"He played safety, receiver, quarterback — whatever we needed," Young said. "He had the instincts. He saw things before they happened."

The trust came early. "Even as a sophomore, he was our best DB out there," Young said. "And off the field? Just a great kid. I never had a problem with him. You knew what you were getting every day — a leader."

Minor remembers that foundation well. "I went to a high school that wasn't far outside of Dallas," he said. "Lake Dallas High School, up north. I was a three-star recruit. I committed to Texas Tech and played there for three seasons, mostly on special teams."

But when his opportunity to start didn't materialize at Texas Tech — in part due to two super seniors receiving major NIL deals — Minor entered the transfer portal.

"They were giving those guys all kinds of money," Young explained. "Kobee knew what that meant. He wasn't going to get a fair shot."

Minor landed at Indiana, where he quickly earned a starting role. When that coaching staff was dismissed, he transferred again, this time to Memphis — where he put together his best season yet.

"I just ran with it," Minor said. "I'm here today because of every step along the way."

A Fit in Foxborough

Minor's path through three college programs speaks not only to his perseverance, but also his adaptability. According to his NFL.com scouting report, he's a fluid, versatile defender with good instincts, the ability to play multiple roles, and a willingness to contribute on special teams — traits that align well with New England's emphasis on versatility and discipline.

"When I came into college, I was a safety," Minor said. "I moved to corner, and at Memphis we had a nickel package for me. I know how to play each and every spot in the back end. I feel like that's what makes me versatile."

Asked to describe his style of play, Minor didn't hesitate. "I would say I'm a dog, for sure," he said. "You're going to get a hard worker, a guy that does everything right on and off the field. You're getting a good football player — and a better person."

He also noted that he takes pride in tackling, physicality, and doing the little things that win games. "I'll come up in run support. I'm a technician. I'll do whatever I can to help the team."

That mindset — doing the dirty work, playing special teams, contributing in the slot or on the boundary — gives Minor a real shot at making New England's roster. The Patriots only hosted a handful of prospects for top-30 visits, and Minor was one of them.

"It gave me that family feel, like I was back at home," he said. "Nice staff. I enjoyed the visit a lot. I'm just glad they took a chance on me."

Character That Sticks

Minor credits his upbringing for keeping him grounded through it all.

"I was raised in a two-parent household," he said. "I was taught to always do the right thing and treat people with respect. Keep God first, and good things will happen. That's what I live by."

Coach Young saw that same consistency early. "He's going to do anything and everything they ask of him," Young said. "And he's just getting started. His best football is still ahead of him."

Minor agrees. He's not looking for headlines — just a chance.

"This isn't new to me," he said. "I've always had to prove myself. I've always had to work. And I'm going to keep doing that."

The Last Pick — and the Next Step

Being the final pick in the NFL Draft comes with a title — but it's not the end of the road. It's the beginning. Kobee Minor's entire football journey has prepared him for that moment: overlooked, underhyped, but never underprepared.

And if you ask the coach who jumped out of his chair in a Texas backyard that afternoon, this story's far from finished.

"I think he's got the ability to stick around this league for a while," Jason Young said. "That title might say Mr. Irrelevant, but to us? He's anything but."

The Boston Globe

Who (and what) is Mr. Irrelevant? Kobee Minor, the new Patriot, embraces his status as final pick of the NFL Draft.

By Amin Touri, Nicole Yang and Emma Healy

As the final pick in the 2025 NFL Draft, Kobee Minor will always be associated with the title of “Mr. Irrelevant.” The new Patriot seems fine with that.

“I love it,” Minor said. “I’ve never been a highly recruited guy, I’ve never been one of the top guys, so really, this isn’t anything new to me. So I’m just going to go out here and do what I got to do, put my head down and grind like I’ve always been. ... It’s just fuel to my fire, so I’m just going to continue to work and I’m excited for this opportunity.”

Nobody had a longer wait to hear their name called than Minor, who finally went at No. 257 to New England on Saturday.

“It’s just a blessing,” Minor said. “I’ve been waiting all day, I didn’t know if I was going to get the call or not, and I ended up waiting to the last pick and ended up getting that call. My heart was racing ... so I’m thankful.”

Minor has bounced around quite a bit, both on the field and off of it. He started his college career at Texas Tech before transferring to Indiana and later finishing his college career at Memphis. He started out as a safety at Texas Tech, moved to corner, and his played all over the secondary.

“I would say I tackle very well, I can come up in run support,” Minor said. “I’d say I’m a technician, I can play man coverage, and I feel like I’m versatile on the back end, I can play whatever DB position or help out on special teams, whatever I need to do to help the team out.”
In 11 games last season, the 6-foot, 190-pound cornerback recorded 38 tackles, including seven for loss, and forced two fumbles.

The Patriots have franchise cornerstone Christian Gonzalez leading their cornerback room but have struggled to find depth at the position.

What is Mr. Irrelevant and Irrelevant Week?

The title of Mr. Irrelevant was created when former USC and one-time pro football player Paul Salata decided in 1976 he wanted to honor the last pick in the NFL Draft.

Salata had been a 10th round pick as a receiver in 1951, and 15 years later, “Mr. Irrelevant” and “Irrelevant Week” were born when Salata invited 487th pick Kelvin Kirk to celebrate with him in Newport Beach in California.

To this day, Irrelevant Week takes place in Newport Beach, California, featuring a parade in honor of the draftee, a “roast and toast” dinner, and a golf tournament. The invited athlete is encouraged to submit a list of activities they want to include in their special celebration.

At the conclusion of the festivities, the player receives the Lowsman Trophy, a nod to the NCAA’s Heisman Trophy — though Mr. Irrelevant receives a prize that depicts him fumbling the ball.

The Patriots have drafted Mr. Irrelevant three times: in 1994 (Marty Moore), 2005 (Andy Stokes), and now 2025 (Kobee Minor). Moore, a special teamer, went on to become the first Mr. Irrelevant to play in the Super Bowl, when he competed in Super Bowl XXXI.

T Morgan Moses

BOSTON SPORTS JOURNAL

Sage veteran Morgan Moses could pay even more dividends for the Patriots than expected

By Mike Giardi

As we got our first chance to lay eyes on this Patriots team assembled by Mike Vrabel and Company, I found myself drawn to a player who wasn't a full participant: Morgan Moses.

The 34-year-old tackle is still rehabbing from off-season knee surgery for an injury that happened at MetLife Stadium in Week 3 when his Jets beat the Pats 24-3. Moses missed the next two weeks because of it, then battled through 11 more games before sitting out the regular season finale. With his experience in the league, he could easily have sat this week out and taken care of his body away from the facility. Yet that's not how Moses is wired. He's doing his damndest to get up to speed as quickly as possible, all while intent on making a mark on his new organization.

"I tease Will (Campbell) about it all the time," relayed Moses post-workout. "I said, 'Will, like the things you did in college, I didn't do 12 years ago.' So, I'm learning from them just as much as they're learning from me. When you come with that mindset, the window for you, just as far as growing as a player and person, is always open. So, I still enjoy the grind. I still enjoy being out here with the guys..."

That was evident during the practice. Moses spent a decent amount of time doing footwork drills with fellow vet Mike Onwenu and rookie Jared Wilson. The work was done against air, yet the right tackle constantly communicated with those two.

Later, as practice wrapped up, several of the offensive linemen gathered in a circle, and it was clear, based on hand gestures and movements, that they were talking ball and talking technique. Considering the turnover in that room alone, these actions are necessary and vital for future success.

"It's really important, man," Moses said. "Obviously, we got a young group, we got a young offensive line, and so just being able to get around them, create that brotherhood, that chemistry, you know, and just bring them along."

When Moses looks around, he sees rookies in Campbell, Wilson, and Marcus Bryant (among others), a second-year pro with limited game experience in Caedan Wallace, and two guards in similar boats in Sidy Sow and Layden Robinson. How quickly they can learn from one another and start seeing the game through the same set of eyes will be a critical piece for this football team.

"We got a lot of guys that are trying to figure it out themselves," Moses observed. "Just being a voice in that room, bringing them along - whether it's going out to dinners, or just staying after practice when everything is done and watching film together...

"When you bring those knowledgeable players into one room, and we can sit down and share football and what we see and just being able to talk about it. Because, my eyes might be different than Will's and the younger guys, because I've been playing for a long time. So, being able to spit that knowledge to them and help them see what I see, to bring them along, is always vital."

Moses wasn't the Pats' first option at tackle. They engaged with several free agents and couldn't — for whatever reason or reasons — seal those deals. But they quickly pivoted to a player who has started 158 games over 11 seasons, giving him a longer term and more guaranteed money than offered elsewhere. Then they stuck his locker next to Campbell, hoping the youngster gets that veteran savvy rubbed off on him quickly. Color Moses impressed so far.

"The way he approaches the game. Man, he's eager to learn. He asks questions every day. He's like, 'Bro, can we get some sets?' and just talking football. His locker is right beside mine, so we get to talk about football all day.

"And obviously, he's a stud man. He's played great football in college, so now he's just trying to figure it out where, like, you know, every week you're going against somebody that has a 'guy.' So, just fine-tune - not trying to change stuff - but just fine-tuning the things he's learned in college and taking them to the NFL and just on the field and getting challenged every day."

Campbell will certainly get that in spades, but having someone like Moses around - with his reservoir of knowledge and experience - can only help. And that's why the old man may not have been the first choice, but he could very well be the right choice as this season plays out.

BOSTON'S HOME FOR SPORTS 98.5 THE SPORTS HUB

Patriots tackle Morgan Moses embraces leadership role in young room
By Matt Dolloff

There's still plenty of mystery about the Patriots' plan on offense. But there's a clear path at the right tackle spot: Morgan Moses leads, and Caedan Wallace develops.

The Patriots signed the 34-year-old Moses as a clear plug-and-play starting right tackle, one of their most pressing needs on either side of the ball. Behind Moses is Wallace, a second-year pro out of Penn State that dealt with injuries and uncertainty throughout his rookie season. The Patriots reportedly intend to develop Wallace specifically as a right tackle, after trying him on both the left and right in 2024.

But Moses enters the equation as a no-brainer to start in the short-term, and set a strong example for the tackles under him on the depth chart. Moses is embracing the mentor part, as he immediately becomes the Patriots' most experienced overall offensive lineman.

"When you're competing, whether it's in any facet of life, when you're able to teach somebody and show them things and you're able to learn in that room, it makes everybody better because that guy behind you is getting better every day," Moses said in his introductory press conference last Thursday in Foxboro. "So you can't be a complacent player and be that same person. You've got to show up every day and make yourself better.

"So when you have that mentality for a room, especially for an offensive line because we operate as one, five equals one, we never leave the field."

Moses credited veteran All-Pro tackle Trent Williams for helping him become a better player during their five seasons together in Washington. Though Moses has bounced around the league in recent years, he's continued to dependably start at right tackle, earning high marks for both his run-blocking and pass protection.

The veteran fills an immediate need for a beleaguered Patriots offensive line on the field, but he stands to deliver value off the field, as well. It's not just at tackle, but on the interior, that the Patriots O-line is developing younger players. Moses is looking to be the teacher to them that Williams was to him, once the linemen gather in the locker room and at team meetings.

"Bringing that mentality as an older guy in the locker room and just bringing guys along and showing them the way is going to be a great deal for us," Moses said.

None of this solves the Patriots' major need at left tackle. Vederian Lowe, Demontrey Jacobs, and Caleb Jones are the only other tackles even on the roster as of this writing. Lowe still projects as the starting left tackle, but the Patriots would be best suited upgrading that spot, with Lowe as a backup or camp competition at best. Options are slimming in free agency, with LSU tackle Will Campbell looming as the possible fourth overall pick for the Pats in the 2025 draft.

If the Patriots do decide to shoot for a left tackle among the rookie class, Moses would at least play a strong leadership role for rookies off the field. And there's hope that Moses can aid in Wallace's development into a potential long-term answer on the other side.

The Pats are still short on plans for improving their offense this off-season, but Moses and the right tackles paint a clear picture.

OL Michael Onwenu

The Athletic

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."

WEEI SPORTS RADIO NETWORK

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

By Ryan Hannable
Nov 18, 2020

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's a "big" story.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But, the Patriots were not like many other teams.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Each week, Onwenu seems to make at least one tweet-worthy pancake block and very rarely misses on his assignments.

Although just 10 games into his NFL career, the future seems bright.

“He’s the type of guy that if he keeps playing the way he is, he’s absolutely a guy that is going to play several years and if he’s texting coaches at 10:30 at night to try and find out details and he’s out competing at a high level, I think great things are going to happen for him because he’s making an impact so fast,” Drevno said. “I think a lot of those guys, if you start out strong, you’re going to have a great career. He has a want-to and a desire.”

Every NFL player has a story, it just so happens Onwenu’s is bigger than most.

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.

DB Brenden Schooler

The Athletic

Brenden Schooler has emulated Matthew Slater since HS film sessions

By Mark Daniels
October 13, 2023

FOXBOROUGH – The father and son sat together, huddled at a computer in their garage. It was here where NFL dreams were conceptualized.

The father discovered the perfect player for his son to emulate. So he pressed play and they stared at the monitor watching clips of Matthew Slater. Then talked about what made him special.

The Patriots legend was living proof that you could make it to the NFL by focusing on special teams. In the Schooler household, there was no better example.

Long before Brenden Schooler signed with the Patriots to play with Slater, his father, Tom Schooler, taught him the importance of special teams. That’s why this teenager didn’t dream of playing quarterback in the NFL. He wanted to be the next Slater.

“I do remember sitting in the garage, watching the clips with (my dad). Just talking about it – trying to break it down,” Brenden Schooler said. “Obviously we don’t know as much as I do now about special teams, but try to break it down and see what he’s thinking and why he’s doing what he’s doing. I remember those days like it was yesterday.”

“I’d show it to him and go, ‘Look, this is what we’re trying to do with you now in high school, but this is the way they do it at the next level,’” Tom Schooler added. “I’m a big visual learner guy. Brenden is too. He needs to see it be kinetic about it and do it as well.”

As a teen, Brenden Schooler was an outstanding athlete. There was a point where his parents thought he might play collegiate volleyball like his mother, Christine. In his one year of track, he became one of the best sprinters and long jumpers in California.

However, the household’s passion revolved around football and Slater was the perfect player to idolize.

Slater, like the Schoolers, grew up in Southern California. Tom Schooler actually met his father, Jackie Slater, at a local event. As Matthew Slater carved out a role as an all-time special team player in the NFL, the lightbulb went off for the elder Schooler – if his son was going to reach the NFL, this was his avenue.

“Early on, he had a knack for making plays on special teams,” Tom Schooler said. “It was like, ‘Brenden, you can do this. If for some reason you can’t get on the field as a position player, there are still opportunities for you to fulfill your dreams of playing in the NFL. And look at this guy. This guy did it. This guy made a career out of this.’”

Little did he know, it would come full circle for his son.

Schooler was an elite special teams player early
Tom Schooler always loved football and was an all-conference linebacker at Eastern Michigan. However, he also loved special teams – he roomed with the punter in college and learned how to long snap to make himself more valuable.

After college, he coached in high school and was an assistant for his sons, Brenden and Colin, teams.

Tom didn't allow his kids to play tackle football until middle school, but in the Schooler household, sports were everything. Brenden played volleyball, basketball, baseball, football, and then track and field. As he got older, his athletic ability became evident. In his lone track season at Mission Viejo High School, Brenden ran a personal best 10.76 100-meter dash.

"Early on in high school he started showing flashes of being able to outrun people and just to understand the big picture of the game," Tom Schooler said. "A lot of special teams is just understanding the situation, where you are, angles and things like that. That's where we started looking at it going, 'Hey, you could have a future here.'"

Brenden loved football so much. His father preached pride in special teams. By the time he got into high school, Brenden started to enjoy it. He played wide receiver and safety, as he did in college, but was also a dominant special teams player.

During his senior season, he blocked two punts and two field goal attempts.

"It's 33.3% of the game. The offense and defense hold the other 33.3%. it's an important part of the game," Brenden said. "You can win or lose a game with special teams. I think that's why I took it so seriously."

It was toward the end of his high school career that his father started to research information about Slater. It was amazing how this Patriots captain not only carried himself off the field but carved out a career for himself as a special teams ace.

When Brenden would tell his dad his NFL dreams, Tom emphasized the improbable odds. It was another reason to lean into special teams.

"We did the numbers – early, early on. The top 5% of high school athletes play Division I college football. Out of that 5%, 2.5% of all college athletes play Power Five college football. Out of that, 1% go on to the NFL," Tom said. "You have to make sure you understand what it takes to be one of those guys and put the work in and be valuable.

"'Let's do everything, let's do offense, defense, special teams because that's going to open your avenue for possible positions in the NFL.'"

Schooler came to Patriots looking to be the next Slater
The Patriots were too hard to ignore.

Leading up to the 2022 NFL Draft, Brenden Schooler had interest as a priority free agent from multiple NFL teams. At Oregon and Texas, he played safety and wide receiver. Special teams, however, always got him noticed. At Oregon, Brenden twice earned Pac-12 All-Conference first-team honors as a special teamer before transferring to Texas where he played two seasons as a Longhorn.

The goal was to get to training camp, but that spring, Patriots special teams coach Cam Achord traveled to Texas to work out Schooler, who aslo 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.

Forbes

Former Tryout Robert Spillane Became A Patriots Priority In Free Agency
By Oliver Thomas

Robert Spillane became a priority for the New England Patriots as the NFL’s legal tampering window opened.

But the veteran linebacker won’t forget when he wasn’t seen as one.

“I always say it doesn’t happen by accident. It doesn’t happen overnight,” Spillane, 29, told reporters during his introductory press conference at Gillette Stadium on Thursday. “This has been years in the making, years of intentional actions throughout every day, living my life a certain way to try to get to where I’m at right now.”

A three-year, $33 million contract worth up to $37.5 million with incentives is where Spillane finds himself now. He stands 86 games, including 50 starts, into a run in the league that began as an undrafted free agent out of Western Michigan.

An invitation to rookie minicamp with the Minnesota Vikings arrived in 2018 for the two-time second-team All-MAC selection. Another week passed. Another tryout followed. It sent Spillane to the Tennessee Titans under the watch of a former Ohio State recruiter who would become his past and present head coach.

“We went out to practice and he didn’t make any mental errors,” Mike Vrabel recalled on Thursday. “He was athletic. He was excellent in this open-field tackling drill. Did the same thing the next day, did the same thing on Sunday. You know, it got to be a joke where we would just keep throwing him in and be like, ‘Hey, let’s see if somebody can make Spillane miss.’ Jon Robinson and I were just like, ‘We have to have him on the football team. I think he’s earned the right to be here based on those three days.’”

On Mother’s Day that May, Spillane’s first NFL contract brought him onto a roster of 90 in Nashville. As that roster reduced to 53 following a preseason featuring 25 tackles, one sack and one interception, he was retained on the practice squad in September.

A promotion came in October. So did additional back-and-forth transactions. But the door had been opened.

“It was pretty special, especially for me being a young football coach or a young head coach to be able to see a player that had earned the right,” added Vrabel, the 16th head coach in Patriots history. “Like, we didn’t hand him anything. That’s what we want for every single player on our team. We want them to earn everything that they get. And that was an example of what he earned – his opportunity in the National Football League. So, that’s no surprise the career he’s had based on how it started.”

Spillane would go on to spend four NFL campaigns with the Pittsburgh Steelers, carving a place in the kicking game as well as in sub packages. Then it was on to the Las Vegas Raiders for 2023 and 2024.

Starting every contest over that span in the AFC West, the 6-foot-1, 229-pound middle linebacker served as a team captain and set new highs with seasons of 148 and 158 tackles along with 1,101 and 1,095 defensive snaps. Now it’s on to Foxborough for the next stage of a career spanning 497 tackles, 8.5 sacks, one forced fumble, two fumble recoveries, six interceptions and one touchdown.

The unrestricted free agent’s deal includes $20.6 million fully guaranteed and a $9 million signing bonus, according to OverTheCap.com.

“I got hired in 2018 on Mother’s Day and I got to call my mom in tears, saying, ‘I’m going to be a professional football player,’” Spillane said. “And today is her birthday, so I’m signing the contract on her birthday. She is a very important and special woman in my life and I just want to make her proud.”

NESN

Intriguing Patriots Newcomer Opens Up On Playing For Mike Vrabel Again

By Dakota Randall

Robert Spillane is all in.

The veteran linebacker, who signed with the New England Patriots during the offseason, knows what it takes to play for Mike Vrabel. Spillane was signed by the Titans as an undrafted free agent in 2018 when Vrabel was Tennessee’s head coach.

After spending four seasons with the Pittsburgh Steelers and two with the Las Vegas Raiders, Spillane is reuniting with Vrabel as a member of the Patriots. And he couldn't be happier.

"It's a full-circle moment being here," Spillane recently told WEEI's Ted Johnson. "(Vrabel) recruited me out of high school at Ohio State. He gave me my first opportunity with the Tennessee Titans eight years ago as an undrafted free agent. Just to be signed to be the middle linebacker here and to play meaningful snaps means the world to me.

"I don't want to let him down. He's the type of coach that any player wants to play for. He encourages people to follow their dreams, to love their families, and to love football. What more can you ask for from a coach?"

Spillane has a chance to be a sneaky-big signing for the Patriots.

A prolific tackler, Spillane racked up 148 tackles for the Raiders in 2023 before posting 158 in 2024. He also posted a combined 5.5 sacks over the two campaigns.

Spillane also has a reputation for being an excellent clubhouse leader, something that surely will endear him to Vrabel as the Patriots look to establish a new culture.

Sports BOSTON

Why Robert Spillane embodies qualities Vrabel wants in Pats' rebuild

By Phil Perry

Ask anyone who has spent a significant amount of time around Robert Spillane, and it becomes clear why he was targeted by Mike Vrabel on Day 1 of the NFL's legal tampering period.

"He is a dude," said one staffer with the Raiders, where Spillane spent the last two seasons. "I would be surprised if he doesn't become a captain in his first year (in New England). He really was such a major part of our locker room. He'll be great there."

A captain for the Raiders under now-Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels, Spillane began his career with the Titans as an undrafted rookie under Mike Vrabel in 2018.

The Patriots obviously had good intel on the kind of human being they were bringing in when it came to terms with Spillane this week. With a roster in need of an overhaul, bringing aboard those types of human beings -- positive influences on the culture Vrabel is hoping to build -- has been an early focus for the new Patriots regime.

"He's huge in (supporting) the military," the Raiders staffer said. "He's big on volunteering. He's a family man. He checks all the boxes. Hard-nosed. Tough as [expletive]... He's an old-school Patriot. He'll be great in the locker room. Gets along with all the guys. He's a really good guy to add."

Spillane's addition is also indicative of a scheme change underway on the defensive side of the ball in Foxboro. Defensive coordinator Terrell Williams and Vrabel will be coaching what looks like it'll be a lighter and more aggressive front in 2025.

Spillane measures 6-foot-1, 229 pounds, which is a departure from the 250-pound linebackers the Patriots have had under Bill Belichick and Jerod Mayo. Fellow free-agent signees Milton Williams and Harold Landry are also lighter than the prototypes the Patriots have valued previously.

But a smaller Patriots front won't necessarily mean a less-efficient front on early downs. While Williams' game has room to grow against the run, Spillane has had Pro Football Focus' third-best run-defense grade for linebackers since 2023.

Landry, meanwhile, was the fifth-highest graded run defender at outside linebacker last season.

What Spillane's addition means for players like Ja'Whaun Bentley and Jahlani Tavai -- both of whom are still under contract and have been staples as off-ball linebackers in recent years -- remains to be seen. But he sounds like the

kind of player who will quickly provide a boost to a program that is going to put a serious emphasis on having the right intangible qualities in its locker room as Vrabel navigates the nascent stages of building a new culture.

"He's a big loss for us," the Raiders staffer said of Spillane. "You guys will have a lot of fun with him in that market. I think he's going to be instrumental in rebuilding that program."

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.”

LB Jahlani Tavai

The Boston Globe

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

By Jim McBride

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

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

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

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

Tavai has come a long way since the Lions cut him at the end of training camp in 2021, developing into one of the Patriots’ most versatile defenders on the second level.

Coincidentally, it was another call from Patricia, shortly after his Lions release, that kicked-started Tavai’s career resurgence.

Patricia had a couple of items on the agenda when he reached out, one of them being a reunion.

“He was checking on me mentally and seeing how I was doing because it was my first time going through that type of situation,’’ said Tavai. “And yeah, when I saw his name on the screen, I was just like, ‘Yeah, I think this is where I’m supposed to be.’ ‘’

Foxborough is the latest stop on a long road for Tavai, who began playing football in California — where his parents and aunt introduced him to the sport — to Hawaii for college to Detroit.

Tavai's father, William, was a defensive lineman during his playing days and his mother, Nafanua, and aunt, Tania, also played defensive line after transitioning from rugby.

"My mom comes from a rugby family, so it was a cool transition for her to do that. And then, my auntie was actually my first coach, so she coached me when I was in Pop Warner,'' said Tavai, who has aspirations to play for the US men's national rugby union team when his football days are over. "From then on, it was just a lifestyle for me and my siblings.''

Nafanua and Tania played professionally for the San Diego Surge and Pacific Warriors of the Women's Football Alliance.

All of Tavai's siblings — he has five brothers and a sister — were athletes and he acknowledged things were very competitive between them.

"One hundred percent,'' he said with a chuckle. "Every day was chaos. It was too much fun.''

Tavai starred at Mira Costa High in Manhattan Beach as a defensive lineman and tight end. He was having trouble getting noticed by colleges — "It was because I was playing nose guard at the time, so I was way undersized for my position and I wasn't getting the looks that I wanted,'' he said — when he discovered a connection close by.

A friend told Tavai that Cameron Chow, an English teacher and basketball coach at the school, was the son of then-Hawaii football coach Norm Chow.

"I was like, 'Yo, can you just tell your dad to check me out real quick?' '' Tavai said.

Tavai sent his tape to Chow and "they took that first look and called me the next day and offered me,'' he said.

Tavai blossomed on the big island, collecting 390 tackles, 16½ sacks, 2 interceptions, and 3 forced fumbles in 47 games. He earned All-Mountain West honors in 2016 and '17.

Attracting the attention of pro evaluators was not a problem.

"I worked him out at UCLA — We spent a day together out there at UCLA,'' Bill Belichick said last week. "Matt drafted him in the second round. We didn't really get a shot at him.''

Then smiling, Belichick added, "But we always get our man. Not always, but usually. Sometimes we get our man the second time around.''

Since Tavai first walked through the doors at One Patriot Place last September — "The first thing you see is the Super Bowl rings. It's their legacy and it's cool . . . It gave me goosebumps,'' he said — Tavai has meshed well.

He started on the practice squad but was quickly elevated to the active roster, contributing to defense he had some familiarity with through Patricia, and on special teams.

This season, Tavai has elevated his game, becoming an important cog in New England's ever-evolving defense. Tavai said the reason he's been able to flourish is simple.

"To be honest, it's just everybody on the defense doing their job. It's really hard to put one person on defense as the playmaker unless of course, they're [Matt Judon],'' said Tavai. "But for us, it's a team defense. If one person's not doing their job, it makes everybody's job difficult. And I'm just grateful that I got a bunch of guys who are just dogs out there trying to go eat.''

Belichick has been impressed with the way Tavai has immersed himself into the defense's multiple schemes.

"I think Jahlani has a few things going for him. One, he's a pretty smart kid and he's played both inside and outside in college, and then with Matt in Detroit. So, when we got him last year, he had a lot of familiarity with our system and a lot of techniques with things that we did and so forth,'' said the coach.

"Just overall, he kind of has that skill-set that he can play on the end of the line, play off the line, has some pass-rush ability, plays on all four phases of the kicking game. He's a pretty versatile player and can plug into a lot of different spots which is helpful, because not everybody can do that or has to be able to do that. But somebody has to be able to do it. He kind of fits that. He's got good size, runs pretty well, got good playing strength, and he's smart.''

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.”

TOUCHDOWNWIRE

Georgia DL Keion White is great on the field, and better at the microphone

By Doug Farrar

INDIANPOLIS — Not that Georgia Tech defensive lineman Keion White had too much to prove at the 2023 scouting combine — the 6-foot-5, 286-pound Old Dominion transfer and former tight end put up seven sacks, four quarterback hits, and 30 quarterback hurries in his 2022 season, and was blowing offensive linemen up at Senior Bowl week — but when he took the podium on Wednesday, it was quite an event.

On the field, White reminds me of Michael Bennett, the former Seahawks star pass-rusher who could nuke blockers from anywhere in the formation. Bennett has always marched to his own drumbeat and has a unique mind. It was nice to experience that White is definitely an original when he’s talking, as well.

White had been in college since his freshman year at Old Dominion in 2018, which is a long time, as he noted.

“Six years in college is long as [expletive],” he said. “I don’t know if I can say ‘[expletive]’ up here but it’s long.”

Well, too late for that. The non-recruited White transferred to Georgia Tech following the COVID year of 2020, and he firmly established himself as a premier pass-rusher and run defender in the one season he was able to show out at that level. He had just 36 snaps in his first season with the Yellow Jackets, but when he was given opportunities to shine, he showed all kinds of first-round talent.

The journey made his combine experience a bit out of this world.

“I was not recruited at all coming out of high school,” he said. “When I got to go to college, I just planned on working in the workforce and being like one of y’all, just a normal person. Coming here and being part of this is just a surreal experience.”

The tape is far from ordinary, though.

Power moves are White’s forte. and he has a lot of confidence in what he does best.

“At the beginning of the season, I was trying to be a speed rusher because everybody was like, ‘You need to add more moves; you need to showcase your talent, that you can do other things.’ And that wasn’t me. So I wasn’t being productive. Once I got back to being a powerful rusher and being dominant again, that’s when my sack production picked up.”

And what did he learn from that experience?

“Don’t listen to what everybody said you need to do or the scouts wanna see. Scouts see what they’re gonna see. I’m going to be me and let them evaluate it from there.”

As far as where he’ll best fit in the NFL, White, who played 80% of his spans outside the guards, 17% inside, and 2% at nose tackle, is perfectly fine with wherever his next team wants to put him.

Of course, he does have some opinions about that.

“That’s cool with me,” he said of a main 5-tech role. “I’ve shown throughout my career that I can go wherever I need to go. Personally, I like playing the 5. Anywhere from 3 to 9 I think it’s reasonable for me to play. And I like being able to play anywhere from 3 to 9, and that versatility. That only makes you more valuable as a player.”

White is also quite sure that he won’t need to add weight to transcend any “tweener” concerns.

“No. I’m 285 pounds, reasonably strong. I’ve been playing end, and I’m reasonably quick enough to play the outside as well. I like the weight I’m at. If teams need me to, obviously they’re paying money, I’ll go anywhere if they give me money for it. That’s how I feel about it.”

Of course, some people are going to misinterpret White’s opinionated nature as making him hard to coach… or that old combine chestnut, “Do you love football?” Which really means, are you going to keep your mouth shut and do what you’re told?

If that’s what you want, White isn’t your guy.

“That’s a tough question because I could tell you any bull[bleep] answer and you’ll be like, ‘Yeah, okay.’ It’s more something you have to show. That’s not just something you can evaluate from the tape because anybody can go out there and play, it’s just about how hard you play and the dedication you put into it. It’s just like if I asked you, ‘Do you love media?’ How am I supposed to know if you love media? No, it’s what you do. It’s just a personal thing. I enjoy doing this every day.”

Perhaps White’s independent nature is tied to the fact that he has serious business plans in his future. Budding real estate magnate, in fact.

“Probably property acquisitions and real estate, things like that,” he said, when asked what he would do were he force 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.

WR Kyle Williams

MASS LIVE

Patriots rookie delivers master class in ... juggling

By Karen Guregian

FOXBOROUGH - DeMario “Pop” Douglas wants in.

He wants to learn the skill rookie wideout Kyle Williams typically shows off before practice.

Only, juggling tennis balls isn’t as easy as it looks.

“I tried two days ago because everyone was doing it. I couldn’t do it, man,” Douglas lamented last week. “It’s the one thing I can’t do, but I’m going to get the hang of it.”

Same with Kayshon Boutte, and every Patriots receiver mesmerized by Williams skills.

But Williams isn't alone. He's not the only master juggler in the class. After getting a load of Williams act, both John Jiles and veteran Mack Hollins have given it a whirl.

Why juggling?

"It's focusing, and multi-tasking at the same time," Douglas said. "It does correlate to being a receiver. So I'm going to get the hang of it."

Mostly, it's sharpening hand-eye coordination.

Quite a few NFL stars - AJ Green, DK Metcalf, Jerry Jeudy, Jaylen Waddle - utilize juggling to help them become better receivers.

Williams picked it up about a year ago. He said it didn't take him long to master the skills.

While Waddle, who was challenged to start juggling by Dolphins wide receivers coach Robert Prince, boasts learning to juggle like a pro in two days, Williams was a quicker study. He claims it took him just an hour to get proficient.

"It's amazing," Douglas said of watching Williams juggle, "He's too good at it."

Williams, who's had an up and down training camp, got the ball rolling during OTAs. That's where he initially took his juggling act to the field.

It wasn't long before fans getting to training camp early were treated to seeing the rookie engage in his routine ahead of practice.

Juggling three balls is like second nature to him. He's trying to add a fourth but hasn't been able to make that happen.

Bottom line: Williams just wants to do whatever it takes to hone his skills, and become a better receiver.

The former Washington State star, who will be in Minnesota for joint practices ahead of Saturday's second pre-season game, has had some trouble with drops throughout his career, but hopes to get past that in short order.

"I just felt like it helped me with catching the ball, so I added it to my routine," Williams said of his juggling habit. "It's a hand-an-eye coordination thing. There's a lot of things moving at once, so you gotta keep your eyes on a certain ball."

Having been a quarterback through high school, Williams has only played wideout since college.

He recalled watching and studying other great receivers, trying to discover their secret to success.

"I watched a lot of people that have elite hands. Julio Jones, Chris Carter, all of those type of dudes," he said. "And hand-eye coordination was something that they used.

"My receiver coach always had me work with tennis balls. If you can catch a tennis ball that's moving fast, you can catch a football. So I thought juggling was something that could better help me with catching the football."

Williams said he's happy to help any of his teammates who want to take up the hobby, which dates back to ancient Egypt.

Douglas is on board. Ditto Jiles.

"It started in OTAs after we saw Kyle doing it," Jiles said. "(Williams) has been teaching me how to juggle. I'm not quite there, but I'm picking it up."

Jiles said he now uses it as a "concentration" tool.

"It's a lot of hand-eye coordination, a lot of focusing trying to catch the ball," Jiles said. "That really translates to our position."

Hollins had actually done some juggling well before arriving in Foxborough and seeing Willliams' show.

“I’ve been juggling for a while,” Hollins said. “It used to be part of my training ... it’s supposed to help your hand-eye-brain connection.”

Hollins started with tennis balls, then added footballs and whatever else into the mix.

“I’ve never done more than three,” he said. “I can do two in one hand. Or three. But a fourth? I don’t know the pattern for the fourth.”

Boutte, meanwhile, seems intrigued, and might join the club.

He wants to get more intel from Williams before jumping in.

“I usually come out after him (to practice), so I haven’t seen him do it,” Boutte said Tuesday. “It might be something I got to ask him about, to get a grasp and understanding of why he does it. I’m not sure why, but I’m gonna ask. I might have to give it a shot and see what I think about it.”

The more the merrier.

Said Williams: “If I can get the whole room to do it, we’ll make it a pre-game thing.”

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.