

**2015  
NEW ENGLAND  
PATRIOTS**



**FEATURE CLIPS**

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## Chairman and CEO Robert Kraft



### **Robert Kraft steady at the helm**

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

By Jackie MacMullan

January 15, 2014

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

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

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

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

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

### **Two Decades Of Dominance**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Resuscitating a franchise**

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

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

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

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

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

"Myra went cuckoo on me when I got back.

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

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

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

### **Parcells era: 'Division within'**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Enter Belichick and Brady**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Two Super Bowl losses and a scandal**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Flirtation with Hartford**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Unprecedented stability**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## **Kraftwork**

**Three bold decisions by Robert Kraft transformed the Patriots from league laughingstock into the NFL's model franchise**

By Peter King

February 1, 2012

On the last day of the 1993 NFL regular season, Patriots players and die-hard fans seemed resigned to losing their team. Absentee owner James Orthwein, a Missouri native who had bought the club two years earlier, intended to move it to St. Louis, which had lost the Cardinals in '88. "We were as good as gone," said Patriots linebacker Andre Tippett. But the fans wouldn't go down without a fight. Though they had the league's worst team (13--50 over four seasons heading into that game, against playoff-contending Miami) and worst venue (dumpy, no-frills Foxboro

Stadium), damn it, this was still their bad team and their crappy stadium. Before the game they burned empty cases of Budweiser in the windswept parking lots. (Orthwein was a great-grandson of brewing mogul Adolphus Busch and sat on the board of the St. Louis--based brewing company.) And once the game ended, victoriously, on a Drew Bledsoe overtime touchdown pass to Michael Timpson, the fans wouldn't leave. "Don't take our team!" they chanted. "Don't take our team!"

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

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

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

### **DECISION 1: Overspending for a bad team**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pause. Fifteen seconds.

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

Pause. Five seconds.

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

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

## **DECISION 2: Hiring Belichick**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Which brings us to Tom Brady.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Head Coach Bill Belichick



### **All football, Bill Belichick leaves his narrative to his friends and enemies**

By Adam Kilgore  
September 9, 2015

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Last week, Bill Belichick trudged behind a podium wearing shorts and a sleeveless New England Patriots windbreaker, gray stubble dotting his face.

The assembled reporters had another round of questions about the status of Tom Brady, the quarterback embroiled in the most recent controversy that swarmed Belichick's team. He deflected questions about Brady's status and the functionality of his team's offense without a determined quarterback. He discussed in detail the intricacies of choosing players for his practice squad. He refused introspection.

Belichick had risen from playing center at tiny Wesleyan University to the top of the NFL, along the way becoming celebrated for his brilliance and achievement but suspected of malfeasance and rule-skirting. He was asked what was the most important thing he had done over those four decades to evolve as a coach.

Belichick looked up from the questioner, gazed at the back of the room, and replied, "I don't know." He snorted. He stared. The room waited for him to say something else. He didn't.

Belichick has left it to others to fill in the blanks behind his gloomy facade, and the effects of his success — admiration, animosity, loyalty, jealousy — have created wildly divergent portraits. On Thursday night inside Gillette Stadium, the Patriots will open the season against the Pittsburgh Steelers, and Belichick will begin the defense of his fourth Super Bowl victory. He is 63 years old, the third-oldest coach in the NFL behind Tom Coughlin and Pete Carroll. Entering his fifth decade in the league, Belichick remains at the fore of NFL innovation. Defining him — and the roots of his success — remains elusive.

[The Patriots aren't dumb enough to have cheated against the Steelers]

People close to him describe a reliable friend, a voracious learner, an ardent student of the game, a man whose grim public demeanor hides sharp intelligence and understated humor. He engenders loyalty with both surprising kindness and utmost competence. "As a player, what more do you want?" former Patriots safety Lawyer Milloy said. "You don't want that fluffy [stuff]. He just wanted us to be focused on ball."

Belichick's detractors — and many within the league — suggest rule-breaking has propped up a brilliant football strategist. The SpyGate scandal remains a stain, a wound picked fresh this week by an extensive ESPN The Magazine story detailing the practice of filming and decoding opponents' signals. In 2007, the NFL fined Belichick \$500,000, but the scope and effectiveness of the scheme remain murky because of the league's rapid investigation and destruction of video tapes.

Supporters, associates and former players say Belichick has adapted with a wickedly dexterous mind and a curious bent. "Probably the story of his career, from my vantage point, would be his attitude toward learning," said Iowa Coach Kirk Ferentz, a Belichick confidante. Belichick once told his college economics professor that what he studied in class helped him stay under the salary cap. ("That's an application of marginalism," said Dick Miller, the professor.) His current defensive coordinator, Matt Patricia, was a rocket scientist before he became a football coach. Belichick seeks. He listens.

"It's really amazing when you think about it: He's been coaching longer than any player on this team has been alive," Patriots special teams captain Matthew Slater said. "That says something about his leadership, the way he learns. The way he views the game is very unique. He's been able to stay ahead of the curve because of the mind the good Lord has given him for football."

**'Always moving forward'**

For nearly three decades as a coach in the NFL, Belichick had divined creative solutions to complex problems, the skill that fueled his rise from playing center at Wesleyan to coaching at the top of the sport. On the day the Patriots arrived in New Orleans for his first Super Bowl as a head coach in late January 2002, he confronted a problem without precedent in his career: Milloy, his star safety, wanted a new hotel room.

At a walk-through practice, Milloy explained to Belichick that he had heard first-year defensive tackle Richard Seymour beaming about how spacious his room was. Milloy could barely squeeze luggage into his. What was up with a rookie scoring a bigger room than a veteran? “Really, Lawyer?” Belichick responded. Belichick was already trying to prepare a two-touchdown underdog to face the St. Louis Rams; he didn’t need another headache.

When Milloy returned to the team hotel after practice, a concierge greeted him with a key to a new room: “Big as hell,” Milloy recalled, and with a panoramic view of Bourbon Street, a Jacuzzi and, oddly, a treadmill in the corner.

At the Patriots’ team dinner that night, Belichick approached Milloy. “How do you like that room, Lawyer?” Belichick asked.

“It’s cool,” Milloy replied. “But I don’t know why they put that treadmill in there.”

“That’s because it was my room,” Belichick said.

Belichick grew up in Annapolis, drawn to football by the same innate pull that obsessed his father. Steve Belichick coached all over the country before he settled down as a Navy scout. He wrote a book, “Football Scouting Methods,” that became a bible among football intelligentsia. Bill followed his father on the road, where he watched Steve’s deathly serious attention to detail, and into coach’s meetings. Rick Forzano, a Navy assistant, would instruct 10-year-old Bill to break down film. Belichick would return with detailed notes, describing which receivers liked to run which routes on which downs.

“I hate to think what his IQ is,” Forzano said. “He looks beyond what’s happening.”

Forzano would later become the coach of the Detroit Lions, and he hired Belichick as a 23-year-old with one year of experience, a \$25-per-week assistant job with the Baltimore Colts. Forzano still called him Billy. Belichick came to the Lions as a special teams coach, but soon his duties expanded to wide receivers and linebackers. His voice quickly became valued in meetings. One coach would suggest adjusting the position of the strong safety, and only Belichick would identify why it might affect the defensive end.

“Bill’s always moving forward,” said Al Groh, an assistant alongside Belichick with the New York Giants. “He’s not just thinking about this season. What is distinguishingly unique for somebody who is very bright and on top is he’s a terrific listener. He’s interested in anybody and everybody’s opinion because out of that might come a good idea. That was the case even when he knew he wanted to do.”

In Cleveland, his first stop as a head coach, Belichick would surprise assistants by raising ideas they had mentioned a month prior. He contacts college coaches and visits campuses. Friends have noticed him drifting away from one conversation to eavesdrop on another.

In the spring of 2007, Belichick — a better lacrosse player than football player at Wesleyan — called Johns Hopkins lacrosse Coach Dave Pietramala to congratulate him on winning the national championship. They talked on the phone for an hour. Later, after an awards banquet both men attended, they met at a restaurant afterward and chatted for three hours. Pietramala realized Belichick had as many questions for him as he did for Belichick. They still talk or text weekly.

“The amazing thing to me with Coach, he’s always in search of a way to do things better,” Pietramala said. “I’m really taken back at how inquisitive he is about lots of different things. It doesn’t have to be in coaching. If we have a guest speaker, he wants to know, what did he talk about? What was good about it? For a guy who’s extraordinarily bright, extraordinarily successful, he’s always searching for a better way, a different way.”

The depiction stands in stark contrast to the label many have affixed to Belichick: cheater. The Indianapolis Colts expressed suspicion that the Patriots bugged the visiting locker room at Gillette Stadium. At the Super Bowl earlier this year, Don Shula called him “Belicheat.” Even before SpyGate, one NFL coach was asked how he killed time at league meetings. He replied, only half-jokingly, “Sit around and talk about how much the Patriots cheat.”

**‘He knew everything’**

Former players insist Belichick did not have to cheat, that his knack for detail and recall gave him all the edge required. Heath Evans, a former Patriots fullback, ran off the field following a kick return, during which he had executed a block. Evans had kept his man out of the play, but Belichick informed him he had taken an imprecise angle, the kind of infraction most head coaches may not spot days later on film, let alone in the cacophony of a real-time NFL game.

"He knew everything," Evans said. "Literally. He knew every detail. There was instant accountability, every second of the day. Bill just knew everything. It was scary sometimes."

One season during his tenure in Cleveland, Browns coaches met with Chicago Bears coaches to swap notes about teams in their respective divisions. "I swear, he knew more about Tampa than the Bears, who played them twice," said Ferentz, then Belichick's offensive line coach. "Their guys were looking at us like, 'Holy smokes.'"

Belichick prepares for everything. During staff meetings, he asks questions about a tactic an opposing coach used a decade prior. During Super Bowl XLVI, in 2012, the Patriots' headsets malfunctioned in the second half, leading to harmful miscommunication. And so, in the week leading into last season's Super Bowl, Belichick stopped practice and shouted for the coaches to drop their headsets.

In today's NFL, most coaches rise and become head coaching candidates by mastering a specific area. Once they become a head coach, they hand off one side of the ball to a coordinator. Belichick touches everything in the organization, from scouting draft picks to an offensive lineman's hand placement. During practice, he can spot a fullback missing a block out of the corner of his eye, halt the drill and correct the mistake himself.

"It's still mind-boggling how I sat there and watch that take place," said former Patriots linebacker Willie McGinest, now an NFL Network analyst. "He would break down both sides of the ball and be instrumental in planning every phase of the game. Other coaches can't do that. That's just amazing to me, having been in the league 15 years."

Playing for Belichick can be stressful. Evans would pass him in a hallway or the locker room, and Belichick would present a situation and play and ask him, "What is their linebacker going to be thinking?"

The strict standard also brought comfort. Players understand their role with uncommon clarity, and they trust Belichick's detailed instructions will reap success. "Playing for Belichick was the most pressure-packed and most peaceful experience of my career," Evans said.

"He'll put it up on the board," McGinest said. "He'll say, 'This is what's going to happen. This is how they're going to attack you. If you do X, Y and Z, you'll be okay.' And it seems like every single week, it happens. So it's not hard to play in that system."

### **The Belichick guys**

Mike Whalen was still groggy when he woke up the day after taking a new job in 2010. After four grueling days, he had resigned as the coach at Williams to take the same job at Wesleyan, a fierce New England rival but also his alma mater. While at Williams, Whalen had tried to introduce himself to Belichick as a fellow Wesleyan alum, but Belichick brushed him aside after a perfunctory greeting. But hours after accepting the Wesleyan post, he checked his packed voice mail, and one of the first messages came from a familiar voice: "Hey, Mike, this is Bill Belichick, head coach of the New England Patriots."

Whalen called him back, and Belichick gave him a simple introduction: "Glad to have you back. Anything I can do to help, let me know."

Belichick has kept his word. He has spoken at fundraisers at Whalen's request, counsels Wesleyan players interested in coaching and responds each time Whalen e-mails him. Whalen once asked him how he would handle playing at Trinity, a rival with a lengthy home winning streak. In the middle of his own season, Belichick replied and told him to ask the players how many of them had anything to do with the streak.

"A few of the seniors had played there once," Whalen said. "It was virtually irrelevant to three-quarters of our team. It gives you a little bit of insight into how his mind works."

Belichick shows the public only his grim side, saying little and revealing less. Those who know him quickly point out his understated sense of humor, his thoughtfulness and kindness toward people who supported him. He sent Forzano a signed picture after the first three Super Bowls he won. "He'll be sending me a fourth," he said.

Ray Perkins, the head coach who hired him to coach linebackers for the Giants in 1979, asked Belichick in 2013 to attend a fundraiser at Jones County Junior College, where Perkins had become head coach. Belichick agreed instantly, traveling to Ellisville, Miss., and telling football stories on stage at a banquet. "He talked for 45 minutes," Perkins said. "We had to drag him off the stage to get him to his plane."

Pietramala has seen Belichick play video games with his 11-year-old twin boys, then drop to the floor and wrestle with them. Last season, after one of Pietramala's players died suddenly, the coach asked Belichick for advice on how to handle his team. Belichick spent an hour on the phone with him.

"Not too many know him outside of the Gillette walls," Milloy said. "Because that's where he's always at. The thing about the perception is, I'll put it like this: Once you buy into the system, once you're a Belichick guy, you're a Belichick guy for life."

But his team always takes priority. The list of Belichick guys Belichick has cut ties with for the sake of the salary cap is long. McGinest, Seymour, Logan Mankins, Deion Branch, Mike Vrabel, on and on. It even includes the safety to whom he once gave his hotel room.

Days before Week 1 of the 2003 season, Belichick told Milloy the Patriots would release him if he didn't take a pay cut. Milloy refused. The Patriots waived him, and Milloy still chokes up discussing it.

Even as Milloy faced Belichick twice a season playing for the division-rival Buffalo Bills, they did not speak for three years. Milloy moved on to the Atlanta Falcons, who played the Patriots in the preseason's first game in 2006. After the game, Milloy mingled with former teammates on the field. He felt a hand on his shoulder pads. When he turned around, he was shocked.

"Hey, Lawyer," Belichick said. "Sorry for how everything went down."

Like that, his animosity dissipated. The gesture was small and unconventional, perhaps open to interpretation. But to Milloy, it had meant everything.

"It was perfect," Milloy said. "It was the Belichick way."

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## **Persistent Bill Belichick grows into champion**

By Jeff Howe

Thursday, September 4, 2014

Ted Marchibroda can't think of another NFL coach who has worked for a paltry \$25 weekly salary.

Then again, "Billy" Belichick always has managed to distinguish himself among his peers, both as a 23-year-old apprentice and a Hall of Fame lock who is entering his 40th coaching season. That milestone has been met with pride and applause by the football minds who worked closely with Belichick throughout his career, particularly as they watched him feverishly hone his craft during eight stops, including this 15-year tenure with the three-time Super Bowl champion Patriots.

"I don't think there's ever been a coach that got \$25 a week," Marchibroda said recently. "I'm very happy for him and very proud of the guy. To me, a guy like Billy deserves it. He has worked for it and has earned every bit of it. He took the chance, whether it was a chance or not, but he didn't get paid too much and decided to take it."

### **Breaking in**

Belichick helped his father, longtime Navy coach and scout Steve Belichick, break down film for years and desperately worked his connections to break into the NFL upon graduating from Wesleyan. Marchibroda, who was hired by the Baltimore Colts in 1975, needed an assistant to do the film work after general manager Joe Thomas' cousin declined the job. Special teams coach George Boutselis recommended Belichick to Marchibroda, who was impressed enough to offer him the job after one interview.

"I decided to hire him because of the fact that I felt like, 'Well, if he runs into any trouble, we have his father as a backup,'" Marchibroda cracked.

Belichick logged every roll of film that crossed his desk, tallying Colts opponents' formations and plays based on the down and distance, time on the clock, score and hashmark, and he'd make a note of any plays the defense needed to practice. As the season progressed, Marchibroda noticed defensive players asking Belichick questions if their positional coach was unavailable.

Belichick also helped on special teams during practice and had the unenviable job as the turk, whose role is to tell players to bring their playbook to the head coach's office to be released.

And he was the driver. Marchibroda got a few free rooms at the local Howard Johnson hotel in exchange for Colts parking passes, so Belichick would shuttle hotel mates Marchibroda, Boutselis and offensive line coach Whitey Dovel to and from practice. They bought Billy most of his meals and slipped him extra cash on occasion. Steve Belichick once told Marchibroda he still had to claim his son as a dependent on his tax returns because of his uniquely low paycheck. But Bill Belichick recognized a priceless experience with three respected coaches, and he simply listened and processed every word he heard.

Marchibroda's staff turned a two-win team into a 10-4 outfit that ended a three-year playoff drought, and Belichick asked for a \$4,000 salary for 1976. Thomas declined, and Belichick joined Rick Forzano's Lions, who were willing to give him \$10,000.

### **Setting a foundation**

Forzano knew Belichick from a four-year stint as the Navy head coach and hired the 24-year-old to assist on special teams and coach the receivers. But Forzano resigned after a 1-3 start and was replaced by Tommy Hudspeth, who transitioned Belichick to the tight ends in 1977. The entire staff was fired after the 1977 season, and Belichick hooked on with the Broncos after his only two years coaching offense, which he always has acknowledged to be significantly valuable to his development.

Belichick again assisted on special teams and defense in Denver, where he focused on the secondary under Joe Collier, the coordinator and architect of the famed Orange Crush 3-4 defense. Though Collier's 3-4 is different from Belichick's modern-day unit, it gave Belichick a first-hand look at another philosophy.

"Just about everything we were doing at that time, he soaked up pretty good," Collier said. "He was the early guy in the office and late to leave. . . He fit right in with all the rest of the coaches."

Belichick again assisted with the film breakdowns, but he didn't overstep his bounds by piping up with new defensive schemes, even though Collier recognized those ideas were flowing. To this day, Belichick tells his players to "do your job" and not worry about others' responsibilities. Collier admired Belichick's grinding mentality.

"I could see his work ethic, how he is absorbing everything, how he is the son of a coach," Collier said. "And his ambition, you could see his ambition. He didn't want to stick doing what he was doing then. He wanted to advance. There was no question about it. Yeah, I could see he was going to be a success."

### **Launching a legacy**

Giants coach Ray Perkins hired both Belichick and Bill Parcells in 1979, but the two new assistants met a few years earlier. Parcells, an Army assistant in the 1960s, used to exchange film with Steve Belichick because of the programs' agreement. Parcells then said he met Bill Belichick in the 1970s when his Vanderbilt squad was playing Army, whom Steve Belichick was scouting with his son.

Belichick joined the Giants to run the special teams and assist Parcells' defense. His responsibilities increased through the years as Parcells asked Perkins to give Belichick more time on defense. Belichick harnessed even more defensive authority when Parcells became the head coach in 1983, and he officially was promoted to defensive coordinator in 1985.

Still, Belichick remained infatuated with league-wide activity, which wasn't difficult to notice because the Giants coaches were confined to one small room. Romeo Crennel noticed Belichick's note-taking during offseason and draft prep.

But make no mistake: Belichick advanced because of his work with the defense. Parcels instituted the basic philosophy, which he picked up during his 1980 stint with Patriots coach Ron Erhardt and coordinator Fritz Shurmur, but Belichick led the group.

“(Belichick) put his own ideas in it and refined it, and we kind of modernized some of the coverages a little bit as we went,” Parcels said. “We always were able to, and this is much to his credit, just go forward with what we thought was necessary at the time, and he did a great job with it.”

Belichick earned more exposure after the Giants were 14-2 with the league’s second-ranked scoring defense in 1986, a season that culminated in a victory against the Broncos in Super Bowl XXI, and he soon started to turn down head coaching offers because he wanted to be set up with an ideal opportunity.

It came after the orchestration of one of the great stretches of defensive game plans in NFL history.

Belichick asked Parcels to switch his positional concentration from the linebackers to the secondary in 1989, which led to the hiring of Al Groh to coach the linebackers. Belichick’s thought process: To be a great defensive coordinator, he must have a great grasp of the defensive backfield.

The Giants generally were a 3-4 team with zone coverages, but they proved their matchup philosophy in the 1990 playoffs against the Bears, 49ers and Bills.

“Within the basic structure of your philosophy, you had to have the flexibility to play the game we need to play. Every opponent presents you with different issues,” Groh said. “At the heart of it all was Bill Belichick.”

The Bears, who visited the Giants in the divisional round, led the league in rushing attempts, and quarterback Mike Tomczak replaced Jim Harbaugh because of a shoulder injury. So Belichick’s plan was to play the whole game with an eight-man box that included some six-man fronts that still utilized 3-4 techniques, and the Giants rolled, 31-3.

They visited the 49ers in the NFC Championship Game and were tasked with stopping Joe Montana, Jerry Rice and a West Coast offense that ranked second in passing. Belichick designed a nickel game plan with man coverages that took away easy completions. The Giants survived, 15-13.

The Super Bowl was Belichick’s greatest trick as he prepared for the Bills’ K-Gun offense without the luxury of a bye week.

“If Buffalo had been trying to prepare themselves for the game by studying the previous two games, there was nothing that was going to relate,” Groh said.

The Giants used a 3-2-6 scheme with myriad zone coverages. Linebacker Lawrence Taylor became a down lineman while Carl Banks and Pepper Johnson played inside with a pair of safeties as outside linebackers, which increased their speed in coverage and enticed the Bills to run more with Thurman Thomas. The Giants offense complemented it all by controlling the ball for 40:33 in a shocking, 20-19 upset.

“I think we had a good defensive plan that was a little different, but it was tested because that was a close game and they didn’t have nearly as many opportunities as we had,” Parcels said. “We were big underdogs in that game. Just managed to pull it out.”

### **First opportunity**

The Browns hired Belichick as head coach in 1991, and he immediately cleaned up a locker room that got out of hand under Bud Carson. Belichick implemented structure, a firm practice schedule and set rigorous expectations.

Ozzie Newsome, a Hall of Fame tight end who retired before the 1991 season to join the Browns front office, immediately recognized Belichick’s credibility. Newsome still had friends on the roster who relayed their appreciation for Belichick’s football IQ and teaching abilities by using past examples.

“He was very demanding on, ‘This is the way it is going to be. I’m coming off a Super Bowl. This is what it takes to win Super Bowls.’ Nobody had won a Super Bowl in Cleveland,” Newsome said.

Belichick finally got the Browns to the playoffs after an 11-5 season in 1994, but owner Art Modell made an unprecedented decision midway through the 1995 season to announce the team would relocate to Baltimore in 1996, which sabotaged the campaign and, ultimately, Belichick’s tenure.

"I know — K-N-O-W — that he got the appreciation of the job that he had to do when the move was announced, to be able to get that team to finish that season," Newsome said. "I don't think you can put a measure on how tough that was."

Belichick was fired after the 1995 season and joined Parcells' Patriots staff as the secondary coach in 1996. Parcells, Crennel and Groh all recognized an assistant coach with a greater perspective of the entire operation, and Belichick continued to make strides as the Jets defensive coordinator under Parcells from 1997-99. He also was mindful that he'd get one more shot to lead a team.

"Whatever the results were in Cleveland, they were certainly results that were below what he had hoped for in the beginning," Groh said. "So he had assessed then, 'OK, the next time I get my next chance, what are the things I'm going to change, how can I improve the structure of things, how can I improve myself in this particular role?' He made pretty good use of that time because he had a hell of a plan."

### **Second chance**

Patriots owner Robert Kraft strongly considered hiring Belichick after Parcells bolted for the Jets in 1997, but Kraft decided to ultimately wash his hands from the Parcells era and went with Pete Carroll.

When given a chance to do it over in 2000, Kraft was all in on Belichick, who resigned as Jets head coach after a day because of the pending sale of the organization. After the Browns relocation, Belichick didn't want uncertainty.

Kraft recalled rave reviews from the Pats defensive backs in 1996, and the owner coveted Belichick's appreciation for the salary cap. During Belichick's interview, Kraft asked him about a key player, and the coach broke down a formula that illustrated why that player would be overpaid based on future production.

League and network executives pressured Kraft not to hire Belichick because of his dry media appearances, and Kraft also withstood the Jets' three-week standoff to release Belichick from his contract, but the owner identified what he wanted and remained persistent.

"I was patient and waited for him," Kraft said.

After a 5-11 season in 2000 and Drew Bledsoe's injury in Week 4, Belichick then sold the "one game at a time" mantra after a 30-10 Week 4 loss to the Dolphins by burying a football at practice.

2 of 2001, Belichic

"When you screw up and have concern about your job and all those things," Crennel said, "I think that eased some of the tension and allowed guys to focus on the next game."

Crennel, the Pats defensive coordinator from 2001-04, really noticed the players buying into Belichick's message after a tight, 24-17 loss to the Rams that dropped them to 5-5, their last defeat of the season.

Crennel was part of Belichick's two most historic game plans — Super Bowl XXV and Super Bowl XXXVI — and likened the prep work to his racquetball sessions with Belichick during the 1987 strike. Pinpoint the vulnerability (the Bills' impatience, the Rams' stubbornness, Crennel's backhand) and attack.

The result, a 20-17 victory against the Rams, spawned a dynasty that includes more Super Bowl wins (three) and appearances (five), division titles (11) and victories (163) than any team in the league since Belichick took the helm.

He is a disciple of many and gathered valuable knowledge at every stop along the way, but anyone who has worked with Belichick during the past four decades has recognized a level of success that is his own doing. After all, if anyone else did actually coach for \$25 per week, they probably didn't last 40 years.

"It's remarkable what he's done there," Parcells said. "The people in New England are lucky to have him."

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## Offensive Coordinator Josh McDaniels



### **LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON: COACHING IS IN THE FAMILY FOR JOSH MCDANIELS**

By Ryan Hannable

Friday nights were a big deal for Canton McKinley High School, a big school in Canton, Ohio, which some called the high school capital of America.

The school was winning state and national championships left and right led by legendary head coach Thom McDaniels.

Standing behind Thom on the sidelines every game was a young boy.

“What’s the call?” a trainer would ask.

“Toss to the right,” the boy replied.

With no headsets back then, it was all hand signals, and Josh McDaniels knew the play before it happened. After all, it was his dad leading the way for Canton McKinley, and Josh was always at his father’s side at practices, so he knew everything.

He watched film, he watched drills, he watched scrimmages, he watched it all — anything football related, Josh was there.

“I got to start to see that at a very early age when I started to go to two-a-day practices when I was 5 and really got to see that up close and personal. I was kind of a sponge at that point and I fell in love with the game of football through [my dad],” Josh said. “I knew real early in my life that this was probably something I wanted to do. I didn’t know what level, but at some point I wanted to be a coach.”

From a player at Canton McKinley himself, to playing in college at John Carroll University, to being a graduate assistant at Michigan State, to now being one of the best offensive coaches in the NFL — everything Josh did and still does now, he traces back to his dad.

#### **STARTING HIM YOUNG**

Thom is regarded as one of the best coaches in Ohio high school football history. In 1997, he was named national high school football Coach of the Year by USA Today while leading his Canton McKinley team to state and national titles.

He won 134 games at Canton McKinley from 1982-97 — the 1997 team went 14-0 and won both state and national championship titles. He then went on to coach two other high schools in the state before retiring.

Many of his players got major Division 1 scholarship offers, so big-name coaches were always getting in contact with him. Football was life in the McDaniels household and Thom’s two sons, Josh and Ben (Rutgers’ offensive coordinator), were always by his side.

“They both loved to watch film with me back then,” Thom said. “It was 16-millimeter film and it was a big deal when I brought the projector home and let them run the buttons.”

Thom’s connections to college coaches are ultimately what led to Josh’s career path.

Josh played quarterback for his dad at Canton McKinley and then went on to play at John Carroll University, a Division 3 school in Ohio “where he belonged,” according to his dad.

He didn’t play quarterback in college because a sophomore already had that position locked down. Ironically, it was current Patriots director of player personnel, Nick Caserio, so McDaniels made the switch to wide receiver and it worked out as he got regular playing time.

“He’s an incredible human being,” McDaniels said of Caserio. “I am very fortunate he befriended me when I went to John Carroll as a freshman. We played three years together, had a lot of fun, enjoyed a lot of success and handled some adversities as well playing together and became very good friends through the whole process.”

(McDaniels was the one who recommended Caserio to work for Bill Belichick and the Patriots. “I knew when I recommended him to Bill that he was the kind of person that would never, ever let you down, and he has definitely held his end of the bargain up,” McDaniels said.)

In the winter of 1998, Josh’s playing days were over, but the majority of his football journey was just beginning.

#### ‘DAD’S INFLUENCE ENDS HERE’

With Thom coaching for so long and having a lot of contact with college coaches, he knew Josh would need to get a graduate assistant job if he wanted to go anywhere in coaching.

After sending out his resume, Josh only got one offer, but a good one at that — a graduate assistant job at Michigan State under Nick Saban.

“I knew that going and being a GA for Nick would be a great experience for him because Nick is extremely demanding and extremely tough and very detail oriented,” Thom said. “I thought it was a really good place for him to go and begin his college coaching experience and all that proved to be true. If you work for Nick you can work for anybody.”

“I remember taking him [to Michigan State] and telling him, ‘OK, you’re going to coach at Michigan State and you’re going to coach for Nick Saban. This is where your old man’s influence ends. There is nothing I can say and nothing I can do to help you after this point. Dad’s influence ends here,’ ” he added. “I think he knew that and I think he understood that. He worked real hard to do things whatever it was.”

After a few years at Michigan State, Josh got a job in the NFL with the Patriots in 2001 as a personnel assistant.

Josh served a number of roles in New England — personnel assistant, defensive assistant, quarterbacks coach and offensive coordinator before becoming a head coach in Denver for two seasons and then an offensive coordinator in St. Louis.

Then in 2012, McDaniels found his way back to New England, where it all began as the offensive coordinator under Belichick.

#### COACHING LIKE HIS DAD

Even though Thom coached teenagers and Josh is coaching grown men, Josh still uses a lot of the same communication methods. Josh is a big believer in connecting with players regardless of age and stature.

“I would say most of it — the way I communicate with the players, the way I kind of interact with them, I really want them to understand what I am saying,” Josh said. “If I need to say it a different way, I will. That is an important part of coaching and he was so good at it. He obviously had a little different types of kids, different varying levels of background, communication, intelligence, age — those types of things so you have to be creative at times. You have to find a way to connect with all your players.

“He was very, very good at that. It’s one of the things I try and do the best I can because we have obviously a lot of older men, but nonetheless you still need a connection and if you can connect with these guys at this level and they know you have their best interest at heart, then they are going to give you everything they have. That is an important thing to learn early as a coach and I was fortunate to learn it from my father.”

Josh doesn’t often reach out to his father for advice, but on occasion does, usually to get his opinion on dealing with a player or other off-field situation, rarely ever X’s and O’s.

"It's about managing people or it's about dealing with a situation or an issue with a player just because when you coach high school football, I did all of that on a daily basis because you're dealing with kids as they are growing up," Thom said. "They are maturing and becoming men. Most of the time he's already got the answer in his mind and he is just looking for affirmation from me."

Thom still tries to remain as involved in the game as he can from the afar like when he watches a Patriots game in person, Josh gives him an idea of what the game plan is and what to watch for from the opposing defense as a way for Thom to be able to watch the game from the stands with a coaches perspective.

"I'm able to watch the game plan unfold and I am sort of able to anticipate based on what they've done before and what the opponent presents I get to anticipate things that they'll do," Thom said. "That is great for me because it allows me to be engaged in the game and not just a spectator."

One of the most memorable moments for the two occurred during February's Super Bowl. The Seahawks scored with 4:54 left in the third quarter to go ahead by 10 points — 24-14, which took a lot of wind out of the Patriots' ™ sails, but not for the McDaniels clan.

Thom and the rest of the McDaniels family were seated at the 35-yard line, just behind the Patriots bench, and it was then and there Thom and his son had a moment they will never forget.

"For whatever reason I looked down to the bench and he looked up at me and I gave him a thumbs up and he smiled as big as can he could smile and he gave me a thumbs up," Thom said. "It was never planned and not prepared for. It was like he was letting me know that he had the thing under control."

The Patriots went on to score two fourth-quarter touchdowns and held on thanks to a last-minute interception to beat the Seahawks, 28-24, and win Super Bowl XLIX.

"I'll never forget that, and he won't forget that either," Thom said. "He talked to me about it after the game. It was just one of those little two seconds on your life that was very meaningful to him and very meaningful to me. We both didn't know the outcome, but we knew what was going to happen."

## COACHING RUNS IN FAMILIES

Like Josh learned from Thom, Belichick learned from his dad, Steve, which Thom said is a reason why he is always welcome at the Gillette Stadium facility.

During his first few years in New England Josh didn't ask Belichick if his dad could come out to watch a practice, but after he became comfortable, he did, and Belichick agreed with no questions asked. Thom recalled the first practice and his first meeting with Belichick when the coach told him he was welcome whenever he wanted.

"Josh told [Bill] later that he may have created a monster. When he said he's welcome anytime he's going to want to do that, and Bill said, 'No, I meant it. Anytime, anywhere he's welcome,' " Thom said. "I think [Bill] sees between Josh and I what he had with his dad and he's going to respect and honor that. I appreciate that so much."

The bond between a coach and his son is special, and Josh knows just how lucky he is to be able to have that with his father.

"I think it's probably I would say the most important ingredient in my upbringing," Josh said. "I got an opportunity to watch him do it. I fell in love with the game of football through him and watch him grind and coach, win and lose, and go through tough times, celebrate great victories and that type of things.

"This aside from faith and your family, this game has really become a huge part of our life. It doesn't consume us, it certainly isn't bigger than the two previous things I've mentioned, but it is an enormous part of our life. It defines a lot of our weekends. It determines a lot of our happiness and joy sometimes.

"As a son of a coach, all you want is for your dad to have success and for your dad to be happy. When you become one yourself, then you have a different understanding of the type of commitment he made his entire life to be a good teacher, good role model, to be a good coach, and there is no way I could have asked for a better father."

From the Friday nights at Canton McKinley to Super Bowl Sunday at University of Phoenix Stadium, the father-son bond has always been there and will never go away.

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## Defensive Coordinator Matt Patricia

The Republican.

### **New England Patriots coach Matt Patricia follows passion from engineer to NFL head coaching candidate**

By Kevin Duffy

on January 07, 2016 at 9:49 AM

Inevitably, Matt Patricia was going to move on.

The guy was too smart, too talented, too damn good at his job to stick in one spot for too long, even if it was a position in which he immediately excelled and, by all accounts, thoroughly enjoyed.

Well-liked, tireless, engaging and super passionate, Patricia had been the perfect hire years ago. He caught on quickly, taking just months — not the customary year or so — to adjust to how the organization operated. In the words of one former staffer, "there was never an ego with Matt; it was all about getting the job done."

"A good fit for our organization," another said.

But, according to someone with direct knowledge of Patricia's thinking, his departure had been considered a "distinct possibility" for quite some time. Another source was aware that Patricia had opportunities to leave. He just hadn't taken them.

Until....

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Full disclosure: The sources are Jim Ward, Joe Markert, Dave Shanahan and Bill Fisher. You don't know them. Matt Patricia does.

And the organization was Hoffman Air & Filtration Systems in East Syracuse, N.Y., where Patricia worked for two years back when he was just a regular guy, long before he became a Super Bowl champion defensive coordinator with the Patriots, and long before he landed on the interview lists for multiple NFL head coaching vacancies.

OK, maybe it's unfair to say Patricia was just a regular guy, because nobody from Hoffman would characterize him as just that. But, among other descriptions, he was that. He was part of a tight-knit office, working his first job out of college for a highly successful company. He threw snowballs at his boss. He threw snowballs at other departments with his boss. He made million dollar sales. You know, regular stuff.

An aeronautical engineering major and the center on the football team at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Patricia graduated in the spring of 1996, then interned with the RPI football team for the fall season. It was off to the workforce in the spring of 1997, as Jim Ward hired Patricia to be one of eight or nine application engineers at Hoffman Air & Filtration.

"One of my favorite employees of all-time," Ward said. "I've been doing this 25 years."

Without getting too far down the engineering rabbit hole, Hoffman produced multistage centrifugal blowers, so Patricia had to A) Understand what the hell that meant and B) Sell the technology (the blowers/compressors), design the project based on plant size, bid the project, close the order, manage the order and startup the project.

Hoffman primarily sold to wastewater treatment plants; the company's blowers provided airflow, adding oxygen during the treatment process.

Patricia also worked on projects with coal-fired power plants, refineries, chemical plants for oxygen and nitrogen, boosters and landfills. He dealt with independent reps across the country — Florida, Texas, Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas. The job involved constant interaction with the reps because, as Ward said, "we're supporting them so they can sell our product."

"I mean, the reps loved him," Ward said.

"Matt was an engineer," said Joe Markert, who held the same position at Hoffman. "But he had a great sales personality."

Most of the work was done from the office, where Patricia and the other sales engineers sat in an open bullpen setup. No cubicles. This created constant chatter, as guys could shout out questions to the group when they worked the phones.

No shirt and tie was required. Business casual. And Patricia conformed to normal workplace attire; only later in life did he land a job where his direct supervisor truly did not care about dress code.

And this was Matt Patricia pre-beard, and immediately post-football, so he was a tad slimmer, although he was going through what every athlete experiences after retirement: Craving the same hearty diet minus the same workout regimen.

As for Patricia's trademark pencil behind the ear? He didn't pick it up at Hoffman. Nor did he drink coffee or coke, or Red Bull or Mountain Dew.

He started in 1997, pre-Google (founded in Sept. 1998), so when important questions arose, the group of sales engineers always had a sports almanac handy. They made too many miscellaneous bets to remember. Many were on sports, the answers in the almanac. Others involved random workplace occurrences. The wager was almost always the same. Not dollars, but Dinos.

"We would go down to Dinosaur Bar-B-Que — it's pretty well known — and you'd have to buy the guy's lunch if you lost," said Dave Shanahan, another former sales engineer. "We'd record it as a Dino."

Dinosaur and Mother's Cupboard, a double-wide trailer diner known for its outrageous portions, were the go-to spots when Patricia worked from the office, which was the majority of the time. The job required some travel, as Patricia would visit reps in the field. He'd also be on the road with Ward for trade shows. At least one of the trade shows was in New Orleans.

"I don't know if you've ever been out with Matt," Ward said, "but he knew how to have a good time."

Didn't affect his work, though.

"When we'd do trade shows and stuff, we'd all be hungover," Ward said. "He'd be bright-eyed, bushy-tailed. He had a very good recovery."

Patricia knew how to keep it light in the office, pranking co-workers on the pager system, which broadcast throughout the sales office and the adjacent factory. Other times he took a more direct approach.

"You could always count on Matt pegging somebody between the buildings with a snowball," Ward said. "And we had an engineering department in the back part of the building. We always used to like to just chuck snowballs up at the window and piss them off."

As Ward said, Patricia "made work fun." Markert took it a step further.

"If you didn't like Matt," he said, "you needed to get yourself checked out."

Markert called the clique of sales engineers the "clown club." A number of them, Patricia included, were not too far removed from college, and Ward, their boss, wasn't much older. Of course, it's easy to joke when business is good, and business was rolling at Hoffman. A sale of seven or eight centrifugal compressors — machinery manufactured next door, sometimes as large as six-feet tall and five-feet wide — could be a \$1 million order. There wasn't as much competition within the industry as there is today, and the Clown Club made for an excellent team.

The job was a standard 8-5, but they usually worked 50- or 60-hour weeks. Patricia "lived and breathed what he was doing," Ward said. His former co-workers describe him the exact same way his current employees do. Seriously, if we sync all quotes to the present tense, it's nearly impossible to distinguish what was said by his Hoffman buddies and what was said by the Patriots.

1). "You don't have to tell him twice how to do things. Matt's just the kind of guy who wants to grab as much work as he can, do as much work as he can."

2). "He's the kind of guy that he's got 10 projects going at once and then you're like, 'Hey, Matt. Can you do this and do that?' 'Oh yeah, no problem.'"

3). "He doesn't leave any stone unturned with anything. He covers everything you could possibly think of."

4). "He always brings new ideas for improvement, and he's never afraid to tackle a problem, no matter the magnitude."

Your answer key: No. 1 was Ward, his supervisor at Hoffman. No. 2 was his, um, supervisor in New England. No. 3 was Nate Ebner, who works under Patricia in the defensive backs division. And No. 4 was Markert, who once had a problem that Patricia fixed.

Markert had "way underbid" a wastewater treatment project in Mississippi. The contractor that won the bid was, in Markert's words, "ready to take us to the cleaners," and to make matters worse the rep for the contractor wasn't too fond of Yankees. Markert turned the project over to Patricia, who "somehow was able to befriend this guy and somehow make the project profitable."

The job required the fusion of technical knowledge and social skills, creating the ideal landing spot for a math whiz who, at his core, was just a regular dude.

"He just connected well with people," Ward said. "And people like to buy from people they like. When you combine his engineering expertise with his responsiveness and his personality, I think that's a winning combination."

Patricia predated the millennial generation, and he embraced the family environment at Hoffman. No one believed he was looking to jump ship immediately. But there was the thought that he'd leave because the opportunity for advancement at Hoffman was limited; it was a small company with young employees like Ward in management positions. According to Markert, Patricia did have offers within the field. He was talented, and he was sought after.

Additionally, Patricia had an aeronautical engineering degree, so Ward figured he'd eventually seek a job in aeronautics. Or maybe something more in line with the design side than sales.

As they'd come to learn, there was also a third reason for Patricia's potential departure.

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Sometime before the fall of 1997, George Mangicaro, longtime head football coach at Liverpool high school, had a visitor at his office.

"I didn't know who he was, I don't know how he got my name, I didn't know where he was working," Mangicaro said. "But he came in and just had a love for a game."

He was Matt Patricia, and he was working about 10 miles east of Liverpool. He was inquiring about any openings on the Liverpool football staff.

Mangicaro had already filled out his staff for the season, but he listened to Patricia's credentials and welcomed him as a volunteer coach. He assigned Patricia to work with the varsity offensive and defensive lines, assisting Liverpool O-Line coach John Giannuzzi, who played behind current Patriots offensive line coach Dave DeGuglielmo at Boston University.

Working with Giannuzzi, Patricia taught blocking fundamentals and principles within the program's freeze option system, the same offense George DeLeone ran at Syracuse. Giannuzzi felt comfortable delegating responsibility to Patricia because, well, "he was really, really intelligent."

"Who knows how much he really knew?" Giannuzzi said.

Giannuzzi knew Patricia was an engineer, and like the guys back at Hoffman, he knew Patricia was serious about coaching. Why else would he be working as a volunteer assistant position coach for a high school team?

At Hoffman, Ward allowed Patricia to rearrange his schedule so he could make it to practice, which started when school got out. Ward said Patricia would "make it work," sometimes coming to the office on weekends.

He spent some nights and mornings volunteering at the Syracuse University program, trying to get his foot in the door. As ex-Orange coach Paul Pasqualoni told The Boston Herald, this involved everything from picking up players at the airport, running curfew checks in the dorms or setting up cones for on-field drills.

By 1998, Patricia had left Liverpool. He began volunteer coaching with the Syracuse Storm, a semipro team in the Empire Football League. And when we say semipro, we mean hardly professional at all. Players didn't get paid to play; they paid their way to play. These were ex-college and high school athletes who simply wanted to stay in the game.

Patricia worked with the Storm's offensive and defensive lines in the spring and fall of 1998. According to Bill Fisher, he "took it very seriously."

Less than two years into the job at Hoffman, Patricia began discussing his next step with his co-workers. The decision wasn't final, but he was leaning toward leaving the engineering field and trying his hand in coaching. He told Ward that he didn't want to be 40 or 50 years old saying, "God, I should have went after that."

"I didn't want to lose him as an engineer because he was a solid engineer and was really beginning to blossom and do well at his profession," Ward said, "but also when somebody says that's what they've always wanted to do, you've got to follow your dreams."

If it didn't work out, Ward told Patricia he'd take him back. And if Ward didn't have a spot, Patricia still had an aeronautical engineering degree to use. There wasn't monumental risk associated with leaving the company. As Shanahan pointed out, "there were all sorts of different things Matt could have done."

So Patricia worked at Hoffman through 1998. In '99, he became the defensive line coach at Amherst, a gig that paid \$8,000, according to The Herald. From there he went to Syracuse, and then joined the Patriots in 2004 as a coaching assistant, and then...

A decade later, Markert tells The Matt Patricia Story. He tells it multiple times each year to his kids, who someday must choose their paths in life. The message of the story is simple: "If you believe in something and you've got a passion for it, then you find a way to do it," Markert said.

But the actual details of the story are truly unbelievable: A promising young sales engineer/volunteer assistant high school offensive line coach wins a Super Bowl, designs and constructs one of the best defenses in football, and positions himself to perhaps someday take reigns as head coach of an NFL franchise.

Here's to whoever bet a Dino on that.

## Coaching Assistant Steve Belichick

# The Providence Journal

## The education of Stephen Belichick

By Mark Daniels

Oct 3, 2015 at 11:36 PM

FOXBORO — Bill Belichick sat there and watched the game film, his eyes glued to the screen.

After each play, he'd mark the down and distance and note what stood out to him on both sides of the ball. He'd turn to the player next to him, pointing out responsibilities on each snap and what he thought should be done in certain situations.

It was just like preparing for any other game. But the future Hall of Fame coach wasn't breaking down film of the Patriots' next opponent. Instead, he was watching film of high-school students, particularly games involving The Rivers School in Weston, Mass., with his oldest son, Steve Belichick.

Related content Who can beat the Patriots? And who almost definitely won't? Donaldson: Fantasy football decision by NFL might not be a keeper No Patriots game this week: Test your knowledge in our bye week quiz "We'd talk about some keys that the other team would have. Like formation or various other tendencies — stances and splits and things like that," Bill Belichick said.

Every week during the season, the then-Rivers School coach Darren Sullivan would send Steve home with game film and eagerly await the results.

"He and his dad would go and watch the previous game's film together," Sullivan said. "We would give him copies and they would sit down together and break it down. Stevie would go over it with his dad, come back and have some ideas about the next week's opponent and that kind of thing. He would also watch film on his own."

Bill Belichick was 10 years old when his father, also named Steve, would have him break down film of Navy opponents. The elder Belichick revolutionized football scouting similar to the way his son would revolutionize coaching and game planning.

As they say, like father like son.

Learning how to break down film has long been a rite of passage in the family. Bill Belichick taught his son about formations and plays when Steve was in elementary school. His childhood also included trading cards and playing Madden NFL, but when his father was involved, it was all used as a tool for teaching the game.

"I mean, we've kind of been talking football back to football cards. Occasionally a video game and stuff like that, since he was in the single digits for sure," Bill Belichick said. "But he's kind of done that his whole life."

Now 28 years old and in his fourth season as a coaching assistant with the Patriots, Steve Belichick continues to follow in his father's legendary footsteps.

THE GRIDIRON was his playground.

Steve Belichick was four years old when his father took his first head coaching job in Cleveland. He was 13 when Bill Belichick was hired as head coach of the Patriots in 2000. As he grew up, he watched, listened and learned — like his father did when he was a boy — and spent summers at training camp.

"He's grown up around the facility, around the players, around the team," Bill Belichick said. "He's seen it from a coaching end as well as player end when he played in high school and college."

Like his father, Steve Belichick played lacrosse and football in college. And like his father, he was known more for his IQ than his athletic ability. When people noticed his last name on a jersey or a roster, lofty expectations followed. He had to live up to the challenge in high school and later at Rutgers. He impressed various coaches and peers along the way.

You won't find many backup long snappers breaking down film in college football. You probably won't find many future NFL draft picks going to these long snappers for advice, either.

But that's what happened during Rutgers' 2011 season.

After playing lacrosse for the Scarlet Knights for four seasons, Steve Belichick walked on to the Rutgers football team. On a team that featured eight future NFL draft picks, he helped defensive players break down film, just like his father had shown him.

Among those who he helped were future Patriots Logan Ryan and Duron Harmon.

"He did his job as the backup long snapper, but he was also like an assistant coach—esque," Ryan said. "That's where he showed off a little bit of his coaching skills. He showed us how to break down some film and showed us how to use that stuff years ago. He was a huge help."

"He was helping me in college getting ready for games," Harmon added. "He would tell me what he saw from their offenses, what I can be on queue for, what I should try to remember. You could tell that he was going to be a coach in college. You could already tell."

Scarlet Knights head coach Greg Schiano would give Belichick "projects" — like running the scout team, watching tape or putting together film clips. Bill Belichick called it "a great experience" that also turned out to be advantageous for the Patriots.

"I'm sure that he learned a lot through Coach Schiano as I have through all my conversations with Coach Schiano," Bill Belichick said. "And just the way he ran the team and things he did to prepare the team and so forth. Stephen and I have talked about those things as well. I've got some good ideas from some of the things that they did at Rutgers."

PART OF BEING a Belichick is the ability to stay composed. It's about taking a deep breath, staring across the sideline and having the confidence that you can outmaneuver the opposing coach. It's one of the things that's made Bill Belichick great.

Sometimes it's also about taking a deep breath and blocking out the noise. Steve Belichick learned that early. There were many times during Rutgers lacrosse away games that he heard it. Opposing fans tossed insults his way about the Patriots and his father.

"Every time we went on the road or Bill was at a game, everyone knew who Stephen was. He'd hear it from the stands," former Rutgers lacrosse coach Jim Stagnitta said. "There'd be hoots and hollers all the time. That just never really bothered him. When you spend time with him as you do with his dad, you learn he doesn't get rattled very easily. They're very steady when it comes to that."

Steve Belichick also dealt with trash-talking spectators in high school. But it wasn't fellow teenagers he had to worry about. It was the parents in the stands who behaved the worst, taunting the teenager.

"Surprisingly not with the kids. More so with the parents," Sullivan said. "But he was pretty stoic and handled it very, very well. I don't recall any times where he lashed out. He just handled it."

Sullivan, who also taught Steve Belichick in his modern world history and U.S. history classes, saw a young man who embraced his name and legacy. At The Rivers School, he'd often be seen wearing his grandfather's dog tags. On the field, he embodied a selfless, emotional leader as a senior captain, one who offered to sit out his final high-school game to give playing time to other seniors.

"I'm not surprised he's a coach, let's put it that way," Sullivan said.

The respect he garnered from teammates in high school and college carried over to Gillette Stadium. And this isn't a story about being nice to your head coach's son. Bill Belichick casts a large shadow, but Steve Belichick's worked hard to create his own identity.

"I think Steve's not necessarily trying to allow himself to be put under that umbrella," said Brendan Daly, the Patriots defensive line coach. "He's trying to do his own thing. He's working hard at the craft, get better every day and develop himself as a coach. It's fun to see."

ASK BILL BELICHICK about working with his son and he'll smile and tell you it's "awesome."

Seeing Steve grow as a coach has been special. It also brings him back to when he was in his 20s, trying to make a name for himself. He first cut his teeth as a special assistant with the Baltimore Colts in 1975, a year out of college. His father's connection with Colts' special-teams coach George Boutselis earned him the opportunity, but it was up to the young coach to make the most of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## P Ryan Allen

# The Boston Globe

## **A foot in the door for Ryan Allen**

### **Allen earned Patriots' punting job**

By Michael Whitmer

September 7, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — Of the 13 rookies the Patriots are expected to have on their active roster for Sunday's season opener against the Bills, the biggest surprise might be the punter.

Not entirely because of who Ryan Allen is, but because of the player he replaced. Zoltan Mesko, though far from being the face of the Patriots franchise, had carved out a considerable niche in his three seasons: dependable punter, locker room jokester, charitable titan. Rarely, if ever, did Mesko miss an opportunity to lend his support to a civic cause.

But competition is part of everyday life in the NFL, and when the Patriots brought Allen to training camp, few fans initially noticed. When he kept hanging around, more fans noticed. Now that he has made the team, bumping Mesko, everyone will notice when Allen takes the field in Buffalo.

"I always knew I had the ability. It's just a matter of opportunity, and when you get an opportunity, you have to compete and make the best of it," said Allen, a left-footed kicker, like Mesko.

"The biggest thing for me is to not compare yourself to another person, because everybody is different, everyone is going to bring something different to the table. I don't want to be a rookie. I want to be someone who can come in and impact the game in a positive way."

It's been one week since Bill Belichick and the rest of the Patriots coaching staff made final roster cuts out of training camp, getting to the league-mandated 53 players last Saturday. Tim Tebow was the roster decision everyone was discussing, but he would have been a third-string quarterback, rarely used. The decision to keep Allen over Mesko will have a direct impact, because not only will Allen handle punting duties, he'll also be the holder on extra points and field goal attempts. That's a role he's never filled in a game before.

"We thought that was the best thing for our football team," Belichick said Friday, before the team's final practice leading into Sunday's game. "Zoltan did a good job for us, but this year's competition is this year's competition, and based on all the things that we took into consideration, we felt like Ryan deserved the job."

"But it was very competitive, and Zoltan showed that he can kick in the league, and he still is kicking in the league, so we were fortunate to have that kind of competition at that position."

Mesko was scooped up by the Steelers Monday, two days after being released.

The Allen-Mesko battle didn't bring nearly the same scrutiny as some of the other positions — running back comes to mind — but that was probably because most assumed Mesko would win the job.

It's safe to say that money was most certainly part of the decision. Mesko stood to make \$1.323 million this season, which would have been his fourth with the team and the last before he became a free agent. Allen will make \$405,000, the rookie minimum, and signed the standard three-year contract that's given to undrafted rookies.

Was the difference in salary a larger factor than on-field performance? Perhaps, because Mesko had better statistics in the four preseason games, outkicking Allen in each of the final three. Mesko punted 15 times in the preseason, nearly twice as many as Allen, who had eight kicks. Mesko's average was slightly better (45.2 to 45.0), his net average was better (38.1 to 32.5), and his long (57) was a yard longer than Allen's best.

So how did Allen win the job?

"I couldn't tell you that," said Allen. "I didn't make that decision, that's on the coaching staff. All I know is I'm just focused on working on my craft, getting it as smooth and as consistent as possible, and helping this team do well this season."

That's not to say Allen arrived at camp unheralded. Despite not being drafted, he was a two-time winner of the Ray Guy Award as the nation's best collegiate punter — the first player to win it in back-to-back seasons — and was a unanimous first-team All-American in 2012, when he averaged 48.0 yards per kick for Louisiana Tech. He never had a punt blocked in college.

Will that translate to the professional game? We're about to find out. Just as interesting will be how well Allen handles holding duty whenever Stephen Gostkowski lines up to kick. Neither Allen nor Gostkowski sound worried.

"I know the technique, I know the form," said Allen. "It's just a matter of getting in synch with the kicker and the snapper, and we've been working all through OTAs and fall camp, so it's all about making everything smooth between the three of us.

"[Long snapper] Danny [Aiken] and Steve were using Zoltan for the past three years, so it's a matter of getting comfortable with someone new. They've been very supportive, they're helpful."

Gostkowski, who had Mesko in the locker next to him for three years, a spot now held by Allen, said, "It's a situation I've been in before. My rookie year I had three different holders, had Matt Cassel hold and he'd never held in a game and we did well, so you just lean on past experiences.

"[Allen's] worked hard, and that's all you can ask. He's a professional athlete and he's obviously very talented and it's something he's going to figure out."

Allen has praised Mesko for the help the veteran gave a determined rookie trying to take his job. Now that he has, the focus changes. During training camp, Allen was the unknown underdog. Suddenly, he's the Patriots punter.

"This is a performance business and there are expectations," said Allen. "You've got to perform well if you want to stay here, that's what's most important to me. I knew everything was going to happen for a reason, everything was going to fall in place eventually. You know what? It all worked out."

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## WR Danny Amendola



### **Football journey: Danny Amendola**

By Mike Reiss

November 23, 2013

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- When the question is asked to Patriots receiver Danny Amendola about the high and low points of his football career, from age 10 to the present day, he is temporarily stumped.

"I'll be guessing on both of these," he starts, "but [lowest] is not getting drafted and the highest point is probably yet to come. I'm looking forward to it."

It's an optimistic viewpoint, shaped in part by the underdog route he's taken to arrive at this point. The 28-year-old Amendola entered the NFL as an undrafted free agent in 2008, spending time with the Cowboys and Eagles before finally breaking through with the Rams.

After signing a five-year, \$31 million contract with the Patriots this year, it's hard to consider Amendola an underdog any more, even if that's the mentality with which he plays.

He shares his "football journey":

**When he first started playing football:** "In organized leagues, tackle, when I was 10."

**What got him started:** "My dad is a high school football coach in Texas. I was always a ballboy growing up and wanted to go play early."

**First positions:** "Quarterback."

**Favorite players growing up:** "Wayne Chrebet. He was a smaller, scrappy guy, kind of like myself. I just related to that."

**Favorite teams growing up:** "The Oilers. Warren Moon. Ernest Givins ..."

**Role models in his football life:** "Guys I still talk to today, high school coaches. Texas high school football is really kind of a big deal. They pride themselves on doing a good job and taking care and minding their work. I respected that, obviously, and really looked up to them growing up. I still talk to all my high school coaches today."

**Role models in his non-football life:** "My immediate family. My mom and my dad, everything they've taught me."

**Favorite memories of high school football at The Woodlands:** "Playing against my dad. We won two out of three. Of course, he knew all the plays. He was the defensive coordinator and I remember one specific time it was third-and-10 and he was physically out on the field, on the numbers, screaming out the play. I remember looking back, saying, 'Get back!' He's a smart guy, so he knew what was up."

**Why Texas Tech was the right college choice for him:** "Just watching their offense go, and watching them throw the ball on every play, pretty much. I committed there when I was a junior in high school so I knew I was going there. I wanted to be in that offense."

**Best memories at Texas Tech:** "Just being in the locker room with the guys. College football is really unique because you're with the guys all the time. You live with them, you go to school with them, you work out with them, you play football with them, you party with them. It's really a family atmosphere."

**If he thought he'd be drafted:** "I didn't really know. I knew I had a shot to get a chance in a camp and that's honestly the only thing I wanted and just to try to run with that."

**Signing with the Cowboys as a rookie free agent and spending the year on their practice squad:** "I knew I was going to have an opportunity. I didn't know when it was, but I knew if I got that opportunity I would have to make the

most of it. I learned a lot. It was a whirlwind for me coming from the stuff we did at Texas Tech and relating that to the NFL, it was totally different. It took me a couple months to catch on and get a good idea of how it was going to be."

**Spending time on the Eagles practice squad in 2009:** "That was my second offense, so I could kind of relate the first offense I learned in Dallas to the offense I was learning in Philly, and I could try to match them together and get the gist of the NFL and how it worked. I feel like I really grew up as a second-year guy."

**Being signed off the Eagles practice squad to the Rams' roster in 2009:** "That was my first real shot. I tried to take that in stride the best I could. The biggest thing I learned in St. Louis, early, was that it's hard to win in the NFL and every time you do be excited about it. And you need to learn something from winning and losing. There is always something to take away from each."

**The challenge of his early-career movement from team to team:** "It was challenging -- three teams in pretty much a year. I was just searching for my opportunity and trying to run with it."

**Signing with the Patriots as a free agent in 2013:** "I was really excited. I feel like I'm ready and been around the game, and the NFL game, long enough to know what to expect when I got here. It's been a learning process. I'm obviously really excited to be here."

**Life as a Patriot:** "It's good. We don't spend too much time smelling the roses or anything like that. It's all work and that's what I really appreciate about it."

**What he loves about football:** "The competitiveness. Being out there on Sunday, being in front of a lot of people, and having fun with my teammates."

**How the game has taught him about himself:** "It teaches a lot of things. One specific thing is how you deal with adversity. Everything in the game doesn't go your way. It's not necessarily how things are going when it's good, but how you respond to things when they go bad. It's like that in life too. ... You play a lot of football and meet a lot of people and you take away what you will. You try to consume the things that you can learn from and get better as a person and football player."

**Summing up his football journey:** "It's been a lot of fun. The most important thing I've taken away from it is meeting a lot of my best friends. You learn a lot about people when you play the game with them. I'm excited to further extend my career to see where it goes."

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## The Boston Globe

### For Danny Amendola, playbook isn't the only good read

By Julian Benbow GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 02, 2015

The first time Sarah McLaughlin and Maura Bradley looked at the library in Robert Frost Elementary School, they saw its untapped potential.

They were making the leap from jobs in Boston Public Schools to the small school in Lawrence. McLaughlin had been the principal of the Dever-McCormack Lower School in Dorchester before taking on the role at Frost Elementary. Bradley was the principal at Mission Grammar School in Roxbury before becoming McLaughlin's assistant principal.

They looked at the school's library — what should have been an oasis of learning tools and information for the children that had seemingly been neglected — and saw it as a symbol for a fresh start.

"We came here and it's a wonderful facility and they have this beautiful library," McLaughlin said. "But the library wasn't being used for library purposes."

There were books, McLaughlin said, but not a lot.

"It was quite sad that kids couldn't access it," she said.

Bradley went looking for ways to rejuvenate the library, and she came across a program run by the charity of Patriots wide receiver Danny Amendola.

'He had a whole lot of eclectic interests in all sort of reading different kinds of stuff . . . It wasn't all about sports. It was about a wide range of things.'

Willie Amendola, on his son Danny's reading habits when he was a young child

Quote Icon

As part of his Catches for Kids foundation, Amendola partnered with Scholastic Highland Street Foundation to promote literacy by creating reading rooms for schools in the Boston area.

The first one they opened was the Frost Elementary School last May. The library was stocked with new books. The walls were splashed with a fresh mural. Bean bag chairs dotted the room, turning the once seldom -used space into a hangout spot.

Amendola visited the school, read books to the second grade class, signed autographs. He told them his favorite page-turner as a child was R.L. Stine's Goosebumps series.

"The idea was just spreading positive growth within the community and within the school system," Amendola said. "It's all based on doing well in school and pursuing whatever you have dreams of."

It injected new life into the school's library and reenergized the children.

"Getting this reading corner and getting the mural and getting this huge influx of books from Scholastic actually kind of allowed us to kick-start the library back into existence," McLaughlin said. "Kids get a chance to be in the room, pick out a book, lay down and read. Literally, it's transformed."

"That reading area being redone was what we needed to say to people, 'Of course we want to use the library for kids to read.'"

This year, McLaughlin said, kids are in the library for hours.

"It's more than just having a room full of books, but creating an environment where it's easy, it's fun, and it's not just going into a room and reading books, but you can actually go into a cool room with bean bag chairs and stuff like that where you can actually relax and be happy and have a positive vibe."

Well-rounded

Growing up with teachers for parents, Amendola understood the importance of reading.

Danny's father, Willie Amendola, was a health, physical education, and social studies teacher as well as a longtime football coach in Texas. His mother, Rose, was a substitute teacher.

They still remember taking Danny to book fairs when he was little.

"He had a whole lot of eclectic interests in all sort of reading different kinds of stuff," Willie said. "Like all little kids when it was the day to buy books, he got excited about it, but his stuff was kind of not your typical stuff, kind of. It wasn't all about sports. It was about a wide range of things."

As much as he was drawn to sports, Amendola loved arts and music.

"He's a really good artist," Willie said.

Amendola still draws and paints. His home is decorated with artwork he created. Willie and Rose wanted to make sure Danny cultivated all of his interests.

"My family was big on if you didn't take care of your school work, not only could you not play sports but you wouldn't make the most of your opportunities," Danny said.

"It was just more or less instilling the desire to be successful and to try to be the best you can at whatever you're doing. So it gave me a different outlook and maybe kind of explore and develop a foundation."

The ideals that helped him in the classroom helped him on the football field. He caught 204 passes for 2,246 yards and 15 touchdowns at Texas Tech, but what his former coach, Mike Leach, remembers most about him was his discipline and IQ.

"He was a smart, instinctive guy, picked things up quickly," Leach said. "He's just a real disciplined, committed guy. One thing with Danny is he's always had a certain amount of tunnel vision. On whatever his task is, it's 100 percent focus out of him and I think it's paid off for him in the classroom, paid off for him in the NFL, and all the rest."

It was something that was instilled in him, Amendola said.

"It was just the way that I was taught," he said. "Constantly learning and constantly trying to get smarter, whether it be in the classroom or on the football field."

#### Community ties

Having the chance to pass that lesson along to children in Boston schools is important to Amendola.

He was born and raised in Texas, but his roots are in Boston.

His father was born in Newton and graduated from Scituate High School. He played football at Northeastern before moving to Texas for graduate school at Sam Houston State University and staying there to teach and coach football.

His family would come back to Massachusetts during the summer to visit relatives.

"Boston's always been a second home to me," Amendola said. "Now, I consider it my home just as well as anywhere else. All my family's up here and it's been a blessing to come back and play football here."

He also has a chance to leave his fingerprints on the community. The reading room at Frost Elementary was the first of two he opened last year. The other was at Taylor Elementary School in Mattapan. The plan is to open eight reading rooms in schools and community centers around the city.

It's about more than just books. It's about opening up children to all the possibilities.

"You get to paint your own picture," Amendola said. "It's different from watching a cartoon or a movie or a TV show where the picture is painted for you. You can paint your own picture."

McLaughlin saw the influence of Amendola's contribution as soon as he left. Over the summer, a group of teachers worked to clean up and restore the rest of the library.

When the students returned in the fall, McLaughlin saw the looks on their faces.

"There was kind of this, 'What happened in here?'" she said. "They love it."

"It's very exciting to have someone come and visit your school, but beyond that, I think it actually was the push we needed to show people, 'Yes, the library should be used for this purpose.' Kids love it. They've treated it so nicely. They love being over there. They consider it like a treat.

"We're grateful. It got the ball rolling on this is what we should be doing with kids in that space. It made it such an easier way to start and get a lot of buy-in from the staff."

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## C David Andrews

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots' David Andrews has unique mentor in Dan Reeves**

By Jim McBride GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 25, 2015

FOXBOROUGH — They can be found on refrigerators, albums, and desks across the country.

Replica trading cards featuring young athletes wearing their favorite uniforms and playing their favorite sports. Keepsakes for proud moms, dads, grandmas, grandpas, and assorted other extended family members.

Dan Reeves has one. And the retired NFL coach is pretty proud of it. It's of a young football player near and dear to Reeves's heart — and it's even autographed: "Hold on Uncle Dan, I'm coming."

The signer? Patriots rookie David Andrews, who watched Reeves's Atlanta Falcons teams as a kid growing up in Johns Creek, Ga.

"That's a memory that really sticks out," said Reeves, whose brother-in-law was Andrews's grandfather. "When I was coaching the Falcons [from 1997-2003] he gave me that bubble gum card. It had his picture on it and he was in his pads, no helmet, but he had his pads on, holding the ball, snapping it."

It's a memory Andrews recalls fondly, too.

"Yeah, I do remember that. You know, he never got to watch me play growing up because [the Falcons] were always either on the road or they had practices when we had games," said Andrews. "So my Little League team had trading cards made up and I signed one. I know he still has that. Pretty funny story. He always says, 'You said you were coming but I didn't hold on.' He always jokes about it. But he did enough in his career."

Andrews has come a long way from those Little League days. These days he's in the big leagues, playing center for the Patriots. He may have seemed like a long shot to have an impact on the reigning Super Bowl champions when he arrived in New England as an undrafted free agent in May. But Reeves saw it coming.

"Well, I'm not surprised because it's something he's dreamed about all of his life," said Reeves, who arrived in Dallas as an undrafted free agent in 1965 and amassed more than 3,600 total yards over an eight-year career at running back. "When he got that opportunity, he immediately moved [to New England] and wanted to be there every day and wanted to do everything he could to prepare. He's worked extremely hard. That's the way he's gotten to where he was at Georgia and that's the way he's gotten to where he is in New England. He's a very dedicated young man."

It was at Georgia where Andrews was able to refine his skills as a center and where Reeves was able to make up for all those missed Little League games. Andrews started every game over his final three seasons with the Bulldogs, and it was during that stretch when Reeves started to realize the 6-foot-3-inch, 294-pounder had a chance to play on Sundays.

"I watched the quarterback at Georgia from the sideline and the end zone and I'd watch David. And in the three years I watched him there he never made a bad snap," said Reeves. "That's incredible — when you figure you go from under the center to shotgun. And they do the same thing in New England. He's very comfortable in that system. He's been doing it a long time."

David Andrews (60) started in the Patriots' season opener vs. the Steelers.

Andrews smiled at Reeves's recollection of his performances, saying, "I think I might have had a few [bad snaps]." But added, "I've played center since the seventh grade, so I had a lot of practice and I try to be consistent with it."

Consistency has been the key for Andrews, who has stepped in and played every snap through the first two weeks of the season for the Patriots. With starter Bryan Stork and top backup Ryan Wendell on the shelf, it looks like Andrews will be entrenched in the middle of the offense for the foreseeable future.

Reeves said another component to Andrews's success is his intelligence — an important trait for a center.

"[Centers are] like the quarterback for the five offensive linemen," said Reeves. "They make all the calls. He and the quarterback have to be on the same page. I know they do a lot of communication at the line of scrimmage in New England."

Andrews ended up in New England after working out for Bill Belichick before the draft. It was a workout that obviously left an impression.

"It was an awesome experience," said Andrews. "I just went there and tried to show that I deserved a chance and it all worked out."

Reeves said no guarantees were given to Andrews.

"Coach Belichick was very honest with David," said Reeves. "He told him he wouldn't draft him but if he was a free agent they would be interested in signing him. So I wrote Bill and told him how much I appreciated his honesty and for giving David a chance. I told him he wouldn't be disappointed because he's such a great young man."

You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone in the organization disappointed in Andrews's play.

"I think that David has done everything we've asked him to do since he came here," said offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels. "He's been accountable to his job, dependable each day . . . And he's played very tough, and he's a smart player."

Andrews lacks prototypical size for an offensive lineman but is deceptively quick and athletic — he can get to the second level. He is very appreciative of the tips he picked up from his favorite former NFL coach.

"He gave me a lot of advice," said Andrews. "Especially as I started getting older and started to understand how the game was supposed to be played. Definitely a very unique contact to have. He's a great mentor. A great mentor for football but also a great man. So it's kind of a two-dimensional thing."

As exciting as the journey has been for Andrews and Reeves, there were some anxious moments along the way — specifically roster cut days.

"The fact that he was getting to play an awful lot, I felt good about that. You know the way it is, it's hard to find offensive linemen," said Reeves. "It's unusual for a rookie, a kid, to come in and play that much in the preseason . . . To think about where he is now. Coach Belichick does a tremendous job. He knows exactly what kind of players he wants, offense, defense. To see that David was someone he was interested in as a free agent, to give him that opportunity is pretty special."

Andrews said the bond between the two is still strong and he still seeks Reeves's advice.

"Not many people in my family know what it's like to play in the NFL," he said. "So he's kind of the only one I can bounce things off or someone who might understand what it's like, so it's definitely cool."

Reeves hopes Andrews will be bouncing things off him for years to come. For now, he's just enjoying the ride. "This has been a dream of his since he was little, so it's been great to see," said Reeves. "You hear stories like these but to be involved with one personally . . . It's just great."

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## RB LeGarrette Blount

### **LeGarrette Blount's found his home**

By: Adam Kurkjian  
Sunday, January 25, 2015

FOXBORO — Virtually every stop along the way, trouble or disappointment has followed LeGarrette Blount in some form or fashion.

However, when he's with the Patriots, there's none of that to be found, just a lot of rushing yards and touchdowns. In a way, the Pats are almost a safe haven, a place where coach Bill Belichick gets all the good from Blount and none of the bad.

But there's been some bad. Plenty of it, in fact.

When Blount was a senior at Taylor County High in Perry, Fla., the running back was a non-qualifier by NCAA academic standards, so he didn't enroll in any of the big-time college programs he was hoping to attend.

After he kept his nose clean at East Mississippi Community College, Blount ended up at the University of Oregon. He played well, but his career in Eugene was pockmarked by bad decisions. He was suspended multiple times by then-coach Mike Bellotti for various team rules violations.

Then, of course, was "The Punch." Following a 2009 loss to Boise State, Byron Hout of the Broncos reportedly yapped to Blount, "How's that for an (butt)-whoopin'?" headlines.

"B bunt took a s

Blount was labeled a thug. Then, during this football season with the Pittsburgh Steelers, he was deemed more of a cancer.

During training camp, Blount and fellow running back Le'Veon Bell were arrested on marijuana charges. Then, after Blount jogged off the field when the clock was still running during a 27-24 win over the Tennessee Titans, Steelers coach Mike Tomlin decided to cut Blount, even though Pittsburgh was in the middle of a playoff push and it left limited depth behind Bell.

Said Pittsburgh offensive lineman Maurkice Pouncey in an Associated Press story: "We've got our star running back (Bell). That's probably a good thing for our team that happened. At the end of the day, if there was someone that was a cancer who ended up leaving on his own, that's a blessing."

But Blount knows how he's been viewed, knows his flaws. He is aware of his perception, not a victim to it.

"It's had its ups and downs," he said. "I've had good times and bad and I've embraced them all. I'm enjoying every second of this."

A sound structure

Alan Hall, now the assistant director at the San Jose Academy and Preparatory School in Jacksonville, Fla., was Blount's offensive coordinator at East Mississippi. Hall said Blount wasn't the type of person he was portrayed as after "The Punch."

"He wasn't one of those guys who went out looking for trouble," Hall said. "He went to class, went to practice, then went to the dorm."

What Hall believed helped Blount was a regimented set of rules to follow.

"I know LeGarrette does well when there's structure," Hall said. "You let him know that this is what I expect and you're going to do it my way, I want you to do it as hard as you can, he's fine. If he's out there wishy-washy in no-man's land, just going to show up and it's kind of 'laissez faire', not so much."

At New England, there perhaps isn't an organization with a more structured environment with a coach like Belichick who ensures it.

Still, while at East Mississippi, there were signs that foretold Blount's future discontent in Pittsburgh, where he grew weary of having to share carries with Bell.

"(Blount's college decision) came down to Oregon and Florida State," Hall said. "The deciding factor — where Florida State dropped the ball — was they told him they were going to sign another junior college back in the same class as him so that they could share the duty. They walked out and got on the plane and went home and I knew it. That was the worst thing you could say to LeGarrette. LeGarrette's got to be the focal point of whatever it is that you're doing."

In a good place

However, all that negativity disappears when Blount appears in New England. A year ago, he set the franchise record with four touchdown runs in a postseason game against the Colts. In last weekend's AFC Championship Game win, he added another three to give him a Patriots career record of seven, along with 148 yards rushing on yet another franchise mark of 30 carries.

Although the Patriots tried to re-sign Blount last offseason, he ended up taking the bigger contract with the Steelers. After he was cut, he came back to Belichick.

Said Blount of why he likes the Patriots coach: "Bill is a straight shooter, 100 percent honest and he wins a lot of football games."

It goes back to the structure Hall mentioned. Blount knows where he stands with Belichick at all times.

"Me and him are really close," Blount said. "He's a personal guy. He keeps everything 100 percent honest with you. That's probably why we click so well."

Belichick holds Blount in high regard, as well. Earlier this week, when asked whom he could compare Blount to, Belichick couldn't. He described his unique skill set as a 6-foot, 250-pounder that can move like a smaller back with almost a sense of wonder.

Now, on the precipice of Super Bowl XLIX, Blount hopes to continue to make things work. He knows where he's been. He knows what he's done. He knows what he's been called. Moreover, he knows where he is.

"I can tell you," he said, "that I'm in the best scenario I could possibly be in right now."

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## Football journey: LeGarrette Blount

By Mike Reiss

September 7, 2013

(Every Saturday, as has been the case over the last few years, the "football journey" of one Patriots player will be highlighted as part of a regular feature.)

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- When 26-year-old running back LeGarrette Blount looks back on almost 20 years of playing football, he sums things up this way: "It's been a long, fun, hard, complicated road. For a while it was a smooth road. Then it got a little bumpy. Then it smoothed out a little bit more for me."

Things are currently in the "smooth" category for Blount, who has carved out a spot on the New England Patriots' 53-man roster after being acquired from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in a draft-day trade. He projects as a top backup to Stevan Ridley, and could also be used as a kickoff returner, which is unusual for a player who weighs 250 pounds.

Some of the bumpy parts of Blount's career are well documented, while he was playing at the University of Oregon and also in the NFL (with Tennessee and with Tampa Bay).

"You're going to have to overcome obstacles in any career, when you're thinking about starting at the age of 7 until now," he said. "I've overcome a lot of those obstacles. Hopefully I continue to do so."

It's been "so far, so good" for Blount in New England.

**When he first started playing football:** "When I about 7 or 8, in Pop Warner, but it's called recreational football in Florida. The team was called Bennett's Glass. It was flag football. I had been used to playing tackle football with my friends, so my first play I got the ball and was trying to run everyone over. They were just moving out of the way. I was like 'this is easy.' Then I got back to the sideline and my coach was like 'You're not supposed to be running people over. This is flag football.' After that, I learned the ins and outs of it. It got really fun."

**What led him to start playing football:** "In my hometown [Perry, Florida], my dad [Gary Blount] was a pretty big deal. His class went to the state championship a couple of times in a row. He was a middle linebacker and fullback, and everybody said to me, 'Are you going to be a football player like your dad?' I always watched football with him, and it just evolved from there."

**If he was always a running back:** "I played quarterback throughout flag football. I played a little bit of quarterback in rec football and a tackle league. But from then on, I played running back, linebacker and safety."

**Favorite players growing up:** "I didn't get to watch the Walter Paytons and the Gale Sayers and guys like that. When I was growing up, it was Barry Sanders, Garrison Hearst, Terrell Davis and Jamal Anderson and those guys. I really liked watching Jamal Anderson. Also Jamal Lewis. Just to see the things they can do, that was exciting to me."

**Favorite teams growing up:** "It was always the Miami Dolphins."

**Top memories at Taylor County High School in Perry, Fla.:** "There were a lot. One game, the possibility was there to gain 500 yards, but there were 200-something yards called back. I ended the game with 300-something yards rushing and six touchdowns. I think I did it two games in a row. So that was probably one of the best memories I had, those two games."

**Attending East Mississippi Community College and playing 17 games while rushing for 2,292 yards and 18 touchdowns:** "I went there because I wasn't eligible to go to a Division I [school]. I came out and my first year, I led the national junior college rankings in rushing and yards per game. That had me rated No. 1 going into my second season. I did it again my second season, and that's what ultimately got me to Oregon."

**Enrolling at Oregon, where he played two seasons and rushed for 1,066 yards and scored 19 touchdowns in 16 games:** "They had this really good stable of backs. [Jonathan] Stewart had just left, but they still had Andre Crenshaw and Remene Alston and Jeremiah Johnson. I had just come in, and I think LaMichael [James] came in that year also, and Kenjon Barner. We did pretty well. Oregon was an amazing place. I love it there, and try to go back as much as possible. The facilities and the coaches, the players and the support you have from the fans and alumni ... they never forget about you."

**Entering the NFL as an undrafted free agent with the Tennessee Titans in 2010:** "It was hard trying to make a team. I made the official 53-man [roster], then I got released. I learned that you can't take things in this business personally. It's a business. You're going to develop friendships and relationships with people, but ultimately it's a business and everyone is out to keep their job. People have families, and you just have to understand that."

**Summing up his three seasons (2010-2012) with the Buccaneers:** "The best year I had there had to be my first, rushing for [1,007 yards] as an undrafted free-agent rookie. It was a big deal for me in general, because I didn't know how many people had done it. Come to find out there was only one other guy who had done it, and I think it was Dominic Rhodes from the Colts. We went 10-6, so it was a successful season. That was my favorite part."

**Being traded by the Buccaneers to the Patriots on May 10, 2013:** "My time in Tampa was done. It had got to the point where I wasn't playing that much in my last year there. It was kind of like 'What should we do here?' I signed with them and got traded to the Patriots, and I'm happy that Bill [Belichick] and Mr. Kraft liked me enough to gamble with that trade. It's been amazing since I've been here. I've loved every minute of it."

Summing up his experience with the Patriots: "It's fun. You're going to work hard, you're going to get a lot done. It's really productive. I love it here."

**Role models in his life:** "My role model growing up was my dad. From the first practice I had in football until I got to Oregon, he never missed one game. From 7 to however old I was when I got to Oregon, him and my mom [Barbara Bonner] didn't miss one game. They would drive back and forth from Perry [Florida] to Scooba, Mississippi every weekend to watch me play home and away games [with East Mississippi Community College]. That was a huge support system for me -- my mom, my dad and my sister [Tareaka Blount]."

**What he loves about playing football:** "I'm a competitor. I love to compete. I hate to lose. I'm a big guy, and I love being physical. I love to take on the challenge of someone trying to tackle me when I'm doing everything I can to get away from them. You can't beat it."

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## RB Brandon Bolden



### **A model program for Brandon Bolden**

By Dan Duggan  
October 7, 2012

As Brandon Bolden turned the corner on the left side of the Patriots offensive line, Bills cornerback Stephon Gilmore was waiting at the 4-yard line.

Bolden had two options: run around Gilmore or run through him. The Patriots running back chose Door No. 2, lowering his shoulder and driving Gilmore across the goal line for a touchdown in the Patriots' 52-28 win.

It was the signature play of last Sunday's 16-carry, 137-yard breakout game for Bolden, an undrafted rookie from the University of Mississippi. The thunderous touchdown run fired up his Patriots teammates and elicited groans from the 70,000 Bills supporters inside Ralph Wilson Stadium.

But 1,300 miles away, the play caused a different reaction for Marva Bolden. Surrounded by family members and friends at a Baton Rouge, La., sports bar, Marva naturally was excited to watch her son's second NFL touchdown. But there also is a fear whenever Brandon is involved in a big collision.

"I can't say there's a thought. When I see it, I just say, 'Get up, Brandon. Get up,' do is see him pop up. I know that football is very physical and can be very dangerous."

"Marva Bolden sa

Marva knows the dangers better than most. As the daughter of Frank Pitts, a retired NFL receiver who has Alzheimer's disease, she is acutely aware of the adverse effect football can have on players' health.

Between her father, husband and three sons, the high school geometry teacher estimated that football occupies 90 percent of her time — "Basically, my life is practice, homework, cooking and working," Marva said. Faced with that reality, she's come to an uneasy peace with the game.

"Football, to me, is a very, very physical game. I always have concerns. I hold my breath when I see him go out on the field all the time," Marva Bolden said. "I have seen players get hurt. My husband says sometimes my knees get a little weak. I just stay prayerful that he stays healthy."

#### **It's all in the family**

Frank Pitts played 10 seasons in the AFL/NFL from 1965-1974. A 6-foot-3 wide receiver, he totaled 2,897 yards receiving, 257 yards rushing and 28 touchdowns for the Chiefs, Browns and Raiders.

Pitts made his mark during six seasons with the Chiefs, playing for legendary coach Hank Stram, participating in Super Bowls I and IV. Pitts caught three passes for 33 yards and rushed for 37 yards in Kansas City's 23-7 win over the Vikings in Super Bowl IV.

During a phone interview with the Herald last week, the 68-year-old Pitts said with a laugh that he considered himself to be a pretty good player. According to those close to him, Pitts wasn't always so modest about his accomplishments.

"I remember being 6 years old and him popping in a highlight film of Super Bowls I and IV," Brandon Bolden said last week. "I'm 22 now — I've seen that tape at least 500 times."

Brandon Bolden grew up near his grandparents in Baton Rouge and football always was at the center of his regular weekend visits.

"He always stayed around me," Pitts said. "He always came to his grandmother's house for the cooking and then I've got some highlight films from Kansas City that I'd show to him. He'd bring some of his friends with him and they'd watch it."

Though Bolden chuckled at the memory of watching the tapes over and over, it was a genuine source of pride.

“My grandfather played in the NFL, what did yours do?” he said of his playground bragging rights. “It was great just having him as a person I could call on, especially with football. If I needed help with anything, he knows the ins and outs pretty much. He’s been my role model since forever pretty much.”

Pitts’ guidance came more in the form of a kick in the butt than a pat on the back

“(Brandon) would always laugh because he would say everybody would high-five him and tell him what a good game he had,” Bolden’s grandmother, Diane Pitts, said. “He said, ‘Then Papa called me and said I could have run five more yards if I had just done this.’”

After games at Scotlandville Magnet High, Brandon would sit with his father, Michael, and grandfather to break down his performance.

“He’ll comment on the game and tell me everything I did wrong,” Bolden said of his grandfather. “(He’s) my toughest critic and I think that kind of rubbed off on me because I’m my toughest critic as well.”

The critical assessments were welcomed by Bolden, who was always eager to improve so he could reach his lofty goals.

“When he was in the 10th grade, one day I asked him what he was going to do for the rest of his life and he told me he was going to play professional football,” Michael Bolden said of his son. “We had discussions around what he’d have to do in order to do that and he did it. I’m so proud of him at an early part of his life deciding that’s what he wanted to do and he stuck with it and he’s worked hard to get there.”

### **Game’s give ‘n’ take**

Pitts was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s 18 months ago. While he’s showing signs of the disease — he’s prone to repeating himself, for instance — he still watches all of his grandson’s games and offers his evaluation.

“He’s very sharp,” Brandon Bolden said. “(Alzheimer’s) kind of comes on every now and then, but it’s not like something that creeps up on him all the time. It’s not an everyday thing. He might just have one day out of the week where he has that kind of spell.”

Pitts’ neurologist determined that there is a link between the condition and his football career. Diane Pitts said her husband is “sort of part of that (head injury) study” and is being taken care of “very well” by the NFL.

“The only thing is the short-term memory,” Diane Pitts said. “According to the neurologist, his brain doesn’t retain any new information. If we’re watching a game, for him to remember and to make the transition from Ole Miss to New England, he’ll kind of go back to when Brandon was at Ole Miss. Now he’s remembering and I think because football has been his whole life he remembers Brandon’s football.”

With so much attention being paid to the long-term effects of head injuries, Marva Bolden hopes her son will avoid a similar fate.

“I worry about that,” Marva said. “But I just pray for the best and I just think the equipment is a little bit better than it was when my father played in the ‘60s. I know there’s always a chance, but I just try not to think about it.”

After putting in years of work and receiving plenty of advice from his grandfather to get to this point, Brandon Bolden also avoids thoughts of what could happen after his career.

“I try not to think about it,” Bolden said, suggesting that it’s a twist of fate as whether someone develops Alzheimer’s or not. “He, unfortunately, got it. It wasn’t his fault. It’s not like he asked for it. But it happens and life goes on.”

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## QB Tom Brady



### **Brady, Belichick are a perfect match**

*An odd couple on surface, Patriots' quarterback, coach were made for each other*

By Greg Garber

Originally Published: January 7, 2015

Bill Belichick and Tom Brady have become almost unimaginably successful and rich and famous - and, in terms of their shared history, inseparable.

But the secret of their unprecedented partnership is the two or three hours they spend together each week, far from the public view, scheming in a drab meeting room under Gillette Stadium. Most NFL head coaches operate like CEOs, delegating the messy, monotonous details of game planning to underlings. And yet in their 15th season with the New England Patriots, Belichick and Brady, along with the other quarterbacks, meet every Tuesday - technically the players' day off. They sit in the flickering semi-darkness and break down coaching videos with something that approaches a forensic fervor. They scout the weekly opponent, doing their diligence, searching for weakness, strategizing on how to best exploit it.

"Bill's done his homework by then, and he tells them what the secondary will be trying to do to them, the linebackers, the defensive front," explained owner Robert Kraft, who has sat in on some of these meetings. "The two of them go back and forth about where the best opportunities are.

"Oh, yes, it can be lively."

Today's videos are awash in color, but their world is starkly black and white, a simple, logical function of down and distance.

Back in late September, after losing to the Kansas City Chiefs 41-14 in a Monday night game, the Patriots found themselves 2-2. The media jackals, sensing weakness, wondered aloud if their ridiculous run was coming to an end. There were even whispers that friction had developed between Belichick and Brady.

Bill O'Brien, head coach of the Houston Texans, remembers laughing out loud at the time. He spent five years in those offensive meeting rooms in Foxborough, Massachusetts, neatly spanning the team's last two Super Bowl appearances, and he understands the crackling dynamic as well as anyone. That accrued knowledge was an important factor in the Texans' 9-7 record this year, an improvement of seven victories from the previous season - three more than any other team.

"I was kind of immersed in things here, but I heard some of that," O'Brien said recently, laughing again. "Don't believe all that stuff you read. These are two competitive guys who work really well together. There is no ego there.

"Bill actually coaches Tom two, three times a week. He appreciates Tom's intelligence and toughness. And vice versa."

In 28 seasons of football - from high school to college, arena football to NFL Europe and the NFL - quarterback Kurt Warner said he never once watched film with a defensive coach. Warner was the MVP of Super Bowl XXXIV for St. Louis, but he was on the opposite sideline when Brady snatched away the game and that award two years later against the Rams in New Orleans.

"They complement each other incredibly well," said Warner, an NFL Network analyst. "If Brady struggles, Belichick keeps him in the game with great defense. In those games when the defense is exposed, Brady picks up Belichick with his great play.

"I think they make each other better - and they're both pretty good to begin with."

More, if it is possible, than the sum of their considerable parts.

On the surface, they are an odd couple: Belichick in his sideline gray hoodie, bangs plastered to his forehead, Brady sporting a GQ-worthy wardrobe (and world-class coiffure) after games. But parse their public words, and they seem to finish each other's sentences. Those close to them say that winning is virtually the only thing they care about.

The bottom-line, quantity/quality numbers: Together, Belichick and Brady have won 160 games - 44 more than the Dolphins' Don Shula and Dan Marino, who are next in line since the AFL-NFL merger in 1970, and 53 more than Pittsburgh's Chuck Noll and Terry Bradshaw. Their record is a staggering 160-47, a winning percentage, .772, which is ahead of the Raiders' John Madden and Ken Stabler (.756), Chicago's Mike Ditka and Jim McMahon (.754) and the Colts' Tony Dungy and Peyton Manning (.753).

"I feel like I have a good player-coach relationship with Tom," Belichick said in a 2011 interview with ESPN. "We talk regularly during the week about what's going to happen, how we're doing it, and then we review what did happen and move on to the next stage."

Earlier that same year, with the Patriots headed to their fifth Super Bowl in 11 seasons, the quarterback also sat down with ESPN.

"Coach comes in and says, 'These are the things we need to do to win,' and he's right damn near 100 percent of the time," Brady said. "It's, 'This is what we need to do, and this is how you're going to do it, and if we don't do it, we're going to lose.'"

Brian Billick, former Ravens head coach and now an NFL Network analyst, marvels at the Patriots' continuity and consistency of structure.

"Tom Brady is an extension of Bill Belichick, and Belichick an extension of Brady," Billick explained. "The offense and defense is totally integrated - not only structurally, but philosophically, too. I don't know if we've had a relationship like this ever in the league."

"The wealth of knowledge, their database is unparalleled. Imagine their frame of reference - 'Remember six years ago when the Dolphins tried a four-wide blitz on second-and-long?' Six years ago? Are you f--ing kidding me? I can't remember yesterday. The synergy between head coach and quarterback, it's stunning."

Their shared experiences have evolved into a collective memory, a vast encyclopedia of X's and O's, an iCloud embedded in their brains. At a critical juncture in New England's Week 15 victory over Miami, Brady surprised the Dolphins with an uncharacteristically unbridled 17-yard run.

"He did a good job of seeing that in the pass rush," Belichick said afterward. "It's something we've talked about this week. He made a big play on that last year against them."

'Absolute, maximum position'

Their fathers both adored the game of football and, in a very short time, so did they.

William Stephen Belichick was always underfoot, a fixture in the film room, at the U.S. Naval Academy's football facility in Annapolis, Maryland, where his father, Steve, was a scout and assistant coach for 33 years. The boy was 8 when Navy halfback Joe Bellino won the Heisman Trophy and 11 when quarterback Roger Staubach also captured college football's top individual prize.

Over the years at Giants training camp, where his son was an assistant for a dozen years, Steve would tell stories over a scotch or two about Young Bill, a Mozart-ian prodigy, asking technical questions about linebackers' run-support responsibilities or a running back's blitz keys.

Thomas Edward Patrick Brady Jr. was born into a Bay Area family of rabid 49ers fans. The boy was 4 years old, wearing a tiny No. 16 Joe Montana jersey, when he witnessed Dwight's Clark's "The Catch" in person. Later, he'd join Montana as a multiple Super Bowl champion and MVP.

Belichick probably saw something of himself in Brady as he rose from the No. 199 pick in the 2000 draft to No. 1 on the Patriots' depth chart in the narrow span of 17 months - intelligent, driven and committed to the process.

For 27 consecutive years, Bill Polian ran the Buffalo Bills, Carolina Panthers and Indianapolis Colts. But after working six Patriots games over the past two years as an analyst for Sirius XM Radio, he has an even greater appreciation for the duo.

"Week in and week out, in every facet of the game, they're the best-coached team in football," said Polian, an ESPN analyst. "With respect to situational football and matchups, they do that better than anybody."

"And as much as it is Tom operating the offense, it's also Belichick and the coaching staff putting those guys in the absolute, maximum position. Especially in Foxborough, you almost have to play a perfect game to beat them. Give them even an inkling of daylight - and they'll grab it."

Running back Jonas Gray was cut three times in one year, but when Stevan Ridley tore two knee ligaments earlier this season, Gray was activated from the practice squad. He carried 37 times for 201 yards against the Colts, becoming the first NFL rusher in 93 years score his first four career touchdowns in a single game. The next week, after oversleeping and missing a Friday practice, Gray didn't get a single snap as the Patriots hung 34 points on the Detroit Lions' No. 1-ranked defense.

"A lot of teams just do what they do," said Ty Law, a Patriots cornerback from 1995-2004 and a five-time Pro Bowler. "They say, 'We'll stick with our bread and butter.' Outside of Brady, they don't have a bread and butter. They always adjust to what the other team does on both sides of the ball."

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Law said, Brady isn't in the business of stroking the egos of diva receivers.

"When you have the star wide receiver with big numbers, most quarterbacks feel obligated," Law said. "They want to make the big guy happy. They force the issue - and they lose games."

"Tom, he'll throw it all over the field. Always to the open guy. For Tom, it's about winning. It's way more important than stats."

As Rodney Harrison, a Patriots strong safety from 2003-08, is quick to point out, making friends isn't Belichick's first priority, either.

"I think a lot of coaches do things for public perception because they're afraid of getting criticized," said Harrison, an analyst for NBC's "Football Night in America." "And that's why he's had so much success. Bill doesn't give a crap what people outside the locker room think. Whatever he thinks is in the best interest of the team, that's what he does."

Suspending their disbelief

Kraft is widely viewed as one of the best owners in professional sports. He knows that reputation rests largely on the successful marriage of Belichick and Brady.

"The coach and the quarterback share a lot of stuff," Kraft said on the last day of 2014, from a yacht cruising the Caribbean. "The main thing is they are obsessed with every minute detail. Obsessed."

Amidst all the accolades this season is one that might have gotten lost in the sauce: The Week 16 victory over the Jets earned Kraft his 250th win (in his 368th game), tying him for the fastest owner to 250 with the legendary George Halas.

It was Kraft who was impressed when Belichick served as the Patriots' defensive backs coach under Bill Parcells in 1996. It was Kraft who parted with a first-round draft choice as compensation for Belichick's services when he abruptly stepped down as the New York Jets' head coach - after one day with the title - following the 1999 season. And while Kraft does not take credit for drafting Brady, he has managed to keep him happy and in uniform.

"Look, there have been situations over the past 15, 16 years where the coach and the quarterback could have gone another way," Kraft said. "I worked hard to keep them together. I've learned in my other business that continuity is critical to success. That's the underlying factor in what we've achieved."

Their rare skill sets and willingness to experiment gives each of them the confidence to suspend his disbelief of the other.

"When you respect and trust someone, you're willing to go outside the box and change things," Harrison said. "They care for each other so much, on a professional level and on a personal level. They've become stubborn in their belief in each other."

And 15 years into their relationship, the two are still clearly motivated by former failures.

As Parcells' wizard of defense for the Giants in the 1980s, Belichick controlled the movements of Hall of Fame linebackers Lawrence Taylor and Harry Carson and helped the team win two Super Bowls. But as the Cleveland Browns' head coach from 1991-95, Belichick was 37-45, including 1-1 in the playoffs, and was left behind when the franchise moved to Baltimore.

Brady was never a stand-alone star at Michigan. He arrived as the seventh quarterback on the Wolverines' quarterback depth chart and struggled to find playing time. He even shared the job during his senior year with Drew Henson - who would later play professional baseball and football, neither with much success. To this day, Brady can spit out the names of the six quarterbacks taken ahead of him in the 2000 draft, including, incredibly in retrospect, Giovanni Carmazzi and Spergon Wynn. As a rookie, he was the Patriots' fourth-string quarterback, behind Drew Bledsoe, Michael Bishop and John Friesz. But in 2001, when Bledsoe was injured against the Jets in Week 2, Brady became the starter.

Today, Belichick and Brady are full-fledged peers, intent on wrecking opponents, sometimes even to the point of embarrassment.

Their biggest challenge? Keeping the other honest and engaged.

"He's a hard guy to coach, because he's so well prepared," Belichick said in 2011. "He's seen all the tape. He's studied the film. You really have to know what you're talking about when you talk to him, because if you tell him something that's not quite right, he'll say, 'Hey, what about this game 10 weeks ago, when this happened and that happened? We can't do that.'"

"It really forces you as a coach to be well prepared to make sure that you can really give him information that is helpful - not things that he's already seen. You can't B.S. your way through a meeting with Tom Brady. I'll tell you that."

'No one works harder'

Troy Brown, who caught a critical pass in the game-winning drive of the Patriots' first Super Bowl win, says that Brady is as competitive as any player he has ever seen.

"He'd lose a game of trash-can basketball - and he'd get upset," said Brown. "Belichick hates to lose, too. It's always the team first and everything else second."

Kraft remembers a golf tournament outside Boston when he was paired with Brady.

"We needed a putt on the 16th to take our first lead," Kraft said, "and he just dialed into that laser focus that he has. Eighteen feet. Yeah, he sunk the putt."

Harrison respects Brady's work ethic as much as his competitive drive.

"The best player has to be the hardest-working player, and that's what you have with Tom Brady," Harrison said. "They call him a pretty boy, with the mansions and the model wife, but he deserves those things. At the same time, no one works harder, or longer, than Belichick."

Brown, a Patriots receiver from 1993-2007, said as a result players feel accountable to both men.

"You feel you need to do a little bit extra for them," said Brown, an analyst for Comcast SportsNet New England. "No matter how much praise they get, you say, 'We need to do the same thing all over again.' Everybody feels that."

If any former player has a reason to hold a grudge, it is Lawyer Milloy, a strong safety who made four Pro Bowls in seven years as a Patriot. Belichick banished him to Buffalo when he wouldn't agree to restructure his salary before the 2003 season. But he remains in awe what his former team has accomplished.

"The one constant in the last 15 years of Patriots success, all this talk of dynasty, is Brady/Belichick," Milloy said from his Seattle home. "It happens once in a lifetime, and you really can't explain it."

"They just get each other."

Said Kraft, "To have these two guys working together, winning games for the people of New England ... it's pretty cool."

They are separated by 25 years and a sense for fashion, but that's about it. Down and distance - so, what are you seeing here?

"He can recognize things, he can anticipate things, manage the clock, manage personnel, down and distance, formations, a lot of moving parts going on at the same time," Belichick said of Brady in 2011. "He's able to sort them all out, put them together and do the right thing for the team."

"It gives you a lot of ability as a coach to put responsibility on him to take advantage of certain situations because he's able to process it and manage it, not just himself but to get the team to do it."

He might have also been talking about himself.



## **Given the way he prepares, Tom Brady won't be slowing down anytime soon**

Why Tom Brady should be getting more MVP consideration

BY GREG BISHOP

Thu Dec. 11, 2014

The sports therapy center sits adjacent to Gillette Stadium, 500 feet to the northwest, inside a shopping plaza, next to a hair salon. It's a nondescript location but no ordinary rehab facility. There's a VIP entrance, a personal chef and a brain fitness room. The company logo is splashed everywhere: tb12.

It's a November Monday morning in Foxborough, Mass., and the center's owner, Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, has already received treatment and spoken to his neuropsychologist via Skype. The day before, he obliterated the Lions, topping 300 passing yards for the 63rd time, tying Dan Marino for No. 3 on that list. Perhaps he celebrated with ice cream, though his would have been made from raw ingredients, mostly vegetables -- he favors an avocado base with cacao mixed in to mimic chocolate. "Tastes great," Brady says later, not all that convincingly.

The flat screen in the lobby is tuned to SportsCenter; next to it are jars of whey protein and knee braces for sale. Brady is away at the stadium, deep into his routines by now. Forget, for the moment, the supermodel wife, the movie cameos, the designer clothes. That's celebrity camouflage. That's Brady and that's not Brady -- not as it relates to football. His career is built on, defined by and prolonged with routine, even if his life is anything but that. This scrolls across ESPN's ticker: 7 STRAIGHT FOR BRADY, PATRIOTS.

The center is run by a 49-year-old California native with a master's degree in traditional Chinese medicine. Teammates describe Alex Guerrero as Brady's Mr. Miyagi. They say he knows the quarterback's body better than Gisele Bündchen, Brady's wife. "I do have my hands on him a little more than she does," Guerrero says, laughing.

He is Brady's body coach and business partner, and he's one of the main reasons Brady has been able to transform what looked like a lost season into another star turn in a Hall of Fame career. In late September, after a 27-point drubbing by the Chiefs, the more foolish NFL observers suggested that Brady could be near the end. That he should retire. Instead, he's on track for the fourth-best passer rating (100.2) and the third-best interception percentage (1.4%) of his career, with what one might fairly describe as one of the least intimidating sets of wide receivers he's ever had. And how he did that -- with a diet that made him lighter, workouts that made him (relatively) faster and marked improvement in throwing on the run -- speaks directly to his work with Guerrero, and to the center they opened together more than a year ago. It has the Patriots 10-3 and Brady positioned to make another run at the Lombardi Trophy, which has eluded him since 2005.

The two men met through Willie McGinest, the linebacker who played 15 seasons with Guerrero's help. Initially, Guerrero fixed Brady's aching right shoulder. Then it was a sore calf and a damaged groin. Other than one freak injury, a torn left ACL in '08, Brady has not missed any time since he started with Guerrero, about 10 years ago. He is 37 and in his 15th season, and he wants to play into his 40s. Like 45. Like 48. When teammates ask how long, he simply says, "Forever."

"You'll hear people say, Football doesn't define me," says Guerrero. But that's not Brady. "Football isn't what Tom does -- football is Tom. This is who he is."

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Let's start here: Brady is a quarterback whose daily schedule, both in and out of season, is mapped clearly into his 40s. Every day of it, micromanaged. Treatment. Workouts. Food. Recovery. Practice. Rest. And those schedules aren't just for this week, this month, this season. They're for three years. That allows Brady and Guerrero to work in both the short and long terms to, say, increase muscle mass one year and focus on pliability the next. "The whole idea is to program his body to do what we want it to do," says Guerrero. "We don't let the body dictate to us. We dictate."

"God, what if LeBron James trained how I trained?" Brady asks. "He really could play forever."

Sports accelerate the aging process, especially football, which often leaves gladiators, once powerful and sculpted, with shredded ligaments, broken bones and scrambled brains. Yet quarterbacks seem to age more slowly than other players. Based on touchdown passes, nine of the top 10 signal-callers this year are 30 or older; six are at least 33. For Brady to play this well for so long isn't simply a matter of built-in aggression (although he has that) or extra film study (although he does that) or of avoiding big hits and running only when necessary. The secret to his longevity is more encompassing. "Everything," says Guerrero, "is calculated."

Guerrero describes a typical vacation day, in the offseason: Brady wakes up, works out, has breakfast with Gisele and their two kids, hangs at the beach, naps on schedule, surfs, works out again. He goes to sleep early, eats well and for the most part avoids alcohol. The in-season portion of his regimen is designed to run through Super Bowl Sunday; if New England's campaign ends in a playoff loss (excluding that 2008 season, he has missed the postseason just once), Brady completes every drill, every throw, anyway.

That's their system. From the outset the principles made sense to Brady, who had spent the early part of his career like most athletes. He'd worried about injuries after they happened. He'd focused on rehabilitation as opposed to preventative maintenance. He was, he says, guiding a plane 30,000 feet into the air without having prepared for mechanical trouble. He would stick his elbow into an ice bucket after training sessions because that's what people did. "It's systematic," Brady says. "I was part of that system. You're in it for so long, you're fearful of change. You always got in the cold tub, so you continue to."

Guerrero challenged all of those notions. He showed Brady how the muscles in his forearm had, through lifting weights, become short and stiff and how that led to soreness when he threw. Together they worked to make those muscles longer and more flexible -- "more like rubber bands," says Brady, "so I can throw thousands of footballs and not worry."

In essence, after the ACL recovery, Brady placed Guerrero in charge of the second half of his career. "God, what if LeBron James got what I got? What if he trained how I trained?" Brady asks. "He really could play forever."

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A Brady story: Charity football game for disabled children, circa 2009. Brady's charity. He's the quarterback. Fourth quarter comes, and he implores his teammates -- guys like retired tight end Christian Fauria -- to pick up the pace. Gotta catch that! Finish the route! So Fauria runs harder, pulls a hamstring and looks at Brady. "Calm the f--- down," he says. "You're the quarterback for both teams."

Brady can eat all the vegetable ice cream he wants, but what drives him, what pushes him to play forever, existed long before. Brady is new age in approach but old school in composition.

"I played with a bunch of quarterbacks: Kurt Warner. Marc Bulger," a former teammate says. "They didn't match Tom's intensity. Not even close."

He's competitive, but to state it that plainly diminishes the level of obsession he has to win. Like in 2005, when a vicious hit to his left shin in Week 14 against the Bills left Brady unable to walk. He played the next week, against the Buccaneers, and suffered a sports hernia that left his testicles at least three times their normal size. He played four more games, including the playoffs, with a bad shin and awful swelling down below. His backup at the time, Matt Cassel, tells this story, setting up the easiest of punch lines. "So, yeah," he says, "Tom Brady has big balls."

Brady has refused to cede any reps in practice, even handoffs. He told Cassel and Brian Hoyer (a Patriot from 2009 to '11), "That's how I got my job." When Rodney Harrison played with Brady, the safety showed up at 6:40 a.m. to lift weights. "Good afternoon," Brady said to him. So the next day Harrison showed up at 6:30. "Good afternoon." Then 6:20. Then 6:10. Then 6. "Good afternoon" each time, until Harrison finally said, "Screw you, Tom. I'm not coming in any earlier."

"I only played one year with him," says tight end Cam Cleeland, a Patriot in 2002. "I still remember his paddle from camp." He means Brady's table-tennis paddle, the one chipped and frayed around the edges, broken from abuse. "I played with a bunch of quarterbacks: Kurt Warner. Marc Bulger. They didn't match Tom's intensity. Not even close."

Brady's throwing coach, Tom House, once tutored Nolan Ryan, the Hall of Fame righthander. Ryan was 42 when he started working with House, back when the ace said he wanted to pitch another year or two. He didn't retire until he was 46.

House operates within what he calls four "windows of trainability." The first two windows focus on developing athleticism as young players (from age six through the late teens) learn sports and gain strength. The third window, which lasts through the late 20s, is for skill acquisition. Everything thereafter -- the fourth window -- is skill retention, skill maintenance. That's when athletes can slow the aging process. Or try to.

House and Brady work to refine less than 2 percent of the QB's overall skillset. That's it. The upper end of the upper end. Early on they ran Brady's throws through a three-dimensional motion analysis, studying his movement patterns (length of stride), timing (shoulder and hip separation) and the mechanical variables (eye level, release point). That provided a baseline.

After Brady's subpar 2013 season -- subpar by his standards, anyway -- they looked at ground-force production: how to shift his feet more quickly to create more torque and to boost his spin on shorter throws and his distance on longer ones. One exercise they added, the Fogel drill, forces Brady to shuffle his feet for 30 seconds while simulating throws to dozens of targets. This makes Brady plant and pass faster. It has helped his balance and led to gains, even at 37, in his ability to deliver on the move.

"Tom is pushing back the aging process," says House. "There's no reason he can't do at 45 what he did at 25."

Brady started with House two years ago, shortly after the death of Tom Martinez, the quarterback guru who developed his mechanics in the first place. For years Brady carried a page of notes from Martinez in his wallet. He eventually transferred those reminders -- hips closed, elbow high -- to his BlackBerry. When Martinez died in 2012, after years of kidney and other ailments, Guerrero says it had a "spiritual impact" on Brady.

Hold up. Spiritual? Has anyone ever described Brady that way? "Our method relates to being physically fit, emotionally stable and spiritually nourished," says Guerrero. "Emotional stability allows you to have spiritual awareness. I always tell him and Gisele they're the most spiritual nonreligious people I know."

There's something else that Guerrero and Brady remind each other of all the time, a philosophy of sorts. It could also be interpreted as spiritual.

"Balance in all things."

Namaste.

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Like Brady, Tim Hasselbeck entered the NFL as a quarterback in 2000. At the combine that year he watched video of Brady, saw him with his shirt off, the 40-yard dash that started in slow motion. "Nothing special," he thought. "Pretty standard."

Hasselbeck went undrafted out of Boston College, played overseas and bounced around the NFL before becoming an ESPN analyst. Brady? He won his first 10 playoff games. He hoisted three Super Bowl trophies in his first four seasons as a starter and was named MVP in two of those games. He was league MVP twice, in 2007 and '10. Obviously not "pretty standard."

"This guy is year-round," Brady's trainer says. "No plays off. No days off. Everything is purposeful."

And yet the career arc hasn't been perfect. Since that hot start Brady is 8-8 in the postseason, including two losses in the Super Bowl to the underdog Giants and two to his greatest rival, Peyton Manning, in AFC title games. The back

end of his career has been defined, in many ways, by his ability to win without continuity among his offensive personnel (when Pro Bowl guard Logan Mankins was traded in August, it was accepted as the Patriots Way) and, largely, without star receivers (outside of Wes Welker, his wideouts have had a combined two Pro Bowl nods). His wife alluded to the latter in 2012 when, after the second Super Bowl loss to New York, she responded to a heckler with, "My husband cannot f----- throw the ball and catch the ball at the same time."

"What he's been able to accomplish there is nuts," says retired fullback Heath Evans, a former teammate turned NFL Network analyst. "There are always new linemen, new receivers, new position coaches. Change is constant."

Except change is only one constant for the Patriots. Brady is another. Coach Bill Belichick is a third. The fourth constant is success: In an era where, Brady notes, "everyone is meant to be equal," New England has had 14 straight winning seasons, the third-longest streak of the modern era. Those who associate Brady only with the rotating cast that he throws to or that blocks for him miss an important point. His support system -- his parents, his three sisters, his various personal coaches -- has remained consistent. "They're almost like his glam squad for football," says Fauria.

Same team. Same coach. "Invaluable," says Brady. "For us, too," says the Pats' owner, Robert Kraft. "He's like my fifth son."

The week after the Patriots fell to the Ravens in the 2013 AFC Championship Game, Brady showed up for workouts with his trainer, Gunnar Peterson, a Band-Aid still on his arm from some game scrape. "This guy is year-round," says Peterson, who has worked with the likes of Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis, and who took on Brady after the ACL tear. "No wasted movement. No plays off. No days off. Everything is purposeful. And that includes the people around him."

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Balance in all things, as Brady says.

He has countered that fire with lighter moments that have made him more relatable to teammates who made less money (or didn't marry supermodels, which is basically everyone). He didn't just gift his offensive linemen Uggs boots, he gifted everyone on the team.

He didn't just watch pranks and laugh. He engaged in them. He won them. He used to sit by the door to the quarterbacks' meeting room and knock Cassel's food out of his hands when he entered. The backup responded by filling Brady's Nikes with a chocolate protein shake. Brady then had the tires taken off Cassel's car, putting three of them in his locker and hiding the fourth -- at which point Belichick put a stop to what he called World War III. But Cassel had learned two valuable lessons. The first: Brady can be one of the boys. The second: Don't mess with guys who make more money than you.

Evans describes Brady as the "most humble superstar I've ever been around," and if that sounds convenient, he isn't saying that about Drew Brees or Shaun Alexander, superstar former teammates who happen to be two of his better friends. Brady's preparation, how he works, bolsters the way his teammates view him. He was maniacal. Still is.

He meets with Belichick three times a week to talk over the gameplan -- every coverage, every hot read, every play. He summons his backups an hour before the Saturday team meetings and goes over the entire call sheet, typically between 100 and 110 plays. Twice. He asks the QBs to arrive an hour early on gameday, too, then goes over everything again. Twice. "He has a great memory from all that," says Bill O'Brien, once Brady's offensive coordinator, now the coach of the Texans. "He can remember from eight years ago: left hash, toward the lighthouse, third play of the game. ... We'll look it up. He's always right."

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If every player is competitive, and most quarterbacks are meticulous, here's what makes Brady different: that approach, where traditional Chinese philosophy and advanced sports medicine meet a quarterback willing to try anything in order to play forever. The avocado ice cream approach to football, basically.

Take that diet. It's seasonal, which means he eats certain things in the winter that are considered "hot property" foods, like red meat. In the summer, when it's time for "cold property" foods, his diet is mostly raw. He subscribes to the 80-20 theory -- but it's not 80 percent healthy food, 20 percent unhealthy. It's 80 percent alkaline, 20 percent acidic. The idea, he says, is "to maintain balance and harmony through my metabolic system." That's why teammates always see him with hummus, raw snack bars packed with nutrients and what one teammate calls "that birdseed s---

." This is the same guy who once ate Christmas breakfast with the Evans family and quietly picked all the sausage out from his omelet.

Brady is faster and stronger. "But given where I started," he says, "I wouldn't say that's some great accomplishment."

Take his sleep patterns. Brady struggles to unwind after games and practices. He's still processing, thinking about what's next. So they added cognitive exercises at night to destimulate his brain, allowing him to get to sleep by 9 p.m. and wake up without an alarm.

Take his workouts. Brady does them on land, in sand, in water. He hardly ever lifts weights but works mainly with resistance bands.

Then there's the brain resiliency program. Brady underwent a battery of tests and a neuroscan a few years back, then had a program created to work out his brain the way he worked out his body. The various exercises help Brady to more quickly process information between plays, read defenses and make adjustments. They assist with his memory. They increase his peripheral vision and how far he can see downfield. "The body is a whole system," says Brady, "and that includes the brain. I'm lucky I haven't had many concussions -- maybe one I can remember. I'm training for if that happens. I'm building resiliency and staying sharp. I feel like that's really where my edge is."

"If we can keep his processing speed this high," says Guerrero, "then I don't care if he's 48."

The by-product of all this: Brady is faster and stronger than on the day he was drafted. He doesn't care if you believe that. "I am," he says. "I'm more durable, too. But given where I started, I wouldn't say that like it's some great accomplishment."

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Brady is on the phone. It's Tuesday morning, two days after the Patriots lost 26-21 in Green Bay. The streak is over. The playoffs loom, the top seed in the AFC is within reach. Brady and Guerrero have already gotten in a workout. Back to the routines.

For years, as Brady made football his singular obsession, everyone asked what he planned to do afterward. He never really knew. He wanted only to play football, to win championships. He never considered flying airplanes or running car dealerships or whatever it is athletes do when they no longer pursue what once defined them. He thought only about football and family. The closer he gets to 40, the more Brady tries to simplify, the more he relies on his routines. He doesn't have many hobbies. He likes to surf, but he's terrible at it. He likes to golf, but he forced himself in recent years to take it less seriously, which made it less fun. Hoyer watched Brady against the Packers, and he points to all the f-bombs captured on camera, the way he head-butted Rob Gronkowski, how much every play still meant.

"Since I met him, he married a supermodel, made millions of dollars and became internationally famous," says Troy Brown, another former teammate. "But I don't think he's changed that much."

Well, maybe a little. Brady is active on Facebook now, a new development. He recently posted his old résumé; under additional, he'd written, "Guided football team as starting quarterback to 1998 Big Ten Championship." He posted pictures of former backup Ryan Mallett carrying his pads.

He still wants to play forever, but he's come to realize that what has enabled him to play at such a high level for so long is what he wants to do after football too. That's why he opened his sports rehab center just over a year ago, why he recruited so many teammates to come by. (About half of them have, which perhaps has contributed to New England's improved roster health this season.) He still remembers the doctor who told him his knee would never be the same after the ACL tear, that he wouldn't be able to run around with his kids. "Which was all bulls---," he says. "That knee feels as good as my other knee."

He won't need a résumé for his next endeavor, only his body of work and his actual body, how it has held up over time. "I used to joke with Alex," says Brady, "one day, we have to go on the road. We have to teach people. This is what people really need to know."

He is presented with a scenario: Brady and his body coach/business partner on stage at some convention hall, dressed in white robes, packed crowd, merchandise tent, clothing and videos for sale, books jammed with testimonials for the quarterback turned life coach. "I don't know about the robes," Brady says, laughing, "but we do talk about it."

## DT Alan Branch



### **Branch operations**

By: Adam Kurkjian

Sunday, November 23, 2014

FOXBORO — Alan Branch makes his NFL living in the trenches. As a 6-foot-6, 325-pounder, that's pretty much expected.

The other things the defensive lineman has been able to do with that frame, though, are completely unexpected.

For all the skills he brings to his current position, it may have been the last aspect of his athletic ability that initially drew big-time attention to the Albuquerque, N.M., native.

At Cibola High, he played everywhere from lineman to linebacker to tailback to quarterback, even. On the basketball court, he played both on the perimeter and the low block. He even became a skilled breakdancer among his friends' crew.

The scholarship offer he received from the University of Michigan — where he eventually attended and played for three years before entering the NFL draft — didn't come from anything he did on the defensive line.

Then-Michigan coach Lloyd Carr and defensive coordinator Ron English attended a basketball practice and, as Branch's boyhood friend Jude Roybal describes it, "Alan became the fastest, highest jumper that we'd ever seen."

Branch stole the show when he did a two-handed reverse dunk. Carr and English were sold.

Said Branch's football coach at Cibola, Ben Schultz: "They watched him do that and they said, 'We're signing him.'"

"Well, that's accurate," Carr said. "It was quite a visit. I don't remember if I had already seen his film before we went down, but there's two things that I saw Alan do that left no doubt about his ability to be an outstanding athlete. The basketball, the dunk, he was probably 260 (pounds) then. To see a guy that size who had wonderful explosiveness in terms of jumping and his hand-eye coordination —he was an excellent basketball player.

"In football, the thing that impressed me was they put him in at tailback and handed him the ball and he had a run that was 60 or 70 yards. It was hard to believe what you were seeing. He was quite a talented guy."

That explosiveness and versatility has served him well in his road to success in the NFL, constantly defying the stereotype of a big-bodied space-eater.

Perhaps Ray Rodriguez, his basketball coach at Cibola, put it best.

"I used to describe him as a sports car in a diesel truck body," Rodriguez said.

### **A multifaceted force**

Carr knew what he had in Branch and identified his best position as a defensive tackle. Still, even in college, Carr saw numerous possibilities for Branch's skill set.

"We felt right away with the way he ran, he'd fit any defensive scheme in the country," Carr said. "He was one of those guys who could have been an outstanding offensive lineman as well. I'm not sure he couldn't have been a tight end. But he was a guy that we recruited from the beginning as a defensive lineman."

Branch saw limited time as a freshman, but grew into an All-Big Ten performer as a junior in 2006. From there, he decided to make the early jump to the NFL.

"You hate to compare players," Carr said. "But let me just say that Alan was as talented as any defensive front player that we've had here."

### **Long wait to get his shot**

When Branch broke into the league as a second-round draft pick of the Arizona Cardinals, he played sparingly with just three starts in four years. However, when he signed with the Seattle Seahawks after being released in 2011, Branch flourished under Pete Carroll's aggressive system, making 31 out of a possible 32 starts in two years with 63 tackles and four sacks.

"Pete saw me the year before against Seattle when I was in Arizona, when I finally got the opportunity to be on the field and showed people what I could do," Branch said. "I knew all I had to do was get on the field and people could see what I could do. Unfortunately in Arizona, they didn't give me a chance, and I couldn't do anything from there not being on the field. I definitely took advantage of it in Seattle."

However, after a year with the Buffalo Bills, with whom he signed as a free agent in the 2013 offseason, Branch was cut in August after being arrested on a DUI charge. Those close to him describe the incident as out of character.

"He's not even really a drinker, so I was more curious than anything at first," Roybal said. "I just tried to play more of a supportive role."

"We were all shocked," Schultz said. "I was shocked. My text to him was, 'Alan, I'm here for you. Whatever you need, I'm here for you.' He didn't respond, but obviously he's gotten it back together and he's moving on."

Branch considers the matter over and done with.

"I definitely take everything that came with it because I was in the wrong," Branch said. "But I'm not even living in that past mentality anymore. I've got a fresh chance of being on a new team, and that's where I'm at now."

And where he is now, playing for Bill Belichick, who craves diversity with the amount of different fronts he presents from week to week, Branch fits in well.

"I've played in a hybrid 3-4. I've played in 4-3. I've played in a 3-4. I've been in almost every system," Branch said. "I feel like I've got knowledge in every system. It's most of a mentality change in my play more than my physical play. I feel like after practicing a couple weeks at a certain position, I could play any position on the defensive front."

In last Sunday's win over the Colts, Branch made three tackles and helped the Patriots defensive front limit the Colts to just 19 yards rushing on 17 carries.

He didn't throw down any reverse dunks or run for any 70-yard touchdowns, but it was an impressive showing, nonetheless.

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## DL Malcom Brown

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots top draft pick Malcom Brown is intentionally grounded**

By Ben Volin GLOBE STAFF MAY 11, 2015

BRENHAM, Texas — Malcom Brown was a 6-foot-2-inch, 306-pound behemoth as a sophomore at Brenham High School back in 2010. And he was about to face the wrath of Margaret Agnew, a sweet little lady with a Texas twang who stood about a foot shorter and weighed nearly 200 pounds less.

Brown had moved in with the Agnew family that year. Growing up 20 miles outside of town, he wanted to live closer to school to make it easier to attend football practices. He also craved a loving family structure. His father was killed in a car crash when he was 4, and his mother, Barbara, struggled to provide for Malcom and his three brothers.

But Malcom was nowhere to be found that June day in 2010. He had attended Brenham's graduation to watch his older friends walk, and got separated from his group. Day turned to night and the Agnews hadn't heard from Malcom. They were worried sick.

When Malcom finally returned home that night, Margaret Agnew got very stern with him. He had to check in with his family and be more responsible.

"Malcom, it doesn't matter what anyone else does. You are responsible for you," Margaret told him. "You can't blame it on anybody else. 'I'm responsible for me.'"

Margaret added, "He really took that in. We didn't ground him or anything, because he never went anywhere. I think just the talking to was enough."

Brown's life begins anew when the Patriots introduce him to the media as the team's latest first-round draft pick. A humble, easygoing kid from southeast Texas who never had visited New England before arriving Thursday, Brown has lived up to his football hype every step of the way.

He earned five-star prospect status as a hulking nose tackle in high school, dominated Big 12 competition for three years at the University of Texas, and left school early to become a first-round draft pick.

Now the Patriots envision him wreaking havoc in the middle of the defensive line as Vince Wilfork's replacement. Former Colts president Bill Polian called Brown "the steal of the draft."

"We could tell as a freshman he would be a first-round draft choice, and no one thought he'd stay past his third year," said former Texas coach Mack Brown (no relation). "The day he walked on the field, he was a man."

But Brown's meteoric football journey may never have come to be if not for the embrace of the Agnew family. Margaret and Craig Agnew — Brown's defensive coordinator at Brenham — taught him about love, maturity, and responsibility.

#### **Feeling at home**

As a senior in high school, Brown defied his coaches and refused to give up his cellphone during a meeting. When he had returned to the Agnews' home, Margaret had placed all of his clothes and belongings on the front porch, a sign that he had to follow the rules or get out.

Lesson learned.

"They took care of me," Brown told the Austin American-Statesman last fall. "They taught me how a family is supposed to be."

Now only 21 years old, Brown is a self-described "old soul" — married to his college sweetheart, Faith, and raising two daughters (4-year-old stepdaughter, Rayna, and babyayah, 9 months old). Brown doesn't drink, and his Texas coaches never had to worry about him running around Austin's 6th Street getting into trouble. When he's not playing football, Brown likes to fish, play video games, watch vampire movies, and play the role of daddy.

"He wants four total, which I think that's a testament to how much he loves kids," Faith Brown said. "He does a really good job — when it's football time, it's football time. When it's school time, it's school time. When it's family time, it's family time. He's just really good at getting into those roles when he's supposed to."

The Patriots didn't draft Brown because he's a mature family man, of course. They drafted him because, simply put, he's a beast.

He was virtually unblockable as a four-year varsity nose tackle at Brenham, menacing many quarterbacks in his path, including Johnny Manziel. He's now 6-2 and 320 pounds, but more of a pass rusher than a typical anchor-down nose tackle. Type Brown's name into YouTube, and watch him chase down a wide receiver from behind, 31 yards down the field.

"I used to like to let the college coaches come watch us do conditioning because he would win every sprint," said Glen West, Brenham's head football coach. "And I'm not talking about linemen. He would win the sprints against everybody, because he ran so hard."

Mack Brown recruited Malcom Brown hard as a sophomore, and by his junior year Malcom had committed to be a Longhorn.

"It became obvious as a sophomore, if he stayed away from the injuries and stayed motivated and stayed out of trouble, that he had definite potential to be an NFL player," Craig Agnew said.

The motivation part was tough at first. Brown didn't have a strong male role model in his life as a child, and he lacked direction. He actually quit the varsity football team as a freshman, but West and Agnew convinced him and his mother to give it another shot as a sophomore.

"I went to Coach Agnew and said, 'This kid's got something special. He's a smart kid, he's just had a bad environment,'" West said.

Brown grew up in Washington, a rural town about 20 miles outside of Brenham. Agnew and his son, Tyler, would drive Brown home from games every Friday night, then pick him up early on Saturday morning for practices. Eventually they thought, "Why doesn't Malcom just stay over on Friday nights?"

After a few weeks, Brown wanted to stay over on Saturday nights, too, so he could attend church with the Agnews on Sunday. Then he wanted to stay over on Thursday night, too, so he could get to the football team breakfasts on Friday mornings.

Before his junior season, Brown told his mother and his uncle, Gerald, that he wanted to live with the Agnews full time.

"It wasn't like we made him do anything. He asked if he could stay with us, he asked if he could go to church with us," Margaret Agnew said. "His mother has some difficulties, and we were just really happy to help him out. If she's there, she's momma. We just try to fill in the gaps."

### **Quick to impress**

The changes in Brown were immediate and noticeable. He turned into an A-student and made the honor roll as a senior. He spent his weekend nights hanging with Tyler Agnew around the house instead of running around town. He went on vacations with the Agnews to their ranch in New Mexico, or to visit Margaret's family in Dallas.

"Definitely saw Malcom mature," said Tim Cole, a linebacker at Texas and lifelong friend of Brown's. "When you don't have a father, you know right from wrong but sometimes you make mistakes. Malcom and Coach Agnew had a special connection. I think that really helped him mature his mind-set in life and school and things like that."

He also dedicated himself to football. While recruiting Brown, the Texas coaches told the Brenham coaches they were worried that Brown, already 306 pounds as a sophomore, would eat himself out of his potential.

"He instantly went to work on it, and he weighed 288 his junior and senior year," West said. "It was nothing to see him running in the heat of the day in July in Texas. He ran a six-minute mile for our conditioning test at 288 [pounds]. He'll do whatever he has to do, and that's what sets him apart and why he's a first-round draft pick."

Brown made an immediate impression on his teammates and coaches at Texas when he enrolled there the summer before his freshman year.

"By the time we got to August practice, he had already earned the respect of everybody in the locker room through his work ethic and toughness, which at a line position is pretty difficult to do," said Manny Diaz, formerly the defensive coordinator at Texas and now in the same position at Mississippi State. "You wouldn't think a freshman would challenge some older guys to finish their lifts or runs, but he brought that instantly."

Brown earned a spot in the defensive line rotation as a true freshman, and started all 13 games as a sophomore. He didn't quite dazzle during his first two seasons, compiling just two sacks and 12 tackles for loss as a sophomore, but the Texas coaches loved having him around and knew he still had tremendous potential.

"Malcom was never in the office for anything negative," Mack Brown said. "He's a very upbeat, positive young guy that took school very important. Never late for a meeting, never in any trouble in any kind, he was never around drugs. Just the perfect student-athlete for us."

He met Faith in a freshman class, and she provided the love and support he was missing from the Agnew family. He quickly assumed the role of father for Rayna, and spent his days changing diapers at 5 a.m., going to class, then practicing football. They scraped by on his football stipends and her odd jobs. They got married last May, and had Mayah last August during two-a-days.

"He was so excited about it, just like, 'Ah man, it's a great feeling to be a father, I can be there for my daughter,'" said Cole, his best friend. "He's one of those guys, it kind of clicked for him earlier than most people. He found the special girl for him that makes him happy, and he was like, 'This is who I want to spend the rest of my life with.' And it's worked out."

When new Texas coach Charlie Strong arrived for the 2014 season, he had discipline issues with the players from the Mack Brown regime, as is common in college. His message to the players who didn't want to fall in line: "Why can't you be more like Malcom?"

"I said that because he played hard," Strong said. "And if you watch him, his game tape, he was one of those guys, even if he took a play off, he felt guilty about doing it. He never wanted to let the team down."

### **'A unique skill set'**

Brown is serious about his football. He loved it so much that during his junior season, he would sit in on the coaches' game-plan meetings on Monday mornings to get a headstart on preparation, even though Monday was his one off day of the week.

"The first time he brought Faith home, he said, 'Will you tell her it's OK that I dream about football?' " Margaret Agnew said. "I said, 'Faith, ballerinas dream about dancing, singers dream about singing. Malcom's a football player, he dreams about football.' "

Brown made a jump his junior season, compiling 6½ sacks and 15 tackles for loss and becoming a finalist for the 2014 Outland Trophy and 2014 Nagurski Award. Coaches rave about his quickness, knee bend, footwork, and power, as Brown is more of an interior pass rusher than a Wilfork-like run stuffer. He can play inside or outside, 1-gap or 2-gap. West said everyone in Brenham was "extremely disappointed" when Brown ran a 5.05 in the 40 at the Combine in February because they'd seen him run in the 4.7s many times.

"He's a speed-and-quickness guy," Strong said. "If he needs to play the double team he can play it, but he's not just an anchor guy that's going to hold down the middle. Some guys that big, you have to create plays for them. But he can go 1-on-1 and create his own plays."

"It's a unique skill set. To have a big guy like that that can still be productive rushing the passer, not just a run plugger, is a huge commodity," Diaz added.

Before the draft, Patriots defensive coordinator Matt Patricia went down to Texas to work out Brown and linebacker Jordan Hicks, and came away impressed with Brown's physical skills as well as his football IQ. Naturally, Brown watched the draft with 70 friends and loved ones in Austin instead of soaking up the red-carpet experience in Chicago.

"He's one of those guys that understands ball," Strong said. "You can put him on the board and he can give it back to you. Smart, tough, and dependable, that's what Malcom is."

Now he's a Patriot, too, with the goal of manning the middle of the defensive line for the next five or six years, at least. He doesn't have to scrape by anymore, as he will sign a contract worth \$7.3 million over four years.

But his loved ones say money and fame won't change him. Brown already has everything he needs in his wife, two daughters, and a career playing football.

"He's not a material guy. He wasn't at all wanting anything from us except attention, instruction, discipline, and love," Margaret Agnew said. "He's not into the hype. He's a family man — changes diapers and takes care of his girls. He's just Malcom. That's what I want everyone to know."

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## CB Malcolm Butler



### **A Hero's Welcome for Malcolm Butler**

**An undrafted free agent who once worked at Popeyes for \$7.25 an hour became the unlikely star of Super Bowl XLIX. The MMQB followed him back home to Vicksburg, Miss., where everyone already knew his name**  
William Widmer for Sports Illustrated/The MMQB

VICKSBURG, Miss. — A sultry breeze rolls off the Yazoo River, and it looks like Malcolm Butler might drift with it ... into a slumber. It's Saturday afternoon, nearly three weeks since his goal-line interception in the waning moments of Super Bowl XLIX, and the Patriots' rookie cornerback is lounging on a red rocking chair on the porch of a 150-year-old bed and breakfast in his hometown.

For the past three hours Butler entertained 150 guests for brunch. The guest list was only 30, but his community college coach brought along two assistants, two members of the public relations staff, plus a photographer, and, well, you know how these things go. Butler worked the room, mingling with a saxophonist, the mayor, two beauty pageant queens and countless friends and family as the B&B served fried chicken, grits, fresh fruit and individual bags of Chick-fil-A potato chips.

Butler smiled. He shook hands. He kept saying, "Thank you, sir," and "Appreciate it, ma'am," and "I'm blessed." He autographed enlarged copies of The Vicksburg Post and grinned for countless photographs. He briefly disappeared upstairs to record a video interview with Patriots TV and then stepped outside for an impromptu photo shoot with Sports Illustrated. Now he's enjoying a calm moment on the porch, the chair rocking slowly, his eyes fluttering on the verge of a nap.

His is the hero's journey told anew. Before he became an instant star in the Arizona desert, he was a once-cut JUCO player who went from working at Popeyes for \$7.25 an hour to an undrafted free agent in the NFL. When he charged in front of Ricardo Lockette's slant route and picked off Russell Wilson's bullet of a pass, the 24-year-old became a legend in all six New England states on the order of Carlton Fisk waving the ball fair, Bobby Orr flying through the air, Larry Bird's crooked finger and Curt Schilling's bloody sock.

And yet Butler, who made the rookie minimum of \$420,000 last season, will find himself fighting for a roster spot in August. That's the cold reality of Bill Belichick's NFL, even after you find yourself taking a selfie with LL Cool J and getting Jamie Foxx's cell number at the Grammy's. That's why Butler says he's dedicating himself to four pillars: staying humble, being appreciative, remaining focused and continuing to work hard. But today is all about celebrating the past.

"Hey Malcolm, you ready?" shouts Milton Moore, a lieutenant with the Vicksburg Sheriff's Department who is shadowing Butler for the day.

"Yeah, let's do it," Butler says, jumping up from the rocking chair. "I just gotta change first."

He looks down at his lavender dress shirt and paisley tie.

"My buddy is going to bring over a jersey," he says. "I can't be wearing this to my parade."

In Vicksburg, Miss., February 21 is Malcolm Butler Day.

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## No Offseason

MALCOLM BUTLER CONTRIBUTOR

Ever since I made that interception, life's been a little different. I can't roam around like I used to. Everywhere I go, people want pictures. They want me to sign something. I can't even go to the grocery store without somebody wanting to talk to me. It's a big change from the "regular" guy I used to be.

I guess it just comes with the territory. People are treating me like a celebrity, but I'm still the same guy who's worked hard and taken advantage of his opportunities, and that's all I'm trying to be. I'm definitely just enjoying the ride and being respectful and appreciative to the fans. Without them — and my coaches, teammates and others who've supported me along the way — none of this would have even been possible.

The first thing everyone asks me about is the play, so let's get that out of the way now.

It's crazy because I wasn't even supposed to be in on that play. The Seahawks were on the one-yard line, so we sent out goal-line personnel. We thought for sure they were gonna try to punch it in with Marshawn Lynch. But when we saw they had three wide receivers on the field, we had to adjust.

That's when Coach Flores, our safeties coach, called for three corners, so we pulled a linebacker off the field and he yelled, "Malcolm, go!" So I went in.

When I got into position and looked at Ricardo Lockette lining up as the outside receiver, I knew that if his first step was outside, that meant he was going inside. I recognized the formation because I got beat on the same play from the five-yard line during Super Bowl week practice, and Coach Belichick wasn't happy. He told me I had to be on that.

Lockette faked outside and came inside, just like I was expecting.

I had to sell out and go for the pick. If I played the receiver and just made the tackle after the catch, he'd already be in the end zone for a touchdown. It was only second down, so if I just knocked the pass down and broke it up, they'd still have two more chances to run Marshawn from the one-yard line. I didn't have any choice but to take a chance and jump the route.

The rest is history. I just went for it, and after I caught it, everything got real slow. I couldn't really feel anything. I was in shock. I couldn't believe it.

I may have known that play was coming, but I definitely didn't know what was coming next. Maybe the reporter literally chasing me down on the sideline after the game should have been an indication. I was never a guy reporters chased down, but that had changed. Everything had changed.

That was the first of many firsts for me this offseason.

After the game, everything happened pretty fast. I already had a calendar full of media appearances first thing the next morning — SportsCenter, Good Morning America, The Today Show — I had like six of them back-to-back, and I had barely even slept. Immediately after that, I was on a jet with Julian Edelman to Disneyland. We had a parade and a big celebration at Disney, followed by more media appearances, and a couple of days later, we were back in Foxborough for the Patriots victory parade.

I wasn't used to all that attention. It can definitely suck you in, and I was enjoying it. Who wouldn't? Everybody in the world saw what I did, so it wasn't just sports shows that wanted to talk to me. I was invited to radio stations and TV shows I'd never even heard of. Everybody seemed to want a piece of me.

It was nice to feel anonymous again, even if it was only for one night.

After that first week of media appearances and parades, I got what was probably the coolest opportunity so far. Just six days after making that play, I was presenting an award at the Grammys.

Julian Edelman and I presented the award for Best Rock Album, and we were on the red carpet and everything. I took pictures with Jamie Foxx, LL Cool J and Nicki Minaj. I met John Legend and Jay Z. It was crazy.

After being all over TV and being recognized everywhere I went since the game, nobody there really knew who I was. I was surrounded by stars, so I was the one who was nervous. I was the one asking for pictures and talking about how much I love what they do. The tables were definitely turned, and it was kind of a relief. It was nice to feel anonymous again, even if it was only for one night.

I even saw my owner, Robert Kraft, who was there with the CEO of CBS, and as the night went on, the stars started to figure out why I was there and who I was. And once they did, they were amazing. Everybody was so encouraging.

That was a great night.

I don't care where you go in life or what you accomplish, there's no place like home. So even after presenting at the Grammys and all the honors and experiences I've had since making that play, the one memory I'll cherish most is when my hometown of Vicksburg, Mississippi held Malcolm Butler Week.

Seeing myself in a Patriots jersey on the front of The Vicksburg Post — the same paper I used to see my high school stats in — was amazing. Getting the key to the city, seeing kids in the streets wearing my jersey and having people come up to me and tell me that I'm an inspiration to them? That was humbling.

Riding in a parade down the same streets where I grew up, thinking about all the struggles and where I came from and where I am now, is a feeling I can't even begin to describe.

There have been a lot of other things I've been able to do since making that interception. I've dropped the puck at a hockey game. I've had dozens of autograph signings where hundreds of people showed up. We even had Malcolm Butler Day at West Alabama, where I played college ball.

I'm enjoying every minute of it, but being in the spotlight does take a toll on you. I don't know how some people do it. The attention can get to you sometimes, even though it's all love and support. It's all so new to me. I'm just learning as I go.

Being in the spotlight does take a toll on you. I don't know how some people do it.

But at the end of the day, it comes with the territory.

I think that's why it's so hard to repeat. After you win, you spend a part of the offseason celebrating and enjoying it. And every minute you're out celebrating, there are 31 other teams getting that extra work in, and they're all coming after you.

That's what separates great franchises from great teams. Yeah, we won the Super Bowl, but we're still hungry. I'm still hungry. I'm working every day to get better and contribute to this team, and I know everyone in the Patriots organization is doing the same thing.

It's only been a couple of months since I made that play, and the hype has finally slowed down, which has given me a lot more time to put it into perspective.

I don't want that play to define me. I don't want to be a guy who had one great moment then disappeared. Getting to the NFL is hard, but staying there is even harder. There's always someone out there gunning for your job. Last season, I was that guy trying to take someone's job. Now, because of the hard work I've put in — and yeah, because of that interception — I have a chance to lock down my spot on the roster. And when I do, I'm guarding it with my life.

Sooner or later I'm gonna have to take a trip somewhere and just get some "me" time, but working and training for next season never stops. Not for Super Bowl media tours and not for vacations. We lost two of the best cornerbacks in the game in Darrelle Revis and Brandon Browner this offseason, and as much as I hate to lose those guys, I'm confident in the players we have in our secondary, and I'm gonna do everything I can to contribute and be one of the guys that fills that void.

That's the thing about the NFL: It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, you just gotta be ready when your number is called, cause you never know when it's gonna be your turn to make a big play.

Trust me, I know.

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## Intangibles have helped Patriots' Malcolm Butler write his rags-to-riches story

By MARK DANIELS

August 20, 2014

FOXBORO — Malcolm Butler was lost. He was without a college, without football and unsure what was next. Butler got a late start with football while growing up in Vicksburg, Miss. He only played for two seasons at Vicksburg High School, during his freshman and senior seasons, and when he graduated the only opportunity he had — in part because of his grades — was at Hinds Community College.

But in one fell swoop his football career almost came to crashing halt. After five games during his 2009 freshman season, Butler was kicked out of school. (Though he wouldn't confirm the reason, the only arrest on his record shows a charge for possession of drug paraphernalia.)

It was that next year, in 2010, that he calls "life-changing." He got a part-time job at Popeyes and worked there for most the year before taking summer classes at Alcorn State University to get back on track. For the first time in his life, he missed football.

"That just made me realize how bad I wanted it and how bad I really needed it," Butler said. "You don't know how good it is until it's gone."

Butler was invited back to Hinds, where he played for one more season, in 2011. From there he went to Division II West Alabama. In what has started to become a trend, Butler persevered. For two years he was one of the best cornerbacks in the Gulf Coast Conference. His performance was enough to get him signed by the Patriots, on May 19, as an undrafted free agent.

After taking an unusual and tumultuous road to Foxboro, Butler entered training camp facing an uphill battle to even earn a roster spot. But if there's one thing this 24-year-old knows, it's that he'll never quit.

"You just can't blow opportunities like this," Butler said. "You've just got to take advantage of the great things when they come. It's been a long road to get here. Some ups, some downs, but I never gave up. I kept pushing and kept believing. I always believed that I could play in this league. It's just confidence, faith and hard work."

IT TOOK ONLY a few moments after the phone ring to make Will Hall excited.

On the other end of the line was Patriots assistant special teams coach Joe Judge. Hall knew Judge, who worked under Nick Saban at Alabama for three years, through multiple mutual acquaintances, and the Patriots' coach wanted to know all about Butler.

Judge asked about Hall's star cornerback and the West Alabama coach gushed. He talked to him about Butler's skills in the return game, how he played on all four special-team units and showed exceptional tackling. He raved about his ball skills — he led the league in passes deflected as a senior — but more importantly, he talked about his character.

"Joe called me and told me how much they thought of him, and I was fired up and had a good feeling because I know coach [Bill] Belichick does a good job of taking guys like him," Hall said. "But the big thing is, I knew he would have the attitude coming from where he's been in his life, and he would do whatever it takes to make it. And he would do it with a great attitude."

"He's just a great guy. He's got a great heart and is a tremendous competitor. He feels like he belongs. He never walks into an arena where he doesn't feel like he belongs there. But at the same time, he's pretty humble. We thought he had a good shot. We really did."

During his time at West Alabama, Butler earned all kinds of accolades — All-American and All-GSC first team. He was a catalyst when the team beat rival North Alabama in the final game of the 2012 season, clinching the first outright conference championship in school history. When a North Alabama pick-6 tied the game, 14-14, Butler returned the following kickoff for a touchdown and the Tigers never looked back.

But it was the little things that made Butler special. It was how the cornerback would volunteer to set up garbage cans around the field before practice, or how his work ethic carried over his part-time job at school.

Butler worked for Hall's wife, Rebecca, on campus at the fitness and wellness center for his work study. He operated the front desk, cleaned equipment and washed and dried towels.

"She thinks the world of him. When you're around him, he just lifts you up. He's just one of those people," Hall said. "Coming from his background, that's why I knew, when he got up to New England, he would be willing to do whatever it took to make it."

BUTLER ALWAYS thought he had a chance to make it in the NFL. He always thought he belonged. And though it was the mention of special teams that brought him to Foxboro, it's been his play at cornerback that's opened up eyes.

In the Patriots' first preseason game, against Washington, he totaled seven tackles and deflected two passes. Then, against Philadelphia, he got the start opposite Darrelle Revis, collected seven more tackles and should've been credited with two forced fumbles.

On Monday, he followed it up by forcing a fumble on Rob Gronkowski during 7-on-7 drills and then intercepting a Tom Brady on a pass during 3-on-2 drills.

"I've been able to enjoy it and be shocked at the same time. It's such a blessing," Butler said. "Tom Brady, one of the best players, and Darrelle Revis — it's just crazy. I've settled down and just hoping I can maintain a spot on the roster."

Friday, he'll line up again with the Patriots as they take on the Carolina Panthers. It's wild for him to think about the road he took to get to this moment. He hates to think about what would've happened if he didn't go back to school in 2010.

Of course, quitting was never an option.

"It's just that diehard attitude to never give up

. If I gave up I probably would've been the manager at Popeyes right now, if anything," Butler said. "I didn't give up. I just stuck with it and just believed."

The cornerback then paused for a second, looking around the Patriots locker room.

"I just believed."

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## OL Marcus Cannon



### **Train eyes on Marcus Cannon**

**Staff key to rookie's progress**

By Karen Guregian

Thursday, February 2, 2012

INDIANAPOLIS — In April, the Patriots [team stats] took a chance on a kid who had just been hit with a devastating cancer diagnosis. Where many teams chose to pass on promising offensive lineman Marcus Cannon and not deal with the ramifications of treatments and so on, the Pats used a fifth-round pick on the Texas Christian product.

Ten months later, that kid is preparing to play in his first Super Bowl.

Of course, plenty happened in between: chemotherapy treatments to help put Cannon's non-Hodgkin lymphoma in remission, a program to get the rookie back into playing shape, and ultimately, getting activated and placed on the 53-man roster.

While Cannon persevered through the worst — the seven cycles of chemo — the Patriots training staff took the ball from there.

Head trainer Jim Whalen and strength and conditioning coach Harold Nash were pivotal in Cannon's turnaround from cancer patient back to football player.

Nash, who had just taken over the job from the well-respected Mike Woicik, was especially proactive. He reached out to other training staffs who had similar situations with athletes returning from cancer treatment.

His first call went to the Red Sox [team stats].

They had to deal with starting pitcher Jon Lester [stats], who was diagnosed with lymphoma his rookie season in 2006, coming back after his treatments. So Nash put in a call to then-Sox strength and conditioning coach Dave Page to get an idea what to expect. Page had helped get Lester back into pitching shape relatively soon after treatment, so any helpful hint was appreciated.

"I consulted with Coach Page," Nash said during Tuesday's media day. "We talked about calorie intake, stuff like that. There isn't a big manual, where you got to do this, this and that. We had to be tolerant to some degree, because he'd go to chemo, come back, then go to chemo, and come back."

Cannon underwent treatment back home in Texas and later headed to Foxboro where Nash & Co. tried to help the 6-foot-5, 358-pound lineman maintain his weight.

"When he came, he worked his tail off. He worked extremely hard. He didn't want any extra special treatment," Nash said of Cannon. "Some days, he gave me what he could give me. And that's what I had to accept. Once we accepted that, he did an awesome, awesome job."

Cannon started the season on the reserve/non-football injury list and was promoted to the roster Nov. 15. He got into game action here and there at right tackle, then found himself seeing more time when the Pats employed fellow rookie Nate Solder as a third tight end.

"This guy stared death in the face for a little while," Nash said, "but he held firm, got his strength firm, got his health back, and got his humor back. It was great dealing with him."

The feeling is mutual. Cannon is very appreciative of the efforts of the Pats staff, the lengths they've gone to make things better for him, and do what's best for him.

"They helped me out a lot, a whole lot," Cannon said. "They did a real good job with me, and I'm happy for that. It's been a real team effort."

Cannon said he couldn't even dream of this moment, being here this week, being on the verge of participating in the biggest game his sport has to offer, back in April.

"I really couldn't, but this is awesome," Cannon said. "I'm happy to be here. I'm blessed to be here."

Nash and the Patriots training staff couldn't be more proud of the kid.

"When you look at it, this really didn't have anything to do with football. He had cancer. We cared about him. We wanted to make sure he was healthy first," Nash said. "And then after he was healthy, give us what you can give. We kept training him through the small victories. . . . And it wa  
deserve. He did such a great job. He made my job so much easier. It worked out. Look at him now."

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## LS Joe Cardona

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots' long snapping is in good hands with Joe Cardona**

**Joe Cardona is making the difficult transition between long snapping in college and the pros.**

By Jim McBride

FOXBOROUGH — Drafting Joe Cardona was no snap decision for the Patriots.

OK, maybe technically it was. But it wasn't a quick one. A lot of research and homework went into taking the Navy long snapper with a fifth-round choice last May; at 166th overall, he is the highest pure long snapper ever selected. A few players with long snapping on their résumés have been taken earlier, but none whose sole position was long snapper.

Asked if he ever thought he'd be part of draft history, Cardona said, "No. Not for a second."

Unlike other positions, long snapper is tougher to evaluate because the job comes with more responsibilities in the NFL than it does at the college level. Therefore, the transition tends to be rough.

"The tough thing for the snappers that a lot of people don't understand is that what you ask them to do at this level and what they do in college is completely different," said Patriots special teams coach Joe Judge, "because in college, at 90 percent of schools, they don't have to snap and protect, they snap and run down the field.

"So with Joe, the transition was learning to snap, learning to get back off the line to protect, as well as learning the protection concepts and now how to operate with players next to him with protecting. Very similar to the offensive line in terms of passing off twists and loops and things like that.

"Joe's transition has been a lot mental learning how to protect but a lot physical in that he changes technique from snapping and falling out and running forward to now he has go to backwards."

Because the role changes at the professional level, scouts and coaches have limited information to evaluate whether players have a chance of succeeding. The combine and private workouts are keys to grading candidates (Cardona was the lone long snapper invited to this year's combine).

"First thing you look for in a snapper is the snap — the accuracy, the velocity, and everyone identified that [in Cardona] coming out," said Judge. "I was able to go down and work with him and put him through a series of drills and kind of test his athletic ability as well as the specific techniques that he'd have to use as a snapper, and he showed enough in that workout that you knew there was the potential to get him there.

"And that's really all you can ask for from those guys: Can they develop into what you need? Because they haven't done it yet and they're not going to be able to do it that day. A lot of guys have a tendency to get frustrated when they can't do the drill right away, and he had a knack for fighting through it and being mentally tough, and by the end of the workout, he was doing a whole lot better."

The mental toughness should come as no surprise, as that is a trait shared by all Midshipmen. The demands on service academy students — and student-athletes in particular — are like no other. In that regard, Cardona had a leg up on most rookies. He'd already been tested mentally and physically more than your average incoming NFLer.

"They both had their trials, for sure," Cardona said, when asked which was tougher, his first year at Annapolis or his first NFL training camp. "Having the Naval Academy preparation prepared me for training camp more than anything. But at the time, first semester plebe year was pretty tough."

Just as Cardona transformed himself from successful high school student (he was a standout football and lacrosse player) to successful Midshipman (the economics major was charged with zero bad snaps as a four-year starter at Navy), he has transformed himself into a successful pro.

Cardona is the third Navy alum drafted by the Patriots, joining Heisman Trophy winner and Winchester native Joe Bellino (1961) and Max Lane (1994). He was aware of the Belichick connection at Annapolis — Belichick's father was an assistant coach there for 34 years — before attending.

He began developing his snapping techniques long ago — never knowing it would lead to the NFL.

"It was just something my dad always had me doing playing pee wee football — before practice — in addition to playing other positions" said Cardona. "I had a couple of coaches in high school that told me I would have opportunities to play college football with this, so it just kind of developed from there."

Cardona is the lone long snapper on the roster, and he's also the easiest player to identify in the postgame locker room (apologies to Tom Brady) because he's the one in his dress whites.

"I mean, it's all business when you come out to a game, so why not wear what makes me feel most comfortable?" he said. "Wearing the uniform of our country and being able to step out there on the field — it's all business."

Cardona received a deferment from his Navy service to pursue his NFL career this season (he's unsure of future seasons because "the decision is way higher than me"), but his postseason plans are set.

"Right after the season I will report to my ship, the USS Zumwalt [a guided missile destroyer] that is stationed out of Bath, Maine," said Cardona. "From there I take on the role of junior officer, and whatever that role is, I will do my best at it."

Sounds pretty much how he's attacked his role with the Patriots

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## S Patrick Chung

# The Boston Globe

### **Patrick Chung happy to be back with Patriots**

By Shalise Manza Young  
OCTOBER 26, 2014

FOXBOROUGH — Sometimes, when you're working the same patch of grass over and over, things start to look a little better elsewhere. Maybe the view is different or the yard is bigger or the trees are nicer. Who knows what makes it more appealing, it just seems like there's a greater plot than the one you've been working.

But Patrick Chung discovered last year: It's not always better elsewhere.

A second-round pick of the Patriots in 2009, Chung was not re-signed by the Patriots after his rookie contract ended early in 2013. His former coach at Oregon, Chip Kelly, was a first-year NFL coach in Philadelphia and offered the chance to play for him again, with a three-year, \$10 million contract to sweeten the reunion.

Only that's where Chung learned that Eagles green wasn't his favorite green.

He played in 12 games, starting 10, and didn't perform to expectations. After one season, he was released, and a couple of weeks later, Chung became one of the few players of the Bill Belichick era to come back to the Patriots after signing elsewhere.

Chung's time with the Eagles made him realize what he was missing with New England.

"I learned that I like this system and I like these coaches and everything," he said. "I like it here. I guess I'm a little bit more calm, I guess I got to experience some things so I'm a little bit more mature about it I guess, just coming here and doing my job and doing whatever I can do, honestly.

"Hopefully, I can stay here a couple more years, but you know, I learned the grass is not always greener. I wanted to stay here and ended up going somewhere else, and now I'm back and I like this grass."

Not long after signing with Philadelphia, Chung announced the formation of his charitable foundation, Chung Changing Lives, and despite having to move out of the city, he kept the charity in Boston.

The foundation's signature event is an intensive six-week summer camp that exposes musically inclined teenagers to all aspects of music: writing, producing, playing instruments, making videos.

"This is the place that gave me my first opportunity," Chung said. "I've got to take care of the city that took care of me in a sense, and that's not going to change. We tried to do something in Philly with kids out there, tried to do something in California where I'm from, but I'm not going to shy away from Boston, regardless of where I am."

Chung's parents were both in the music business — his mother, Sophia, was a reggae star in her native Jamaica, and his father, Ronald, was a producer — and Patrick has inherited their passion.

"I love it. I think it's a stress reliever, kind of an outlet. On a bad day, you might hear a song and you're like, 'I just went through that' or 'maybe I'm not going through that bad of a day,'" he said, adding that he often writes lyrics for his own songs. "Music is like an outlet. You use it for whatever you want to use it for, but it's definitely an outlet for whatever you want."

On the field, Chung seems to be having more good days than bad. He wasn't considered the top candidate to take the starting safety spot opposite Devin McCourty when training camp began — it was assumed Duron Harmon would win the job — and some believed he wouldn't make the roster, but through seven games, he has been the starter, and has played all over the defense, from the deep part of the secondary with McCourty to close to the line of scrimmage as a hybrid linebacker.

"He's done a good job, Pat is a smart kid," Belichick said. "He's played a lot of different roles for us, both in the passing game and the running game. Not just our every-down, regular defense but also situationally, whether it be goal line or nickel sub situations and in the kicking game.

"We've used him on the punt team, punt return, kickoff returns obviously. He could play on the kickoff team but that's something that we haven't had him doing a lot of, but he's ready to go there if we needed him; field goal rushes. This guy is on the field for four downs, not every single down for four downs but he's on the field on every down-and-distance situation. I think that speaks to his versatility and the multiplicity of his roles on the team."

Chung has gotten 10 or so opportunities to play in pass rush, blitzing and also recording tackles for loss.

"It's fun. When I'm down there, it's fun. All the action is down there," he said of playing in the box. "But it's kind of just the call — sometimes you're deep, sometimes you're middle, sometimes you're outside. But yeah, it's fun being down there with all the big guys."

"He's been around the line of scrimmage a lot and he's been able to make a lot of plays," McCourty said. "I think he sees things better than a lot of us when he's closer to the line of scrimmage and he reacts and he's been able to make tackles for losses, and you don't always see that for a guy, you know, there's no hesitation in his game, he's been able to be really aggressive."

McCourty was forced into playing safety in 2011 when injuries, including to Chung, left New England depleted at the position. Because of that, the two did not play together much before Chung left for Philadelphia. But McCourty believes individually the two are better, which makes them a stronger unit.

"I just think myself, I know a little bit more, I think he knows more about just defense overall," McCourty said. "I think he's just a little bit more mature as a football player. I think like all of us, each year you play in this league you learn a bit more, you don't make the same mistakes you've made, and you can see Year 6 for him he doesn't make many mistakes at all. I think when he was first here, we were all going through a huge learning curve; like the 2011 season, we all took turns making mistakes it felt like. I think now, even though it was a year away, he has growth and I think it's fit nicely now."

Chung has been credited with 42 tackles, already close to the number he had last season with Philadelphia.

Chung feels he's back where he belongs.

"I like this grass," he said, laughing. "It's mowed right."

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## LB Jamie Collins

# The Boston Globe

### **Can Jamie Collins take the next step?**

By Michael Whitmer GLOBE STAFF  
SEPTEMBER 04, 2015

It's not the eye-popping displays of athleticism that resonate, years later, with those who coached Jamie Collins in high school and college.

It's not the wins or losses, either, and both of those came in waves.

It's how quiet Collins was, maybe still is. He plays a loud, fast-moving, powerful, violent sport, and plays it exceptionally well. The Patriots linebacker has used his deep voice, a slow, Southern drawl, to relay plays and direct teammates to get in certain spots. He also doesn't hesitate to yell and scream when a big play is made by the defense.

But that person is Jamie Collins, the football player. Off the field, he's a soft-spoken country kid from a speck of Mississippi called McCall Creek. Collins is fine with that, proud of that.

In fact, there might not be anyone more comfortable in their own skin than Jamie Collins, who shuns video games, needs music, and is happiest when he's on a lake, fishing for bass.

"I'm a different breed, man," Collins said recently. "I'm self-motivated. I listen, but everything for me is self-motivation. You've got to have personal goals in order to take the next step. You have to talk to yourself. And that's what I do."

Taking the next step would benefit the Patriots. During the offseason they lost a key defensive lineman in Vince Wilfork, plus cornerbacks Darrelle Revis, Brandon Browner and Kyle Arrington, all to free agency. With a sudden drop in star power, there is an opportunity for Collins to emerge as a leader on defense, if he's not already. He made a late splash as a rookie in 2013 (playoff interception against the Colts), then led the Patriots in tackles last season, not only in the regular season, but in all three playoff victories, including Super Bowl XLIX.

How good of a player can Collins become? He won't bother telling you, but others will.

"He's always been the guy that, no matter how much you threw at him, the more he was able to do," said Trent Hammond, who coached Collins for two years at Franklin County High School. The Bulldogs went to the state championship game when Collins was a junior, playing quarterback and safety.

Collins chose defense over offense when he got to college – Southern Mississippi, after originally committing to Auburn – and played on all three levels, going from safety to linebacker to defensive end as he grew larger. Now, at 6 feet 3 inches and 250 pounds, he's found his home among the Patriots linebackers, rushing passers and tackling ball carriers and covering receivers.

He's able to do all that because of his athleticism, which has been impressing observers since he was old enough to play sports. It's the first — often the only — adjective you hear about Collins: athletic.

"Freakishly athletic," said Lorenzo Costantini, the defensive line coach at Central Florida who held a similar job at Southern Miss, and coached Collins at that position for his senior season. "He would do a standing backwards flip in pads, right before practice."

It's not only the physical ability that stands out to those who have coached Collins. They've marveled at his ability to see and think, to read and react.

"I'm gonna tell you what, he has great athletic ability, but he also has football IQ, and he can react to things as quick as anybody, and I've been around some really good players in 30 years of college coaching," said Tommy West, the former head coach at Clemson and Memphis, and now an assistant coach at Middle Tennessee. "You can explain something to him, 'This is what we want,' and he's got it. You don't have to come back two days later and say, 'Remember, we talked about this, and this is what we want.' He gets it. He understands football."

West was the defensive coordinator and linebackers coach at Southern Miss in 2012, his only season at the school. It was when Collins was a senior, and the Golden Eagles were coming off a 12-2 season, winning Conference USA, then the Hawaii Bowl. With Larry Fedora gone — he had recruited Collins to Hattiesburg, and left after the 11-win season to become head coach at North Carolina — Southern Miss struggled, going 0-12 and ending a run of 18 straight winning seasons.

Collins, unlike others, never let the long, losing season beat him down.

“We went through a horrible year that year at Southern Mississippi. We go 0-12, and those kids were really, really struggling. Jamie was never different one day throughout that whole year. There was never a look of, ‘What in the crap is going on here?’ He came to work every day,” West said. “I even thought about talking to him a couple times. I was gonna say, ‘Hey, look man, you’ve got a lot riding on this season. Don’t let this get to you, don’t fall into the locker room lawyers that are blaming everything going on around them. Don’t fall into that, because you’ve got too much to lose.’

“I never said a word to him, because he never lost his focus. He plays the game. He’s a baller. He doesn’t let what’s going on around him upset his approach toward football.”

Collins doesn’t let what others say affect him, either. Asked if descriptions of him as a football player match up with how he views himself, Collins said, “No, not at all. You can’t control what people say about you, inside or out. I don’t let stuff like that faze me.”

When pressed to evaluate himself, Collins wanted the question to be more specific.

Question: What do you like about yourself as a football player?

“The work ethic. I’ve never had anything given to me, I’ve always had to go out and take what I want,” he said. “I’m not a pushover. Whatever I’ve got to do to get the job done, I’m gonna get it done.”

Question: Is there anything about your game that you don’t like?

“Nah, nah, nah, nah. Obviously, there’s always room for improvement, but there’s nothing that I don’t like, no.”

Back to the part about being quiet. Collins, who was raised primarily by a sister after their parents died when he was 6, took a lengthy ride with Hammond from McCall Creek to Auburn for a football camp the summer before his senior year of high school. An hour goes by, then two. Collins hasn’t said a word. Finally, as Hammond’s car passes a lake along the highway in rural Alabama, Collins looks out the window and speaks up: “I can catch fish in that pond. There’s some good bass there.”

Whether it’s his taste in musical acts (“Lil Boosie, Lil Wayne, Gucci Mane, all the guys from down South, man, not the newer stuff”) or his affinity for grabbing a fishing pole, Collins seems most at ease and most interested talking about his off-field interests.

“I’m a really nice fisherman. I’m like Bill Dance or Roland Martin. Real nice,” he said. “There’s just something about fishing, man, when you’re out there and you get that fish on your line, I don’t care who you are, that ain’t nothing but fun, and I’m all about fun.

“I try to bring fun into the game of football.”

But he’s serious when he needs to be. Hammond, now the coach at Tupelo (Miss.) High School, knew Collins’s back story, and the challenges that came with his difficult upbringing. As much as Hammond could instantly recall football details involving Collins, there were other images, as well, scenes just as impressive as a standing back-flip in full pads.

“He had so much self-discipline, because he was always the one sitting near the front in class, always had his classwork finished. Here was a kid who had every excuse to go one way, and instead he went the other,” Hammond said. “Jamie’s a winner. He never got so much as a tardy in any class.”

Every player in the NFL has a next step, from practice squad to active roster, reserve to starter, good player to great player. Based on his first two seasons with the Patriots, there will be an expectation for Collins to take that next step

this year. He increased his tackles from 38 his rookie year to 109, sacks from zero to four, interceptions from zero to two.

If there's a next step for Collins, he's not saying what it might be. Then again, unless the topic is bass fishing, he doesn't like to say much.

"I'm still trying to get better, still trying to learn. As a player, there are a lot of things I'm still trying to get used to," Collins said. "I come here knowing I have a family to provide for, so I have to come here and just do my job."

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## The Providence Journal

### Collins a quiet weapon for the Patriots

By Mark Daniels

Posted Jan. 27, 2015

PHOENIX — Jamie Collins sat there, elevated on his very own podium, and tried to be a good sport even if this situation was something he tried to avoid all season long.

The Patriots' breakout star of 2014 is also one of the team's quietest players. The linebacker never talked to the media after a game this season, and would go out of his way to avoid the team locker room each week when reporters were present. But here he was, wearing a backwards Patriots hat and sitting in front of a microphone during Tuesday's circus, which is also known as Media Day.

"It's not something I look forward to. I can tell you like that," Collins said. "It's just not something that I get excited about. If I had a choice, I wouldn't do it. I don't really need all the publicity."

But the truth is he deserves it, because he's part of the reason the Patriots are prepping for the Seattle Seahawks in Super Bowl XLIX.

The second-year player had a tremendous jump in production from his rookie season, leading the Patriots in tackles (116) and forced fumbles (four), tying for the lead in interceptions (two), and finishing tied for third with four sacks.

That didn't happen by accident. Patriots linebacker coach Patrick Graham called Collins one of the hardest workers he's ever coached, which paid off this season.

"The biggest thing I would say is Jamie works extremely hard," Graham said. "He's quiet, but he's pensive. He's always thinking. I noticed that from him last year even when I wasn't coaching him and he would come ask me questions here and there. His work ethic is by far one of the best I've been around in my coaching career."

The Patriots' 2013 second-round pick, Collins was a gifted but raw rookie who has put it all together in 2014.

In addition to his work ethic, Collins has also benefited from staying at one position for two years in a row for the first time in his career.

In high school, Collins played quarterback. When he went to Southern Mississippi he bounced around from safety to weak-side linebacker to edge rusher. His athleticism allowed him to do a little of everything, but the lack of continuity made NFL teams shy away from him.

With the Patriots, Collins might cover a tight end one play and stop the rush or rush the passer the next. His role got elevated this season when Jerod Mayo was lost for the season with a knee injury.

"I mean, it's changed a lot, and it's helpful. I never back down. I need it," Collins said of his enhanced role. "It's just given me the opportunity to do more things."

Collins said that when it comes to what he can do on the field, he has his preferences but isn't one to speak up. He will do what the coaches ask and then let his play do the talking.

"I like to experience a lot of stuff. I like to do a lot of things, especially if I can help my teammates," Collins said. "If they want to put me at safety, I'll play safety. Put me at quarterback, I'll play quarterback."

At least one teammate, Dont'a Hightower, thinks Collins could pull it off in the secondary because of his athletic ability alone. But as Graham points out, if not for this linebacker's work ethic, the storyline surrounding him this week leading up to Super Bowl XLIX could be vastly different.

"Because he's so naturally gifted, if he didn't work hard, then we'd just be talking about the potential," Graham said. "Because he works hard, now you're talking about the reality and what takes place on game day."

His teammates see it, too. For someone who is introverted, Collins is popular among the players. He'll entertain them in practice by doing back flips on command, and take charge of the defensive huddle when he notices a certain trend in the opposing offense.

Hightower calls him 'Tweet,' because last year against Baltimore there was a Ravens player who "made a big scene" about Collins wearing yellow canary earrings.

"Man, I'm a tell you all about Tweet. Tweet's a different dude," Hightower said. "When he was a rookie, you could tell how good of a player he was going to be. His football IQ has grown so much and I definitely feel that's what helped him. There's been times in the game, he comes to me and is like, 'High, we've got to do this. ... We've got to do something.' I'm not surprised at all how Jamie's been playing. He's a great athlete, great linebacker. And if you needed him to, he could probably play safety or cornerback."

Collins might have been in the spotlight and out of his element on Tuesday — admitting he wanted to "get this Super Bowl over with and go back home" — but at the end of the day, the linebacker's play this past season has spoken louder than anything.

"Yeah," Collins said. "I don't really need all the publicity."

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## The Providence Journal

### **Patriots linebacker Jamie Collins stands head and shoulders above them all**

BY MARK DANIELS

Published: December 20, 2014

FOXBORO — The stories about Jamie Collins, the Patriots second-year linebacker, sound like something you'd hear out of a fairy tale. Fables that leave you speechless. Folklore that keeps you amazed.

Ask anyone on the Patriots. Ask his former coaches at Southern Mississippi, or at Franklin County High School in Meadville, Miss. The athleticism Collins possesses just seems impossible.

How can you describe a 6-foot-3, 250-pounder who at any given moment will perform a spontaneous backflip?

"He does backflips all the time. He does backflips down the hills, up the hills. He's a freak, bro," teammate Dont'a Hightower said. "You see a 6-foot-3, 250-pound guy doing backflips; it's not something you see every day."

Collins has been like this ever since high school. One day before practice, coach Trent Hammond was telling a story about an athlete at Ole Miss who once ran out on the field during a football clinic and did a round-off back handspring in his pads. Collins was listening. Little did Hammond know, Collins was up for the challenge.

"That day, we get out stretching and he says, 'Coach Hammond, you'll remember this.' And he did 13 backflips in a row," Hammond said. "Up, over, touch. Up, over, touch. Up, over, touch. I mean, he was landing back up, landing back up. There wasn't any bounce. Just 13 of them in a row."

He might not be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but ever since the Patriots drafted Collins in the second round in 2013, his legend has grown.

"I have seen him do a backflip before. I mean, that just shows you how athletic he is," Duron Harmon said. "He's 6-3, 250 pounds and bouncing up and down, backflipping. I mean, you should see him on the court more than anything, playing basketball. The highest I've seen a man jump, to be completely honest."

THE FIRST TIME then-Southern Mississippi linebackers coach David Duggan went to evaluate Collins at Franklin County, he wasn't at spring football practice. Instead, the high school junior was practicing with the track team, where he starred in multiple events, including the shot put, discus, long jump, triple jump and high jump.

A coach from Auburn was also there that day. Seeing a chance to show off, Collins called over to quarterback Milton Griffin. With the high-jump bar set up at 6-0, he decided to put on a show.

"As I was watching, football practice was finishing up, and he was just kind of messing around with the high jump and yelled over to one of the quarterbacks to throw him the ball as he jumped over the high-jump bar," Duggan said. "Whatever the technique is that you high jump with, he did that as well as catch the ball one-handed, and fell into the pit."

Collins was a three-sport standout in high school. He was the best in track and the best on the basketball court. On the football field he somehow did even more.

By the time he was a senior, he played everywhere for the Bulldogs. At 6-2 and 210 pounds, he was the team's quarterback, throwing for more than 1,000 yards and rushing for more than 1,200. He played safety on defense. In a game against Amite County, in which he surpassed 1,000 rushing yards, he also returned an interception 94 yards for a touchdown. That season, he punted a ball 56 yards.

"A lot of the times I would say he would go to a phone booth, put on his cape and come back out and do things for us," Hammond said. "He could do whatever he wanted to."

A quiet kid from McCall Creek, Miss., Collins is naturally shy. That all changes when he gets on a football field, a track or a basketball court. The first time Hammond saw him play basketball, Collins dunked 11 times in the game. His vertical leap was something that impressed then-Southern Miss head coach Larry Fedora right away.

"One word: He's a freak," Fedora said. "The other thing that was so impressive was the way he played basketball in high school. I mean, he was phenomenal. ... I've never coached a guy with that type of athleticism from top to bottom. A lot of guys call him a freak because there's nothing really he can't do."

Although it's a heated debate in the locker room, Harmon anointed Collins the best dunker on the Patriots (Kyle Arrington still thinks it's him).

"I had to give it to him. He makes every dunk look crazy. He's very, very, very athletic," Harmon said. When asked if he's ever seen anyone more physically gifted Harmon said: "Not that athletic ability. Not the way he runs, how physical, how strong he is. The way he jumps. The way he moves his body."

"Nah, that's a once-in-a-lifetime guy right there."

SO YOU HAVE an athlete who is freakishly strong, has a 41.5-inch vertical jump, an 11.6 broad jump and is fast. What do you do with him?

For the coaches at Southern Mississippi, the solution was simple: Use him everywhere. In college, Collins didn't spend more than one season at one position. He played safety and weak-side linebacker, was used as an edge rusher and eventually took over a hybrid position.

"There was some learning mentally. But there was nothing you could ask him to do that he couldn't do," Fedora said. "He was just so athletic, so good in space, making plays. It didn't matter if it was a little slot guy trying to run a route on him, or a tight end. He was going to make the play."

Although versatility is welcomed in the NFL, one of the biggest questions surrounding Collins before the 2013 NFL Draft was his true position. As it turns out, that never bothered Bill Belichick.

Belichick traveled down to Hattiesburg, Miss., to work Collins out personally on campus.

"When Coach Belichick came down here to scout him, I said, 'If you have someone to spend some time with him, he has a lot of upside,' " Duggan said. "He's never really played a defensive position for more than a year. If he plays a position over and over and over again, he's going to do nothing but get better."

That's been evident this season. In 13 games, Collins has 100 tackles and three sacks (he had zero sacks his rookie season). Last week, against Miami, he flashed his vertical-leaping ability when he blocked a Caleb Sturgis field goal on the Dolphins' opening drive, setting up a Patriots touchdown.

That scene was all too familiar for Duggan. During the 2009 New Orleans Bowl, Collins blocked a second-quarter field-goal attempt by Middle Tennessee kicker Alan Gendreau. The picture's out there and it looks fake with Collins elevated impossibly high in the middle of the line.

"He looks like he's dubbed in there, he's so high," Duggan said. "We have pictures of it all over our office."

And the scary thing is, Jamie Collins might only get better.

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## DE Dominique Easley

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots' Dominique Easley helps sister tackle fibromyalgia head on**

**Patriots defensive lineman Dominique Easley is happy to use his prominence to help out his sister Destinee.**

By Shalise Manza Young GLOBE STAFF JULY 07, 2015

Like many 16-year-olds, Destinee Easley considers a perfect day to be one in which she gets to hang out with her friends, maybe spend some time dancing with them or in a Zumba class with her mother, Erica.

But those days are few and far between for Destinee, the sister of Patriots defensive lineman Dominique Easley. Five years ago, Destinee was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, a chronic disorder characterized by widespread pain and often fatigue.

That means there are times when Destinee can't even get out of bed, unable to go to school or see her friends.

"It's just really hard to function a lot of times; there's a lot of times when I can't even move," Destinee said recently. "It hurts really bad and sometimes I can't sleep, my legs are hurting really, really bad."

Though the National Institutes of Health classifies fibromyalgia as a "common" disorder because it affects an estimated 5 million Americans, it doesn't get a lot of attention. For unknown reasons, between 80 and 90 percent of those affected are women, though Destinee is somewhat different in that most people are diagnosed in middle age and Destinee was diagnosed at 11.

Back then, she was a cheerleader and dancer as her older brothers, Dominique and David Jr., played football.

Dominique, the Patriots' first-round draft pick in 2014, has decided to use his prominence to get attention for his sister's disorder.

First up was a website, [EasleysAwareness.com](http://EasleysAwareness.com), which shares Destinee's story and aims to educate visitors about fibromyalgia. Dominique has done interviews with local and national media outlets, always mentioning his sister as he discusses his upcoming season with the Patriots.

Next on the schedule is Champs Camp, later this month at Hormel Stadium in Medford. Easley and teammates Chandler Jones, Jerod Mayo, Aaron Dobson, and Sealver Siliga will take part, and a portion of the proceeds from the camp will go to fibromyalgia research.

Dominique said it was an easy decision to use his burgeoning fame to help his sister.

"Just being at the stage that I'm at can really help bring awareness to the illness," he said. "If I wasn't in the NFL, there wouldn't be the awareness going on that I'm bringing because of the position that I'm in."

For many individuals with fibromyalgia, it's a silent struggle. Friends, family, and outsiders can't see their pain, and some days are better — or worse — than others. Some don't believe there's anything wrong with those suffering.

"Going to school is really hard, and I can't go to school sometimes because I'm homebound and can't go out with friends because I'm always in pain. It's hard to have a social life," Destinee said.

Despite that, "I always have a smile on my face. You'd never know that there's something wrong with me. Someone might ask me if I'm OK but I don't show it [and] it's not like you can see that I'm in pain. It's inside my body, you can't see it on the outside, and sometimes people think I'm faking or something.

"I'm always happy so you can't see that I'm in pain."

Destinee doesn't take medications because the ones she has tried didn't help. A steroid made her body "blow up" and made her feel worse. Now she takes only vitamins.

The siblings come from a military family — their father, David, did tours in Afghanistan and Iraq when Dominique was in middle and high school — and not betraying their emotions is something they come by naturally.

"We are all the same; it would be hard to tell that we were going through something," Dominique said. "You don't complain about just anything, that's not in our blood to complain about things like that."

Destinee is grateful to her brother that he has made it his mission to not just bring awareness to fibromyalgia, but also for his goal of funding research in the hope of finding a cure. If that day comes, Dominique would also like to help pay for travel to treatment for those who can't afford it.

In the meantime, Destinee inspires her brother.

"That's my baby sister. Seeing her go through pain every day and not be able to walk or even get out of bed sometimes, I have no excuse to say that I can't do something," Dominique said. "She's been fighting since she was 11. It's really more of a motivation for me."

And even with so many more questions than answers when it comes to her disorder, Destinee simply focuses on the positive.

"I just think that I'll get better. I don't have any anger toward anything," she said. "I'm in this situation, it's hard sometimes, but I know I'll come through."

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## The Providence Journal

### Dominique Easley sets sights on sacking a new target

By Mark Daniels

Nov. 14, 2015 at 6:11 PM

FOXBORO — When times get tough, Dominique Easley hears it. Sometimes he visualizes it.

It can happen at any moment. Maybe it's in the weight room and he's struggling on that last set. Perhaps it's out on the practice field when the day is getting repetitive. It might even hit him in the middle of the game, during the fourth quarter when he's exhausted.

There's a voice inside his head that won't let him give up.

"That flashback comes into your mind, 'What are you complaining for?'" said Easley.

During times like these, he closes his eyes for a second and thinks about his 16-year-old sister, Destinee Easley.

"Your sister could be in a wheelchair right now," he thinks to himself. "What do you have to complain about?"

Before the Patriots' 2014 first-round draft pick started his second NFL season, he embarked on a new fight. Instead of targeting the opposing team's quarterback, Easley's set his sights on fibromyalgia.

The 23-year-old defensive lineman has witnessed his little sister battle with the disorder for the past four years. After the conclusion of his rookie season, he decided to use his newfound celebrity to bring awareness, raise money for research and help find a cure for the millions of people affected by the mysterious condition.

"The reason why I'm doing it is for my sister. I want to find a cure for it," Easley said. "As much as I can do, I will do. As much as people can hear about it, the more people will try to change it. I'm trying to do my part."

IT WAS SCORCHING in Gainesville, Fla., on Sept. 17, 2011, as Florida played Tennessee. All day long, fans were warned about the heat and told to keep hydrated.

That's what Dominique Easley's stepmother, Erica Easley, thought the problem was. While watching the game from the stands inside Ben Hill Griffin Stadium, Destinee started to feel faint.

"People were passing out all over the place in the stadium because of the heat," Erica Easley said. "Destinee was like, 'I feel so dizzy, Mom.' So we left and went out of the stands and went under, where she could get some cool air. We went back out and it was still the same. On the ride home, she was very weak, very dizzy."

Destinee Easley was 11 years old. That day in Gainesville marked the beginning of a frightful odyssey for the family. The first doctor they went to diagnosed her with a sinus infection. Her symptoms remained after going on antibiotics, and doctors started to search for answers.

"It was very scary," Erica Easley said. "Destinee had been healthy her entire life. Can you imagine taking your child back and forth to the doctor and they keep on saying, 'Nothing is wrong?'... She went through a multitude of testing. She was hospitalized seven times. She saw different specialists."

And then she was diagnosed with fibromyalgia.

The word wasn't familiar to the Easley family. Doctors explained that it was a new diagnosis that was given to people who have chronic pain in their bodies. But even they were not sure where the pain came from or what exactly triggered it.

The toughest moments were still ahead. In the beginning, the pain was relentless and left Destinee Easley bedridden. Little things such as moving around became difficult. Soon her legs became weak and she began to lose muscle mass in her body.

"Destinee actually has been in and out of a wheelchair for four years because of the fibromyalgia," Erica Easley said. "She couldn't function like we function on a daily basis. She was not able to use her legs. We had physical therapists and occupational therapists come to the home and help build her back up."

LIKE ANY NORMAL 16-year-old, Destinee Easley wants to have an active social life. But simple things such as going to a high school football game, the movies or the mall have at times been impossible for the junior at Stratford High School in Goose Creek, S.C.

"It's been very difficult," Destinee said. "Socially, very, very hard because I'm not able to do the things I used to or hang out all the time, or participate in the things I would like to. It takes a toll on my body. I try to get through it the best that I can. It's just very hard."

Last summer, Destinee received treatment at the Centers for Integrative Medicine and Healing in Providence. She plans on graduating from high school early to come back to Rhode Island and seek more treatment, and might seek out the help of an acupuncturist with a more holistic approach.

One of the hardest parts of dealing with the illness is the mystery. There is no set plan of action one can take to offset the pain. She's tried medication, but it didn't help. There is no cure.

That's why her always-protective older brother stepped in. He remembers what it was like to be 16 and it hurts him to see and hear about his baby sister struggling.

"It's tough. She's 16. When I was 16, I was always up and out of the house," Dominique Easley said. "Just to see her, in the bed all day at the age of 16 and not able to go to the movies with her friends, not able to go to school some days. Not able to be a kid some days, it just sucks. You can't get those kid days back."

This offseason, the Patriots defensive tackle linked up with Antone Barnes, who has experience helping out NFL players in the area of marketing and business management, and set out a plan. They created a website — [easleysawareness.com](http://easleysawareness.com) — and then the player went to work.

During his rookie season in Foxboro, he was quiet, but this past spring Dominique Easley was everywhere. Barnes estimated that he did more than 30 media appearances on radio and television to speak about his sister and her condition.

He held his first football camp in July, in Medford, Mass. In October, he held a meet-and-greet at Kowloon Restaurant in Saugus, Mass. On Tuesday, he put on another charity event at Boston Bowl, in Dorchester. In each case, the proceeds went to fibromyalgia research and education.

"It's a beautiful thing," said David Easley, Dominique and Destinee's father. "When he first called and asked us about it, we were just elated over the fact that he was willing to use his platform, being an NFL player, to bring awareness to this condition that she has, which a lot of people don't know about and aren't familiar with."

A YOUNG MAN on a mission, Dominique Easley has grown up fast this year.

People suffering from fibromyalgia have reached out to tell him their stories. The situation has had a direct effect on him.

"I've heard so many different stories of what people go through daily," he said. "It makes you appreciate life more because not everybody can live a daily life normally, the way they want to. And they have no control over it and that's what sucks. People tell you to control what you can control, but in this sense, you can't control it."

His teammates have noticed. On Tuesday, Chandler Jones, Jabaal Sheard, Alan Branch and Jon Bostic all came out to his charity bowling event to show their support.

"I honestly feel like that shows a lot of maturity," Jones said. "He's definitely maturing and I think it's great. Him being a good friend of mine, I get the opportunity to hang out with him in and outside the facility. His maturity level has gone way up and I love him for it."

"The sky's the limit for him. He has a lot of potential. He's a great player right now, but he can be even greater."

The better Dominique Easley plays, the higher his profile will be raised. Fighting for his sister is more than enough motivation to push him to greater heights.

"That's the main thing on my mind," Easley said. "I don't want to say it's a burden on my back, but that's something that weighs down on me. I have to play good because if I play good, it's more likely that someone will recognize what my sister has and is going through and able to do something about it."

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## DB Nate Ebner



### **Rugby star-turned-NFL safety Nate Ebner has made rapid improvement**

By Tom E. Curran

Published: November 2, 2015, 1:00 pm

FOXBORO -- It's coming up on seven years since Jeff Ebner was killed. November 14, 2008. That's the day Jeff died in a Miami, Ohio, hospital.

The cause was massive head injuries. They were inflicted by a man named Willie Anderson, who showed up to rob Ebner & Sons auto reclamation in Springfield, Ohio, the day before. Nate Ebner was a month shy of his 20th birthday when his father was murdered.

The anniversary of Jeff's passing won't make Nate think harder about him on that day. Jeff is on Nate's mind every day.

"I'm not really the type that gets wrapped up in dates, as if, 'Now I have to feel sad because this is the day that this happened . . . ' or 'This was his birthday . . . ' " Ebner explained. "You think about those things, but to me, the relationship on a day-to-day basis, the amount I think about him every day, no one day is more important than another one."

Nate says this late on a Friday afternoon. We are standing outside the door to the Patriots locker room. He's wearing a gray Patriots hoodie, a navy blue towel and flip flops. I'd asked him the day before if he'd answer a barrage of pithy, "What's your favorite ice cream?"-type questions for a feature I call "Irrelevant Questions." He agreed.

In his first three seasons with the team, he'd showed no interest in being interviewed, ever. Not hostile. Just so silent and serious that -- unless there were something pressing that needed to be asked -- it seemed best to leave him be.

He seemed to lighten up toward the end of 2014. This year, he'd been even more engaging. So I figured I'd ask about his rugby background and the role he had in blowing up the Colts' fake punt and why he was so quiet.

We hadn't linked up in the locker room but he agreed to give me time now before he took a salt bath and left for the night. I didn't want to keep him. But I wanted to give him the chance to speak about his father if he wanted to. I figured he might not.

In preparing my questions, I'd learned what happened to his father. And realized it was Jeff that introduced Nate to rugby. And that they were inseparable. And wondered how in God's name that impacts a kid.

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"We basically would take the parts out of cars, but the main thing we did was buy broken-down cars, crush them and then take the crushed cars, stack them, then load semi-trucks with the crushed cars and sell the steel. That was my main job, crushing cars, loading semi-trucks. I loaded a semi-truck with 24 crushed cars at age 15 before I had my license. And the crusher didn't have brakes on it."

The way he tells it, you know Nate Ebner believes in his DNA that he had the coolest job any 15-year-old could imagine.

His parents -- Jeff and Nancy -- divorced when he was young, but Nate still spent a tremendous amount of time with his father. In the summer, Nate would go to work with Jeff. When he was young, he'd simply raise hell all day.

"I had three dirtbikes and four-wheelers and we had some acreage that wasn't stacked with cars," he says. "When I was younger, from about 10 to 13, I was riding dirt bikes like it was my job. My dad would go into work and I would put my helmet on and I would literally ride for 10 hours."

By the time he was 14, he was driving a loader around the yard, doing a full day's work. Sometimes when the work was done, he'd stack cars in a grid, call his buddies and play the most diabolical games of paintball you could imagine. Or they'd beat out windows with bats. Or shoot BB guns.

But usually when the work was done, there was rugby.

Jeff, who was 53 when he died, played in college at the University of Minnesota and kept right on playing into adulthood. He was part of two Ohio-based rugby clubs and -- starting when his son was about 6 -- he introduced Nate to the game.

"He didn't push me," says Nate. "He never made me do anything. He just played and enjoyed playing. And I enjoyed playing as a young kid. It was part of our culture because it was something he did. In the summer, I'd go work in the junkyard with him all day and then we'd go work out. That was probably at the age of 14 through high school. We'd work all day, work out in the afternoon and run hills. Tuesdays and Thursdays we'd drive to Columbus and go play rugby with the 7s team. He was still playing and the 7s was something we all did to run around and still play and stay in shape."

Nate's power, speed and fearlessness made him a perfect fit for rugby. His early introduction to the game put his development far past players who were years older.

At 16, Nate was playing on US Rugby's U19 team in the World Championships in Dubai. When he was 17, he played for the U.S. Men's National team in Rugby 7s.

Jeff coached Nate's rugby team at Hilliard Davidson High School, just outside Columbus.

"We were as close as I could imagine a father-son relationship being," Nate explains. "We did everything together, rugby, working out, skiing -- we went out West about three different times -- [and] I'd be with him in the junkyard all summer. I didn't even really have friends in Springfield because I was working so much with him that if we weren't working, we'd be lifting weights. When I got into college (Ohio State), he'd be coming up to Columbus, making the 40-minute drive and he got a membership at a gym called the ACC and we'd get after it there. We did everything together. Especially as I got older, it wasn't like as much parent-child as it was friendship because we enjoyed each other so much. We were very close. From the beginning.

"Even living with my mom, I would still see my dad two or three times a week, let alone the weekends when he had me. That shows the effort he put in to see me. I lived in Cincinnati for a stint of time. From Springfield, that's a good ride. I couldn't tell you how many times he came from Springfield after work to have dinner with me and then he'd turn around and drive back. How many fathers are doing that?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Playing club rugby at Ohio State wasn't getting it done for Nate anymore. It was the fall of 2008 and he was a sophomore. Nate wanted to walk-on to the football team the next year. He told Jeff his plan.

"He said that, 'If your end goal is to make it to the NFL, you should do it. If you're just doing it because you don't want to play rugby at a club at Ohio State, maybe you should find another outlet.' But I wanted to play in the NFL. We decided that together the last time I saw him for dinner. Next thing I know, he's dead and I gotta move on.

"I'm sitting there after having that conversation," he recalls. "I really wanted to just . . . make it. I put so much into it -- that was a good distraction for me -- but at the same time it was something we talked about and a motivation for me that I wasn't gonna fail at it. After he passed I wanted to make sure I carried it out."

The months immediately after Jeff's murder were bleak for his son. Nate withdrew from school for a period. He isolated himself, grew quiet.

How did he resurface?

"My mom played a big part in that," he explains. "For a good two months, I was not in a good place. He was my best friend and father figure and I just wondered where I was gonna go from there. That was the person I always confided in when I needed something. Every aspect of my life was changed.

"I remember sitting there in the house with my hood up and my mom came up and said, 'You're not gonna walk around with your hood up acting like a zombie anymore.' She was a big part of me getting back on it. She knew I

wanted to play football, so she made sure I could afford to pay for the training to get that done, to train and get prepared. She pushed me in that regard and didn't let me sit around and feel sorry for myself. She painted the picture of, 'Your dad wouldn't want you to be like this.' "

The following spring, Ebner -- back at Ohio State -- went out for football. With his black beard, a mane of hair, piercing eyes and no interest in conversation, he ended up with the nickname "Leonidas", a nod to the Spartan warrior whose story was told in the 2006 movie, 300.

He played like a warrior.

"Football was good for me," he admits. "I would have done some . . . (the emotions) gotta come out somehow, and there was only so much rugby I could have played at the time.

"I wonder, looking back, what people at Ohio State thought because I would just come in, do my work and leave without saying a word. Try to just beat everybody's ass and go home. Let what I do speak for itself. I didn't know about football. I didn't know those guys. I didn't come in with anyone. I came to the team as a junior. I didn't know these dudes, so I was trying to make a way for myself. And my dad had passed a couple months before I walked onto the team. I NEEDED football then."

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If there is bitterness toward Willie Anderson -- who admitted his guilt at a 2010 trial and was sentenced to 15 years in prison -- Nate Ebner never mentions it. Nor is there obvious melancholy that Jeff Ebner hasn't seen what Nate's become.

"I definitely think about him a lot and I don't try to run away from it," he explains. "I tell a lot of people how lucky I was. There's a lot of people that lose parents. Two of my best friends growing up -- one lost his dad at 13 years old because his dad had a heart attack. What time is more important to a boy than 13 to 17 years old? You need a father in your life. A man figure. And that affected his life. Drastically. I think how lucky I am. I had my dad, not only until I was 19, but the relationship I had with him was unmatched. You see dads who don't want to be a part of a kid's life or don't put the effort in or are consumed with other things.

"You don't know at a young age, but the older I get and the more I see people, the more I respect him for the way he raised me," Ebner continues. "The effort he put in. He used to say, the way kids spell love is T-I-M-E. When I would play football when I was 6 or 8 years old, they called him 'Mr. On-Time.' They knew he was coming from 90 minutes away and he was never late. Never late for anything I was involved in. That says a lot about who he was and the importance he placed on family. When I have children, I want to uphold that level of commitment because I think it makes a difference in the character they have. I look at myself, and the way I am had a lot to do with my parenting."

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It's closing in on 5:30 p.m. now. The bustle around us of stadium workers buttoning things down for the night and locker-room attendants rushing to clean up before they leave makes me feel like I've overstayed. And I don't want to be invasive, but I want to ask about this seeming peace Ebner's reached.

"It made me stronger in being by myself. If that makes any sense," he said. "A lot of people are uncomfortable with either themselves or they feel they have to lean on someone else in their life. His passing for some reason made me feel like: I had him with me but now, I'm strong enough by myself. No matter where I go in this world, I'm gonna be able to handle it. I don't need anybody else. I don't need to lean on anybody else -- and it's okay to lean on other people, I don't mean to say that -- but I'm saying I never will feel self-conscious about who I am or dependent on someone else for my existence or success or happiness. If that makes any sense whatsoever.

"I used to wonder before he died what I would do if he wasn't there," he says. "But, again, it goes back to how he raised me. Obviously I was strong enough when he was gone to pick myself up and move forward and try to make the most of my life. My mom had a lot to do with it -- I don't want to minimize that at all -- but he had a lot to do with me being strong mentally and knowing that, whatever happens, it will work itself out. Some way. Or another."

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## Rugby star-turned-NFL safety Nate Ebner has made rapid improvement

BY BRIAN MACPHERSON

Published: September 19, 2014

FOXBORO — Three seasons into his NFL career, Nate Ebner clearly has grown a little bit weary of the rugby storyline, the way his relative lack of football experience before the Patriots drafted him makes him something of a rags-to-riches tale.

“That was quite some time ago,” Ebner said this week. “I’m not really worried about all that.”

But that lack of experience when he entered the NFL provides critical context for the contributions he has made during his career since then — and that hasn’t escaped the notice of Bill Belichick, now in his 40th year of coaching in the NFL. Belichick has coached plenty of better football players than Ebner, but the rate at which Ebner has improved ranks “maybe in the top five percent all-time of players that I’ve coached,” the Patriots’ coach said this week. Ebner did not play football in high school at all. He instead was one of the best players on the U.S. junior national rugby teams, even competing in the World Junior Championships in Wales in 2008. Even after he walked on at Ohio State, he essentially played rugby in pads; he was asked to play almost exclusively on special teams, kick coverage being football’s closest approximation to the skills required in rugby.

“Tackling, of course, it’s something you do in both sports, but that’s even different as well,” he said.

Ebner played just three defensive snaps in his junior year at Ohio State, in 2011. Everything else he did came on special teams. When the Patriots drafted him in the sixth round in 2012, they viewed him almost as a kick-coverage specialist. But the improvement Ebner has shown in two-plus years since — he has “far exceeded our expectations defensively,” Belichick said — has earned him more playing time on defense in the NFL than he saw in college.

“I just attribute it to working hard on a day-to-day basis, taking it day to day,” Ebner said. “Whatever the team needs of me, that’s what I’ll do to the best of my abilities.”

After playing just one snap on defense in the Patriots’ regular-season opener against Miami, Ebner played 14 snaps in a dime package on defense last Sunday against Minnesota. Most of those snaps came in the second half.

It’s not anything close to regular playing time on defense. Six New England defensive backs saw more defensive snaps than Ebner did, and most of the snaps Ebner did see came when the outcome of the game no longer was in doubt. But it’s a big step forward from last year, when he played a grand total of five defensive snaps. And Ebner might have earned more snaps than he has played, his time on the field limited only by the quality of the players in front of him — players who have played far more games either at the college or NFL level than Ebner has.

(Logan Ryan might be a year behind Ebner when it comes to NFL experience, for example, but he played enough at Rutgers to amass 170 tackles — more than five times as many as Ebner had in his special-teams role at Ohio State.)

“We have, I think, a number of good players at that position,” Belichick said. “There’s a lot of competition there, and there’s not an unlimited number of opportunities for all those guys.”

If Ebner keeps improving at the same rapid rate, however, more opportunities might await him. He even saw some time last Sunday closer to the line of scrimmage than he has played in the past — something of a linebacker-strong safety hybrid position.

“I’m prepared to do whatever they ask me to do, honestly,” he said. “If it’s to play deep in the middle of the field or come down on the line of scrimmage, whatever the team needs me to do, that’s what I’m going to try to do, and I’m going to try to do it to the best of my ability. I don’t think anything specific about it. Whatever I’m asked to do, I’m going to try to do the best I can.”

And that means leaving his rugby past behind in order to focus exclusively on what it will take to contribute to wins with the Patriots this season — even if it in part made him the player he is today.

“I wouldn’t have changed it for the world,” he said. “Everything that has happened to me has happened for a reason, and I attribute a lot of that to my past playing rugby, but now it’s football time.”

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## WR Julian Edelman

# The Boston Globe

### **Julian Edelman has gone from unheralded to invaluable for Patriots**

**When Julian Edelman takes flight, he moves the chains, and sometimes a pylon, for the Patriots.**

By Michael Whitmer GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 05, 2015

It was a short drive, not even 10 minutes, but long enough — and taken often enough — that Julian Edelman and Fred Taylor strengthened a connection during training camp in 2009.

Edelman was a Patriots rookie trying to make the conversion from college quarterback to NFL wide receiver. Taylor sought a new start in New England that year, too, after rushing for more than 11,000 yards in 11 seasons with the Jacksonville Jaguars.

The veteran liked the potential he saw in the rookie, and really admired the kid’s work ethic. So Taylor began offering Edelman a ride, in Taylor’s car, to or from the team’s training camp hotel, and to or from practice at Gillette Stadium.

During those car rides, questions would be asked, frustrations expressed. The answers were reassuring, motivational.

More than six years later, Edelman still remembers Taylor’s advice, the best he says he’s been given during his time with the Patriots.

“I was having a hard time, just on an emotional roller coaster, and Fred goes, ‘You know, it’s going to be like a roller coaster, there’s going to be ups and downs. Just try to keep things as level as possible, and it’ll all work itself out.’ That’s something I’ve really taken home and learned from,” Edelman said last week. “There’s going to be really high highs, and really low lows. It’s about keeping everything even-keel.”

Taylor, reached by phone, couldn’t confidently vouch for the authenticity of Edelman’s recollection — “I tease my wife when I say, ‘Well, babe, my memory isn’t that great because I’ve only been tackled a couple thousand times’” — but said his message as mentor was consistent.

“I would talk to Julian when he would get frustrated. Julian was one of those guys who was real curious as a rookie, had a lot of questions. A lot of veteran guys will take that as, ‘Look, man, I’m not here to babysit. You figure it out.’ But I saw a kid who wanted to know. I saw his desire, I saw him work his butt off,” Taylor said. “He made typical rookie mistakes, but he didn’t let that slow him down.”

Slow down? Edelman rarely does that. He’s on the go the second the Patriots emerge from that inflatable helmet before kickoff at Gillette Stadium. Tom Brady always leads the team out, but he’s quickly overtaken by Edelman, who sprints the length of the field, into the end zone, and jumps as high as he can, right arm raised, in an effort to whip the crowd into a frenzy.

It works every time.

Then the game begins, and Edelman transforms himself from emotional cheerleader into serious, sure-handed receiver, catching pass after pass and giving repeated reminders that, although the Patriots rely heavily on Brady and tight end Rob Gronkowski to move the ball and score, perhaps nobody is as valuable to the offense as the 5-foot-10-inch, 200-pound Californian who grew up wanting to be Doug Flutie.

It’s early — the Patriots are 3-0 and had the weekend off because of their bye — but Edelman is off to the best start of his NFL career. Through three games, Edelman has 30 receptions, nearly double the Patriots’ second-leading

receiver (Gronkowski has 16). He's on pace for 160 catches on the season, which would shatter his previous best (105, set in 2013), soar past the season club record (Wes Welker had 123 in 2009), and also break the NFL record (Marvin Harrison had 143 for the Colts in 2002).

By catching 11 passes against the Steelers, 11 more against the Bills, and 8 against the Jaguars, Edelman has put together the most productive three-game in-season stretch he's ever had as a Patriot. The 30 catches are the most by any Patriot over three games since Welker had 32 in 2012 (Weeks 4-6), and the most over the season's first three games since Welker caught 31 in 2011.

Edelman rarely talks about himself, a humble trait that Taylor immediately noticed six years ago. Predictably, attempts to get the receiver to discuss his start to the season and how valuable he's become to the Patriots offense are politely, but effectively, dodged.

"I don't know. There's been a lot of production from a lot of other guys, as well," Edelman said when asked what has worked for him these first three games. "It can change, according to scheme from the other teams. It's just . . . my number has been called a couple times and we've been fortunate to execute during that time. I guess it's a coincidence."

Coincidence? The statistics might disagree. Counting the playoffs, Edelman has caught at least seven passes in 10 consecutive games. The streak started with 11 receptions against the Lions on Nov. 23, 2014, and continued through the playoffs (8 catches against Baltimore, 9 in the AFC Championship Game, then 9 in Super Bowl XLIX, including the winning touchdown).

Had Edelman not been inactive for the final two regular-season games last season, he likely would have finished with more than his personal-best 105 catches; instead he had 92, for 972 yards and 4 touchdowns.

Edelman has caught two touchdown passes this season and is averaging 9.3 yards per catch, slightly less than the 10.3-yard average over his first six seasons.

His yards-per-catch might be down, but Edelman's value to the offense might be reaching an all-time high.

"He's a great player and he plays really hard at all times. That's valuable to any offense, at all positions. He gets open, catches the ball, competes in the run game. He's been here a long time and has been doing it at a high level," said fellow receiver Danny Amendola (8 catches, 92 yards, 1 touchdown). "Whether it's taking double coverage, or blocking — which is all effort — those are things you don't really see on the paper in the stat column, but it's something that brings value to your spot and value to the team."

What makes Edelman so valuable to an offense that is averaging 446 yards and nearly 40 points?

"You'll have to ask Coach [Bill Belichick] that," Edelman said. "I'm valuable as long as I can go out and practice hard each day, try to improve, and help the whole unit get better."

OK, let's try that again. What makes Edelman so valuable to an offense that is averaging 446 yards and nearly 40 points?

"If you go back the past eight years and look at the type of offense the Patriots have run, they need that guy to make the offense go. All they want to do is keep the chains moving," Taylor said. "No matter where Gronk is at, you can't guard him, and then when you add Julian to that mix, he's going to hit you short, and has the ability to hit you deep. But they don't ask him to go deep, because he's an intermediate nightmare. He's a pick route/rub type of receiver who will catch it short, shake you, run it and get 15, 20 yards off a short catch."

This isn't a role that Edelman created. The small, shifty slot receiver who catches screens and runs short possession routes has been part of the Patriots offense for years, and helped make stars out of Troy Brown and Welker. They, like Edelman, also added value to the Patriots in the return game.

Now it's Edelman's turn, and he's followed the blueprint masterfully. Like Brown and especially Welker, Edelman plays with an edge, a smaller man playing a rough, physical game, and putting up eye-popping numbers.

"He's confident. I wouldn't say he's cocky. It's hard to separate the two. You've got to have that cocky sort of swagger in order to compete. You don't want anyone to see you walking around with your head down or not talking a little trash," Taylor said. "He's feisty. He's fiery. You've got to be that tough [expletive] on the field."



"You see what he does on Sundays," said former Ohio defensive end Jameson Hartke, "but imagine him having the ball every single snap from the shotgun and not knowing what he's going to do. It was insane. We had to put in new defenses, new plays, quarterback-contain plays that we didn't do with any other team."

Edelman threw for 1,800 yards and rushed for over 1,300 more as a senior at Kent State in 2008. Since then, six Division I quarterbacks have enjoyed 1,800/1,300 seasons. Four of them — Cam Newton, Johnny Manziel, Jordan Lynch and Denard Robinson — finished in the top six of the Heisman voting. You won't find Edelman's name on the Heisman ballot, but a former MAC coach swears you'd find it somewhere else.

"If there was a statistic for the most created missed tackles in the history of the NCAA, he'd be pretty high up on that list," said ex-Miami (Ohio) defensive coordinator Jay Hood.

So what memories linger from those MAC matchups with Julian Edelman, the Kent State quarterback?

"He brought them back single-handedly," Haneline said.

"He single-handedly beat us," said former University of Buffalo linebacker Raphael Akobundu.

"I can remember sometime maybe in the second quarter, our head coach, Shane Montgomery, gets on the headset and says 'Jeez, can anybody tackle this guy?'" Hood said.

The answer to Montgomery's question was usually no, unless there were multiple anybodies on the play. Even then, there were no guarantees.

What they all recall from Edelman's quarterbacking days reads like the stuff of legend now: so outrageous it makes you wonder if the stories have been exaggerated as the years have passed.

In 2006, Edelman's first year as Kent's quarterback, lightning delayed a game versus Ohio. There was rain and sleet. Cold as hell, Hartke said.

"Imagine trying to tackle Julian when you can't feel your hands," he said.

Now imagine four defenders pouncing on Edelman in the backfield, the other seven assuming the play was done, and the shortest guy on the field ducking out of the quadruple-tackle for a 60-yard gain straight up the middle. That's what Hartke remembers.

Hartke had 7.5 sacks that season. Two of them were on Edelman, but he told reporters afterward that he could've had five if he'd been chasing any other quarterback.

For three years, Hartke worried about one play: "They had this playaction where they'd have two guys in the backfield, and (Edelman) could either hand it to the back or rollout and improvise. It was almost like a naked boot, which is petrifying for a defensive end."

Hartke has a theory that, on designed passing plays, Edelman would hold the ball purposely, inviting defenders to lunge at him. Because they'd miss, obviously, and Edelman would race downfield. Everybody agrees: He was an underrated passer, but nobody could get a clean shot on him as a runner.

And they all have their stories. Former Akron linebacker Mike Thomas recalls a 4th-and-long on which Edelman broke loose for 34 yards, setting up an overtime-forcing field goal. Edelman's teammate and friend, Brian Lainhart, remembers the play as 4th-and-30. The old box scores say it was 4th-and-9. As the years pass, the legend grows.

Hood recalls the final play against Edelman in 2007, his Miami defense clinging to a 20-13 lead.

"(Edelman) dropped back, there was nobody open and he took off, and it was just like 'Oh my God, somebody please tackle him!'" Hood said. "Then he's on the 20, then the 10, and we knocked him out at like the 2-yard-line, and it's just a sigh of relief. Your heart is racing."

Ask Haneline, who from his Will linebacker position at Bowling Green had the unenviable role of spying Edelman: "You chase him all the way to the right hash, and then he'd run all the way to the left numbers. I've dropped 50 pounds since playing from doing cardio and I still can't get myself as tired as I was that night."

"If there was a stat for the most created missed tackles in the history of the NCAA, he'd be pretty high on that list" -- Ex-Miami (Ohio) DC Jay Hood  
On one play, Haneline abandoned his coverage to blitz. Screw it, he thought. Edelman had just ripped off a 30-yard run on the previous play. He wasn't about to let that happen again.

So Edelman saw the blitz and dropped a pass over the top. Whoops.

"He had a great knack for being able to throw the ball right before (he crossed) the line of scrimmage," said former Buffalo coach Turner Gill.

Edelman's college career ended against Buffalo, the 2008 MAC champion. Holding a 24-21 lead late, Kent State needed 11 yards on a third down to seal the deal and run out the clock. Edelman, shedding tackles and diving forward, got 12.

"We played LeSean McCoy, Donald Brown, Jeremy Maclin, RG3," said ex-Buffalo linebacker Raphael Akobundu. "As far as talent, (Edelman) ranked somewhere in the middle, but as far as heart, I would say he had the biggest heart. You could just tell from the way he played; he just wanted to win the game so badly."

"No one gave us a problem like he did," Akobundu continued. "He beat us alone."

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None of those guys really knew Julian Edelman. They just knew how maddening it was to play against him.

Yet they also knew, from the one or two or three times they'd faced Edelman while he was at Kent State, that he was great for reasons beyond physical skill.

"He was a mean dude," said Haneline, who later trained with Edelman prior to the NFL Draft. "Intense as all you can be. I feel like at times he thinks he's 6-5, 250 pounds."

The stories from the inside, equally legendary, confirm that: Kent State had a punt blocked in the 2008 season opener against Iowa State, and according to former Golden Flashes defensive back Brian Lainhart, Edelman decided to become the personal punt protector from that point forward. It stayed that way for the rest of the season. Edelman also returned six punts that year, and even punted four times (for a respectable average of 39.3 yards a try).

And he once beat up a Kent State receiver during practice because the receiver "half-assed a route," Lainhart remembers. He told Lainhart "we need to do more" after the Golden Flashes lost to Akron despite Edelman's 270 yards, 34 of which were on that fourth-down scamper, and Lainhart's three interceptions. And when he arrived on campus in 2006, as legend has it, Edelman told Kent State's incumbent quarterback, who was messing around punting the ball, "you better get used to that because that's all you'll be doing." Then he took the guy's job.

In 2007, before No. 3 Ohio State faced Kent State, two Buckeyes, ex-high school teammates of Lainhart's, told their friend that coaches were concerned about containing Edelman.

"You better be," Lainhart told them, "because he don't give a s--- if you play for Ohio State or not."

The gamplan against Edelman varied. Ohio blitzed the hell out of him, figuring the first guy would automatically miss, but the second would stand a chance. Same thing at Miami of Ohio, where Hood told his players, "You just have to run to him and take your shot and at least misdirect him to the next guy."

Buffalo opted to defend him without a spy. At Bowling Green, the responsibility fell on Haneline, a film junkie who typically stayed in the coaches' office until 11 p.m., studying the upcoming opponent. Not during Edelman week, though.

During Edelman week, Haneline got his sleep. He even got a massage. He knew it would be more about endurance and physical condition than game-planning. He knew it the Sunday before Halloween, when the Falcons had put the Northern Illinois game behind them, and when he and his teammates popped in the film of Kent State: "We all just said, 'Oh God...here we go again.'"



## Competition fuels Edelman's fire

**Undersized, underappreciated WR's success no surprise to those who know him**

By Jackie MacMullan

January 9, 2014

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- The receiver was running at half speed.

The quarterback, Julian Edelman, simply could not stomach that.

Edelman had warned his Kent State teammate before. Run precise routes. Don't go through the motions. Do your job, even though the team had nothing left to play for but pride.

"But the kid just wasn't listening," said former Kent State coach Doug Martin.

The receiver was tired of Edelman riding him. He tuned out the diminutive QB, the know-it-all perfectionist who challenged coaches, baited teammates, kept pushing, pushing, pushing everyone to the brink.

"A lot of the guys didn't like him," admitted former Kent State safety Brian Lainhart.

They didn't understand how tirelessly Edelman worked for this opportunity, how many programs looked right through him like he wasn't there, even after dominating in high school, junior college and Kent State.

He was too small, barely 5-feet-2 through his first two years of high school. He had the ability, the drive, but he was manhandled by boys who had already reached puberty. His father Frank assured him, "The Edelmanns are late bloomers. Wait 'til you are their size. It won't be fair."

His father drilled him every day, seven days a week, season to season, football to basketball to baseball, before practice, after practice, on weekends. It was agility drills, conditioning drills, then 200 spirals or 200 jump shots or 200 ground balls.

"No more!" his mother Angie protested. "We're on vacation!"

But the father couldn't stop. He invented conflicts, challenged Julian mentally, reducing his son to tears. "I'm 12 years old and he's in my head," Edelman said. "I'm over there crying and he says, 'You have to master this part of it,' and finally I'd get so ticked off I'd battle him back.

"Keep on competing. That's all I knew."

The Kent State receiver was messing with the wrong undersized, underappreciated football player. So when Edelman launched a pass and the kid didn't make the extra effort to haul it in, the option quarterback sprinted downfield, pinned the receiver to the ground and pummeled him with a flurry of fists.

"It was a brawl," Martin said. "But that was Julian, the most fiercely competitive kid I've ever had."

Five years later, Edelman (now listed a 5-10, 198 pounds), is no longer a quarterback. He's a receiver, a punt returner, and, two seasons ago, when New England's secondary was depleted with injuries, a makeshift defensive back. Edelman will line up against the Indianapolis Colts on Saturday night as the most dangerous receiver in Tom Brady's arsenal, a player with over 100 catches and 1,000 yards, who couldn't convince a single NFL team to surpass the incentive-laden \$716,000 the Patriots are paying him this season.

"I may have overreacted with that receiver at Kent State," Edelman said, "but I like to do things the right way. I was a fiery guy. I still am."

In preseason, when players are vying for roster spots on the Patriots, skirmishes are frequent, heated, particularly among the receivers and the secondary.

"It's Edelman," said Devin McCourty. "If you are looking for someone in the middle of it, it's almost always him. There's no love lost between the DBs and Julian in training camp."

"It's an everyday occurrence with him," confirmed corner Kyle Arrington. "He's an extreme competitor. He came out with that chip on his shoulder, a small guy from a small school. The chip's still there."

Tight end Michael Hoomanawanui marvels at how Edelman bounces to his feet after crushing hits, still talking, still taking everyone on.

"It's every day," Hoomanawanui said. "It doesn't matter if it's big or small, Julian has something to say about it. It will be 'Why did you run that way?' or 'How come I didn't get the ball on that play?'"

"The fire is always burning with him. Little man's syndrome, I guess."

Frank Edelman lost his father when he was 3 years old. He was small but naturally gifted, and when his mom frequented the local taverns, he tagged along with his baseball mitt and a tennis ball. He played baseball in the back, designating a brick as his home run target. Sometimes he'd borrow his mother's hair spray cap and kick imaginary field goals.

When Frank was a freshman cornerback in high school, he got beat on a deep route.

He quit. He had no father to encourage him to go back and try again.

Regret can be a powerful, lingering, aching sentiment. Frank Edelman's dreams ended when he went to work at an automotive shop to support his mother. He became consumed with making sure his sons fulfilled their potential.

"I was very athletic without any coaching at all," Frank explained. "I figured if my kids had a little help, maybe it would get them over the hump."

So he put Julian in a pair of glasses with one eye plugged up with tape and threw him a football. He forced him to dribble left handed while his right hand was tied behind him. He threw him fastballs, right near his head.

Parents drove by and yelled out the window, "Frank! Why are you throwing bee bees at your 10-year old son?"

"It was so bad," Frank lamented. "I was so possessed. We'd drive around and find a local baseball field and I'd hit him grounders, just enough not to ruin his arm. It was wrong."

And, yet, the results were striking. Julian led his team to a 12-and-under national championship in Pop Warner. In basketball, he was to go to guy for the last shot. He was a vacuum at shortstop, a .500 hitter.

He was the best athlete in his class -- until all those kids he ran circles around started growing. Edelman entered Woodside (Calif.) High at 4-foot-11, 70 pounds. Suddenly everyone was taller, bigger, stronger.

For years Edelman had been chiding Sam Alipape, a talented but marginally motivated football teammate. Suddenly Alipape had 75 pounds on Edelman, so when Julian barked, "Move your lazy butt!" Alipape grabbed him and slammed his head into the locker.

"It was a rough three years," Frank said. "These kids he had been dominating wanted some pay back."

Julian Edelman finally grew his own 6 inches between junior and senior year. He led Woodside to a 13-0 mark with 2,237 yards and 29 touchdowns passing, and 964 yards and 13 touchdowns rushing.

He waited for the scholarship offers, but no one came calling, so he visited the College of San Mateo with his parents. Coach Bret Pollack proudly gestured to the photos of the All-Americans on the wall behind his desk. Edelman studied them, then asked Pollack, "Coach, where are you going to put my picture?"

Pollack was a physical education teacher and a fine badminton player. Edelman had never taken a swipe at a shuttlecock in his life, but declared, "I can beat you."

The first game was 15-1. The next one was 15-2. Twenty games later, Edelman was only losing by a 15-9 margin, but his coach finally shut him down. "Kid," he said, "I've got to go home." Edelman desperately persisted. He couldn't handle "no."

"He gets a little fiery, but you can't take it personally," Pollack said. "He just wants to get something done."

Pollack charted out each football practice, assigning points for a poor throw or a crisp route or a successful scramble. Edelman was the only player who kept track during workouts.

"I'd grade him on a slant route and he'd say, 'That was the receiver's fault. I should have 2 points here,'" Pollack said. "My other coaches said, 'Aren't you bothered he's questioning you all the time?' I said, 'Hell no. He's paying attention.'" Edelman stayed at San Mateo only one semester, just long enough to throw for 1,312 yards and rush for a school-record 1,253 yards. Martin, scouring talent in the Bay area, liked the kid's spunk and offered him a spot on his team.

Martin already had a quarterback, a 6-foot-6 transfer from Baylor. Edelman had never met him, so when he showed up for 7 on 7 drills in the summer he strode toward him.

"What are you doing?" Edelman asked.

"Practicing my quick kicks," the QB answered.

"Keep on practicing those, because pretty soon that's all you'll be doing," Edelman said. "I'm taking your job."

He did, throwing for 4,997 yards and 30 TDs and rushing for 2,483 yards in three seasons at Kent State.

"He changed the culture of our whole program," Martin said. "He wasn't going to stop until he proved everyone wrong."

Edelman roomed with Brian Lainhart, a safety with pro aspirations who shared his competitive nature. They became best friends, even though they were on opposite sides of the ball. Because he was the quarterback, Edelman wore the "no contact" red jersey in practice.

"So one day I pick off one of his passes," Lainhart said. "I'm jogging into the end zone. He's got the red jersey on, but he comes at me full throttle and sends me sprawling. He hits me so hard I do a flip. "This is my best friend, my roommate, a groomsman in my wedding, and he's taking me out at the knees."

"We went at it. I'm screaming, 'You're wearing the red jersey, Julian!' and he comes back with, 'You should have known I wasn't going to let you score!'"

Edelman and Lainhart competed in darts, Xbox, games of H-O-R-S-E in the backyard. When Edelman lost, he kicked the ball into the woods.

"He's like a 12-year old," Lainhart said, 'but it's his best trait. Julian's still playing like a little undersized kid that nobody thought would make it."

In Edelman's senior season, Kent State was milking a lead over Buffalo in the final seconds. It was third and 14 and a first down for Kent State would clinch it. "Julian has the ball and he's in trouble, but he runs over two guys, makes another one miss, and dives for the first down," said Martin. "That personified his career."

Lainhart's lasting memory was against Akron when Kent State was down 7 and facing a 4th and 31 with under a minute left. Edelman retreated, cut, ducked, avoided a slew of would-be tacklers and scrambled for 64 yards. Then he threw a TD to tie the game.

Kent State lost in overtime. A disheartened Lainhart, who picked off 3 passes, asked rhetorically, "What else could we have done?" Edelman growled, "[Expletive]! We've got to do more." Edelman knew he had no future as an NFL quarterback. Martin allowed him to return punts on a day scouts were in the stands so they could be exposed to his versatility. "Truth was, we muffed a few punts in previous games," Edelman said. "If things weren't going right, I'd go up to the coaches and say, 'Let me do it.' Coach Martin was the kind of guy who would actually let me." With the 232rd pick in the seventh round of the 2009 draft, the Patriots selected Julian Edelman, Kent State, quarterback, personal punt protector and resident agitator. When Bill Belichick called, he said, "I don't know what we'll do with you, but we'll find something."

Edelman's early attempts at punt returning were a series of misadventures. He was booed by the discerning New England fans and retreated to the film room, asked for extra reps after practice. Four years later, he's now one of the premier returners in the game.

The task of transitioning from quarterback to receiver was painstaking, at times demoralizing, and required the one thing Edelman did not possess: patience.

"People can criticize all they want, but he had never played receiver in his whole life," Frank Edelman said. "Now he's battling how to get out of press coverages. I'm so proud of him."

Last season, Edelman was being groomed as a replacement for Wes Welker, his good friend and mentor, who was approaching free agency. But Edelman broke his foot and his narrative -- the little tough guy who can't stay healthy -- dogged him.

New England later signed injury-prone receiver Danny Amendola to a multi-year contract worth millions. Edelman received a tiny nibble from the Giants but returned to New England for short dollars.

"It was frustrating for Julian," Lainhart said. "It was frustrating for him going into camp. He had to rehab.

"Everyone else was in minicamp, OTAs, and all he could do was ride the bike."

Amendola was billed as the able replacement for Welker, but that was wrong. The overlooked kid from Kent State and San Mateo and Woodside and Frank Edelman's back yard is the one who stepped up.

"One thing I've learned from everyone around here is be prepared for your opportunity," Edelman said. "Whether it's taking actual reps, or mental reps, or watching extra film, make sure you're ready.

"Sometimes it's gone my way and sometimes it hasn't. But I don't want to go back one day and say, 'I wish I had done this' or 'I wish I had done that.'"

Frank Edelman says he wishes he wasn't so hard on his son. He frets he did the wrong thing. Julian Edelman won't hear of that.

"I wouldn't be here now without my father and the love of my mother," Edelman said. "It was a great balance. They are my foundation."

He will not be overlooked this time in free agency. He and Brady are kindred spirits, establishing a solid connection from offseasons of "gentlemen's bets," tallying points for bad throws or missed catches. Edelman's leap in production from last season is stunning: from 21 catches to 105, from 235 yards to 1,056.

"As a competitor, I'm not shocked by what's happened, but as a New England Patriot, I'm groomed not to think about those accolades right now," Edelman said. "Maybe when the season is over you can take a look at what you did, but it's only going to get harder, because you have to do it again."

He will not let up. He can't. How else could he have secured his photo above coach Pollack's desk? How else could he have changed positions on the fly, a seventh-round pick with the numbers of a first-round talent?

He still pushes and pushes and pushes, but as Hoomanawanui noted, "He's the first one here and the last to leave. He's a great example for everyone."

The defensive backs who want to punch him in training camp now feed off his urgency, his fire. Edelman is a marked man in these playoffs, and he knows it.

Practice has been edgy this week in preparation for the Colts. There's chance a punch or two has been thrown, though Arrington would only smile knowingly when asked for confirmation.

"That's Edelman," Arrington said. "Man, I love that guy."



## Julian Edelman enjoys his moment

Kevin Van Valkenburg, Senior Writer, ESPN.com and ESPN The Magazine

JULIAN EDELMAN IS hesitant, at first, to break out his Bill Belichick impression. He is well aware that even a playful needling of his head coach, the closest thing the NFL has to a Tywin Lannister, carries a certain amount of risk. But he cannot resist.

He's sitting in the back of his favorite Los Angeles sushi restaurant, Sushiya on Sunset Boulevard, chomping on a second plate of edamame and re-creating the moment when Belichick called him to say the Patriots were drafting him in the seventh round of the 2009 NFL draft. Edelman's impression is less an accurate rendering of his boss than it is a vocal marriage of Dick Cheney and Kermit the Frog, but it works because there are hints of genuine affection in it. Edelman commits to the character in full, adding a half sneer and a furrowed brow: "I pick up the phone and he says to me, 'Eeeeeeedelman, I don't know what we're going to do with you, but you're a hell of a football player.'"

The Patriots knew they were taking a flier on Edelman. A quarterback out of Kent State, he'd never played any of the positions -- wide receiver, punt returner, cornerback -- Belichick was contemplating for him. The team certainly had no intention of making him a Brady backup. But that phone call set in motion one of the most unique career arcs in recent NFL history. Edelman spent his first four years toiling on the margins, almost getting cut one year to the next, before exploding for 197 receptions over the past two seasons. He attained full New England folk hero status by catching the go-ahead score in this year's Super Bowl.

After fighting and clawing just to stay in the NFL for most of his career, it's safe to say that Edelman, 28, is enjoying his moment. Over the past three months, he has paraded through Disneyland, presented at the Grammys and become a fixture on the talk show circuit. He partied atop a duck boat during the Pats' Super Bowl parade, beating his chest, taking off his sweater in a mock striptease and punching out a giant picture of Richard Sherman. He popped up on a red carpet looking like Daniel Craig's James Bond and appeared in a blurry video lifting up his shirt for a flock of admiring females at a Harvard keg party. He, of course, screened the *Entourage* movie, in which he has a cameo, with Mark Wahlberg, Justin Bieber and Rob Gronkowski. He might have even passed Gronk as the team's Good Time Charlie when he showed up in a picture, either asleep or passed out in bed, posted by a woman on the dating app Tinder, alongside the caption, "Just f---ed Julian Edelman, no lie!" Gossip sites rejoiced. Edelman laughed it off.

But for Edelman, things aren't as carefree as they seem. After all, it was just three seasons ago, he says, that Belichick called him into his office and told him he was no lock to make the team. The Patriots are notoriously ruthless and unsentimental, and Edelman -- who's spent most of his career playing at the league minimum -- knows it. There are rules, and you break them at your own risk. You don't talk about injuries, especially concussions. (Edelman declined to discuss the apparent blow to his head during the Super Bowl.) And you're allowed to be playful and goofy only while you're at the top of your game.

"As long as you're doing your job on the field, you can have fun," Edelman says. "But if you start slipping, you're going to start hearing s---. Everything is about football with Bill. I love the guy to death. He's the man who gave me the opportunity. But I know the day I start slipping, the day I'm not producing enough and there is somebody cheaper, I'm gone. That's just Coach."

Which is why, despite what his extended post-Super Bowl tour de fiesta might have you believe, Edelman is living the life of a football monk. A mere 40 days into his offseason -- a time when most players are still recovering from the grind of a long year -- he insists on eating nothing but edamame and drinking ice water (with lemon) for lunch while he chats.

"I'm actually on this crazy little diet right now," he says. "I try to pack all my nutrients into a smoothie right when I wake up. I'll go out to restaurants at night sometimes, but I count pretty much every calorie."

If it seems strange that the receiver could live simultaneous lives of excess and asceticism, the explanation is simple: He understood, long ago, that all of this could be gone tomorrow.

PART OF EDELMAN'S calculus this offseason has been trying to figure out how to maximize his time in the spotlight. In the era of Chris Borland, every NFL player is thinking more about his future, and over the past year, Edelman has put in motion a calculated business strategy, literally designed to capitalize on his moment in the spotlight.

Turns out, he knows what he's doing. Two years ago he teamed with a Boston marketing firm called Superdigital to build and grow his Internet stardom. And lately, their efforts have kicked into overdrive. He films comedy sketches to post on YouTube, and although higher-profile stars have more followers, Superdigital claims that fans interact with Edelman on social media at a higher rate than any other NFL player outside of J.J. Watt. Whether or not that's true, it's hard to find a pro athlete who leverages his digital brand more deliberately than the Pats receiver.

"I think Jules has always approached his career with a small-business mentality," says his father, Frank Edelman, a mechanic and the owner of A-1 Auto Tech in Mountain View, California. It's a month after the Patriots' Super Bowl triumph and, dressed in a blue shirt with his name stitched above his heart, Frank is looking up at the pictures of his son plastered across his office walls. "No one wants to hear you complain. They want you to get the part they need, and they want you to fix their car.

"Every day," he adds, "your job is on the line." Frank Edelman's own dad died when Frank was 3 years old. He spent much of his childhood living in a trailer park, playing very few sports. To support himself, he learned to fix cars and became a certified mechanic by 19. After opening his shop in 1987, he would come home each day and drag Julian and his older brother, Jason, to the park. He would hit them ground balls, pitch to them or have them work on throwing a football until it got dark. Even when they hated it. Even when they tried to refuse. "I think my dad still needs shoulder surgery from all the batting practice he threw us," Edelman says. "He wanted to live through us a little."

Sports came naturally to Julian. "A total daredevil and a ball of energy," says his mother, Angie Edelman. "He'd go up the slide, then jump off instead of slide down. His whole life, you had to watch him closely." His Pop Warner team, coached by his father, won the youth football Super Bowl with Edelman playing tailback and linebacker. His father didn't let him lift weights, but every day they worked on agility drills. Pushups. Situps. Changing directions like a squirrel running for its life. Sometimes, when firing another endless string of passes, Edelman would pretend he was Tom Brady, a local kid starting for the Patriots who'd played high school football at Junipero Serra in San Mateo, just 9 miles from Redwood City.

Edelman was a small kid, but that was hardly reason for his dad to go easy on him. Once, during a session of batting practice when he was in eighth grade, Edelman accused his father of throwing inside once too often and warned him not to do it again. Frank, not one to back down or be mouthed off to, fired the next pitch even closer to his son. Edelman charged the mound and leaped into the air in a rage, his fists whirling, but his father was ready. He caught him in midjump and slammed him to the ground. Frank laughs as he tells the story. "Jules jumps up and tries to head-butt me. I kind of pin him down, and he's kicking and screaming, and he cuts the inside of his lip because he'd just gotten braces that day. There was blood all down the front of his jersey. People were looking at us like we were lunatics. By today's rules, they'd probably have put me in prison. It wasn't all peaches and cream."

Going into his junior year at Woodside High School, Edelman was still barely 5 feet tall and less than 100 pounds. "Kids would tease him all the time, and he was getting into fights," Frank says. "He'd come into my room and just cry and say, 'Dad, when am I going to grow?'"

The growth spurt finally happened, and Julian grew 7 inches in less than a year. His senior year of high school, he quarterbacked Woodside to a 13-0 record.

"I thought to myself, 'OK, now it's on,'" Frank says.

IT STILL TOOK years for Edelman's ambitions to take shape. He wasn't recruited out of high school, so he spent a juco year at the College of San Mateo, then transferred to Kent State. He won the starting quarterback job right away, but it didn't exactly prepare him for a future in the NFL. Despite setting a school record for total offense, he wasn't even invited to the 2009 combine. He wondered if, after graduation, he could find work as a firefighter. "I started checking out firehouses in Cincinnati," Edelman says. "I didn't know what I was going to do. I was starting to get scared."

It was in preparing for the NFL draft that he first decided to train as if his football survival depended on it. Every day he'd wake up at 5 a.m., climb into his truck and drive 50 minutes in the freezing cold to Cleveland, just so he could run routes and catch passes from former Browns quarterback Charlie Frye. The truck's heater didn't work, so most of the time he'd wrap himself in blankets for the drive. When he came home, he'd catch passes from a Jugs machine for an hour, trying to suppress any feeling that it might all be for naught. "I did that every day for three months," Edelman

says. "I really grew up. I started to get addicted to the Jerry Rice mentality. I can get up before anyone else does. I can outwork anyone." At Kent State's lightly attended pro day, his time in the shuttle drill was faster than that of anyone else who'd attended the combine that year. The Patriots decided he was worth the late-round gamble.

"The day I'm not producing enough and there is somebody cheaper, I'm gone."

Patriots wide receiver Julian Edelman

He was a mess during his first training camp. During a break for Wes Welker, Edelman was thrown in with the starters, and he dropped his first pass. At another practice, he lined up on the wrong side of the formation, and Belichick snarled at him, asking if he'd even bothered to study his playbook. "I thought I was studying so hard," Edelman says. "I had flash cards I'd go over constantly, but it was like going from junior high to getting your Ph.D. in terms of complexity." He'd often stay late at the facility, sometimes just staring at his helmet, trying to soak it all up in case he got cut the next day.

He was convinced that his chances of making the team were so thin, he kept from the medical staff that his groin was in agony. He believed the team would simply give him an injury settlement and release him. "I was an idiot, but you feel like you don't have a choice," Edelman says. It wasn't until the year was over -- 37 catches for 359 yards in 11 games -- that he found out he'd just played through multiple sports hernias. "Julian is a tough kid," Belichick told reporters recently. "We knew that right from the beginning."

NOT SURPRISINGLY, EDELMAN spent his first few years with the team in quiet awe of Brady, hoping the quarterback might invite him to work out during the offseason when they were both back in their native California. They shared an agent and grew up near each other, so it seemed like a possibility. The first offseason, Brady called just one time.

As the years went on, the calls became a bit more frequent, even as Edelman's playing time diminished. In 2010, his second year, Edelman caught just seven balls. In 2011, the year the Patriots went 13-3 and played in the Super Bowl, he had only four catches and moonlighted as a corner to help hold on to his roster spot. Yet Edelman obsessed over what routes Brady liked best -- the nuances, like where he preferred to place the ball on certain throws and the way he could convey his intentions with a presnap nod. One year, Brady called to throw while Edelman was at a family barbecue. "I ran so hard, I puked," Edelman says. "He ran me to death." But it paid off: A friendship began to emerge. "He's like a big brother," Edelman says. "He taught me everything about how to be a professional. We'd throw three times a week, then we'd go have lunch at his house, and at first it was surreal for me. Just me and Tommy, hanging out. Is this for real? But then it became just normal. I stopped being scared of him."

Edelman was still a journeyman type in the eyes of everyone else, though, including his head coach. In 2013, when Welker signed with the Broncos, Belichick brought in Danny Amendola from the Rams as his replacement. Edelman trusted, however, that the countless hours he'd invested with Brady would be his secret weapon. When Amendola had trouble staying healthy, Brady started firing darts Edelman's way. By the end of the year, he'd caught more passes (105) than he had his entire career. As a free agent following the season, he might have gotten more money elsewhere, but he re-signed with the Pats because he wanted to keep playing with Brady. "Julian and I share the same work ethic and commitment to the team concept," Brady says. "It's been great watching him grow as a person, as a player and now as one of the leaders of our team."

Watching the way Brady handled his business, both on and off the field, also pushed Edelman to think about a life outside of football. Leading up to the 2013 season, a mutual friend set up a lunch meeting with Assaf Swissa, the creative director for Superdigidigital. As Edelman's profile grew, Swissa persuaded him to star in a series of playful -- and surprisingly funny -- YouTube videos in which the wide receiver hosts a fake talk show, shares his favorite smoothie recipes and conducts bumbling mock interviews like he's a slimmed-down Zach Galifianakis. "SmoothieTyme" and "BurgerTyme" soon racked up some 250,000 views each.

"It's fun. You get to show the fans a little bit about you," Edelman says. "It's kind of a way to say, 'Hey, I like Dumb and Dumber too.'"

Edelman's Facebook page has grown to 621,000 followers, Instagram to 465,000 and Twitter to 392,000. A parody of the Growing Pains theme song, "Growing Pats," that was posted to Edelman's YouTube page just before the Super Bowl, has 1.6 million views to date. All of it raises his profile -- and might give him more career options when the NFL is done with him.

"Videos and social posts and cool T-shirt designs, this is the new Rolex watch for athletes," Swissa says. "This is the new cool thing you get to show off."

And so when Edelman threw a surprise 51-yard touchdown pass in the Patriots' AFC divisional playoff win over the Ravens, a pass that helped his team erase a 14-point deficit for the second time, Swissa knew exactly what he needed to do. He left Gillette Stadium around midnight and didn't get back to his house until nearly 1 a.m., but he immediately sat down in front of his computer and started designing a T-shirt with a silhouette of Edelman throwing the touchdown to Amendola. He finished the design around 4 a.m., sent it off to production and got the shirt up for sale on Edelman's website by 10 a.m. Within hours, Swissa says, Patriots fans were flooding the site with orders for the \$29.99 shirt.

Back on the field, Edelman had been so focused all these years on surviving in the NFL, he'd forgotten how good it felt to uncork a touchdown pass. As he walked to the sideline, high-fiving Brady, Amendola and the rest of his teammates, he was briefly transported in his mind to the park near his parents' house in Redwood City, throwing footballs with his dad.

Weeks later at the Super Bowl, with under three minutes to play, Edelman ran a perfect route, shook free from Seahawks defensive back Tharold Simon and caught a touchdown from Brady to give the Patriots a 28-24 lead. But there was no time for reflection. When Brady came over to praise him on the sideline, Edelman growled back, "It doesn't mean s--- unless we win."

When New England prevailed, Edelman stood on the platform during the trophy presentation and scanned the crowd until he finally spotted his father, and the two locked eyes. I love you, Edelman messaged in sign language, a gesture they'd often used growing up. Frank signed the same words right back, and Julian began to cry.

Months later, as he pops edamame, Edelman's nostalgic mood has passed. There will come a day, he says, when he'll try to let the unlikeliness of his career sink in. But he's not there yet. If he's learned anything from Frank Edelman and Bill Belichick, it's that every day your job is on the line. His next moment is yet to be earned.

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## OL Cameron Fleming



### **Patriots football journey: Cameron Fleming**

By Lee Schechter  
December 27, 2014

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- One of the first things people often point out about New England Patriots rookie offensive lineman Cameron Fleming is his education at Stanford, where he majored in aeronautics and astronautics. For Fleming, the possibility of designing planes offered something to keep him busy and engaged in learning.

His impressive college degree labels him as a smart guy on the Patriots' roster, and he was asked this week about how that education translates to football.

"I don't know [if it makes a difference]," Fleming laughed. "I mean, it probably helps me study and get the plays down a little bit quicker. But as far as on the football field, you have to already know it and just react."

The 6-foot-6, 325-pound Fleming caught the attention of the coaching staff throughout training camp and early on this season. He had a later start to offseason work, as he was finishing up school at Stanford, but his football intelligence helped him to catch up quickly.

Fleming, who thinks intently about everything he says and does, shares his "football journey" as part of our weekly feature:

When he first started playing: "Third grade."

**First position:** "Offensive guard."

**Favorite team:** "I was probably a Saints fan back then."

**When he first started liking football more:** "Probably in high school when I got good at it."

**Role models:** "My parents [Karen and Kem] because they were both in the Army and just good people to look up to. They have strong values."

**Favorite high school football memory -- first at Harker Heights (Texas) and then at Cypress Creek (Texas):** "The first time we won districts. We were 2-9 the year before, so winning it was really good."

**Being a basketball player:** "I'd say I was pretty good. I was a really good rebounder, good defensive player. I loved it. East Texas Baptist University [offered a scholarship], a nice little D-III [school] in Texas. Oh yeah, [I held down the post]."

**Why he chose Stanford:** "Academics and football. I think it all meshed together and it was a good fit for me. I went out there and liked it and liked all the coaches."

**Recruited by and playing for Jim Harbaugh:** "Definitely a charming coach. He definitely makes himself comfortable in your house. He's a nice guy and a really good recruiter. It was cool. I was happy. I learned a lot from my first year [with him]."

**Playing with Andrew Luck:** "It was really cool. He's a really good quarterback. He probably got me out of a lot of situations my redshirt freshman year when I wasn't quite what I was as a senior. It was cool to see success [as a part of Luck's school-record 36 touchdown passes in a season]. It's always good to be around it. He always thanked us. He was really good to the O-line. [I still talk to him] occasionally."

**Majoring in aeronautics and astronautics:** "It was an interesting major. It always kept me engaged, kept me very busy as well. But it was something I wanted to do and I just went for it. Basically what it is you learn about planes

and we studied mostly planes, but some space, too. And my thing was design and structure. So I learned the structure and the materials that go into the planes and all the components of designing one.”

**A backup career if football doesn't work out:** “Aerospace, hopefully.”

**Coached by David Shaw:** “He’s a great coach, obviously. He’s doing a great job. It was a lot different from Harbaugh. Harbaugh is more of a ‘rah-rah’ coach. [Shaw] is more of an ‘all-right-let’s-calm-down-and-get-it-done’ [coach]. Definitely very different, but the same success.”

**Stanford’s pro-style football:** “I guess, yeah, it’s similar. I think it helped because we had such a focus on blocking along the offensive line -- run blocking. We did pass, of course. But run blocking -- it really helped me. We wanted to run the ball no matter if they stacked the box because we had to get those blocks done.”

**Drafted by the Patriots in the fourth round (140th overall):** “I was super excited. I was just happy. I was with all of my family at my aunt’s house and I was just coming inside from fishing and got the call. It was the Patriots and they told me they were going to take me.”

**Starting his first game as an extra TE:** “It was a great experience, definitely a little nerve-wracking just because it was my first NFL game. But it was really cool. I was glad I got to get out there and that the coaches felt confident enough in me to put me out there.”

**On playing guard:** “It was an adjustment, but I tried the best and did the best I could. I was glad the coaches had the confidence in me to put me there.”

**On his position:** “Whatever they say, wherever they put me and feel confident in me playing, I will play there no problem.”

**Tough dealing with injuries:** “It’s always hard when you are not out there playing, but I was just trying to rehab and get back as quickly as I could.”

**On the team’s success:** “I don’t know. I can’t look into the future. I don’t really know what’s ahead. I haven’t been here before. So I’m working hard and focusing on the next step and trying to take it one game at a time.”

**Summing up his football journey:** “Ongoing. It’s definitely not over. I’m just looking ahead more than I’m looking behind.”

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## QB Jimmy Garoppolo

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots' Jimmy Garoppolo resembles Tom Brady**

**New England had Brady's air apparent in mind when they picked Garoppolo in the second round of last weekend's draft**

By Ben Volin

MAY 18, 2014

ARLINGTON HEIGHTS, Ill. — Jeff Christensen wants to show an example of perfect quarterback mechanics. So he opens up his 15-inch Asus laptop and finds the All-22 film of the Patriots' 27-20 loss to the Colts in November 2006.

Coincidentally, this is one of Tom Brady's worst statistical games as a pro, with four interceptions. But when it comes to throwing mechanics, this is when Brady, then 29, was at his peak. This game is one of the films that Christensen, a journeyman NFL quarterback in the 1980s who now coaches quarterbacks full time, uses when teaching pros such as Kirk Cousins, Teddy Bridgewater, and Jake Locker, or prep school kids here in the Chicago suburbs.

"See how he gets his feet apart? See that bounce?" Christensen says of Brady. "You see that back heel off the ground? How his toes are pointed right at the target? How his hips are open? Now, watch where the ball goes. Right on the money. It's like a clinic."

Then Christensen opens another file on his laptop. It's a video from two summers ago, when Jimmy Garoppolo was working with him at a local park. Garoppolo is dropping back and throwing the ball to a receiver — with his eyes closed. He hits the receiver in stride every time.

"Flat front foot, back heel 2 inches off the ground, legs at an angle, his back slightly angled, no tension in his shoulders, no head movement. Nice and easy," Christensen says. "Perfect."

Christensen presses pause right as Garoppolo cocks to throw. He holds a similar photo of Brady on his iPhone up to the computer screen.

"Isn't that something?" Christensen says. "Just like Brady. Identical."

Garoppolo, 22, is most often compared to Tony Romo, because they both went to tiny Eastern Illinois University, a Football Championship Subdivision school deep in the Illinois cornfields.

But the real comparison is with Brady.

"He didn't have any posters in his room or anything, but Tom Brady, that's his guy," Garoppolo's mother, Denise, said Wednesday at their home in Arlington Heights.

The drills Garoppolo has done in the last seven years with Christensen, the videos and photos he watches in the classroom — it's all with the goal of emulating Brady.

"The way Tom has poise in the pocket, the way he throws the ball — it's pretty picture perfect, if you ask me," Garoppolo said.

Now that education takes on a whole new meaning.

Garoppolo was drafted by the Patriots in the second round last weekend, 62d overall.

"Is this a big deal?" Denise asks, genuinely.

Yes, it sure is.

Bill Belichick never took a quarterback that high in his previous 14 drafts with the Patriots.

Brady is soon to be 37, and Belichick acknowledged that the team doesn't know how much time the quarterback has left.

No one is ushering Brady out the door yet. He is signed for four more years, and Garoppolo is just the third-string quarterback right now, also behind Ryan Mallett.

But the Patriots have grander intentions for Garoppolo than they did with the six other quarterbacks they've drafted in the Brady era.

Who knows how gracefully Brady will age? So the Patriots hand-picked Garoppolo — the kid who didn't get a scholarship offer from one Football Bowl Subdivision school — to be the next Brady, if that's what it comes to.

"He's learned all the stuff from Tom and his throwing mechanics, and now he gets to go live it in real life, and not just through drills," said Doug Millsaps, Garoppolo's former coach at Rolling Meadows High. "It's really unbelievable."

#### Similarities, differences

There's a lot of Brady in Garoppolo's game — the mechanics, the rhythm passing, the leadership qualities, his control of the offense, his attention to detail in the classroom. Type Garoppolo's name in YouTube, and watch him drop corner fade after corner fade into his receivers' hands for touchdowns. It's mesmerizing.

But Garoppolo is his own man, of course, and the Brady comparison isn't perfect. Garoppolo is 2 inches shorter. He excelled at baseball, but was never considered to be an MLB draft pick like Brady. And while Brady earned a scholarship to football powerhouse Michigan, Garoppolo only received offers from FCS schools — Illinois State, Montana State, and Eastern Illinois.

Garoppolo is more relaxed than Brady and doesn't quite have the same chip on his shoulder. Don't mistake that for a lack of work ethic. Garoppolo just is enjoying the ride a little bit more.

Garoppolo and his brothers — he's the third of four — all played high school football, but it's not like they had great measurables or came from a football hotbed. His older brother, Mike, played linebacker at Western Illinois, but Jimmy was more of a baseball and basketball guy at first. In football, Garoppolo liked running back and linebacker, which he played for his first two years at Rolling Meadows.

"The quarterback thing was never really a goal," said his father, Tony. "He wasn't even buying into it at first, and then it sort of grew on him."

Millsaps saw good athleticism in Garoppolo and sent him to his friend Christensen, who played at EIU in the early '80s and was the Bengals' fifth-round pick in 1983. Garoppolo's throwing mechanics were a mess — he had a long windup like a baseball player — but they saw potential.

Garoppolo's two years as the quarterback at Rolling Meadows were fairly uneventful. The team wasn't very good, and Garoppolo didn't win any honors from the local newspapers. But Garoppolo cleaned up his mechanics and tightened his throwing motion, which is more three-quarters than over the top.

One Friday night Christensen got a call from Roy Wittke, the longtime receivers coach at EIU, who was in town to recruit another kid. Christensen implored him to check out the first half of Rolling Meadows's game that night to see Garoppolo.

Wittke, who had been at EIU for 25 years before leaving for Bowling Green recently, was instantly sold. He told longtime EIU coach Bob Spoo to sign Garoppolo.

"Roy recruited Tony Romo, so knowing Roy's track record, it was an easy choice," Spoo said.

#### Made most of opportunity

Garoppolo was supposed to redshirt his freshman year, but the Panthers were awful, on their way to a 2-9 season, so Spoo inserted Garoppolo as his quarterback in late September and stuck by him, even as he got battered, throwing 13 touchdown passes against 14 interceptions.

Garoppolo was better as a sophomore, throwing 20 TD passes with 14 interceptions, but the Panthers again went 2-9, and Spoo retired after 25 seasons.

In 2012, the Panthers hired as their new coach Dino Babers, who was Baylor's receivers coach during the Robert Griffin III era. He brought the up-tempo, shotgun spread offense to EIU, and many inside the program told Babers he should find a new quarterback and convince Garoppolo to transfer.

"I said, 'Hold on, let me see him in practice or something,' Green. "Jimmy threw five balls, and I said, 'That's the starting quarterback.' That's all I needed to see. I thought a bunch of recruiters made mistakes, because this kid was at the wrong level."

" said Babers, rec

Garoppolo flourished in the up-tempo offense — Babers took out the running element he used with RG3 and tailored the offense to Garoppolo's strengths. Garoppolo threw for 3,823 yards, 31 touchdowns, and 15 interceptions as a junior as the Panthers improved to 7-5.

Still, the NFL seemed like a fantasy. Garoppolo played in a glorified high school stadium in the middle of nowhere, in front of a few thousand fans.

"People always asked us, 'Is he gonna go pro?'"

" Tony G aroppo b sa id.

But the NFL started taking notice.

A handful of scouts started coming through EIU last August. Garoppolo threw for 361 yards, three touchdowns, and zero interceptions in the first game of the season, a 40-19 win at San Diego State, an FBS school. San Diego State's second game of the season came against Ohio State, and Urban Meyer helped put Garoppolo on the map.

"Eastern has really one of the best quarterbacks I've ever seen," Meyer said after watching the game tape. "I didn't even know who he was until I watched him. He's a great player."

Garoppolo didn't slow down. He threw for at least 440 yards and four touchdowns in each of the next three games. Garoppolo finished the season with 5,050 passing yards, 53 touchdowns, and just nine interceptions, shattering all of Romo's EIU career records.

The Panthers went 12-2 and lost in the FCS quarterfinals. They averaged 48.9 points and 87.1 plays per game, both tops in the nation for FCS. Garoppolo won the Walter Payton Award, the FCS version of the Heisman Trophy. For the first time maybe ever, two NFL general managers watched EIU games in person — Chicago's Phil Emery and Tennessee's Ruston Webster.

Still, expectations were low.

"We thought, 'Maybe we can get him drafted in a late round, maybe be a free agent signing,' EIU's sports information director. "What he did after the season really catapulted him."

" said R ich M oser,

Admirable qualities

Garoppolo was invited to the East-West Shrine Game in January, a second-tier college all-star game. Garoppolo was the star of the week, turning heads at practice and winning MVP honors for throwing for 100 yards and a touchdown in the game. His performance earned him an invitation to the Senior Bowl the next week.

"Very accurate, great timing," said NFL Draft insider Tony Pauline, who was in the stands all week at East-West. "He was able to acclimate himself to his new receivers right from the word 'Go,' and I mean, never missed a play. Looked like he was playing with these guys for a long time."

"He didn't have a big arm — he's not a vertical passer, more of a timing passer — but that's the way Brady started."

Buzz quickly grew that Garoppolo had elevated himself to a second- or third-round draft pick.

The NFL invited him to attend the draft in New York City, and he visited more than a dozen teams on official visits. He even visited Foxborough, but didn't think too much about becoming a Patriot.

"He liked New England. It was different from every other team he visited," Tony Garoppolo said. "I remember him saying that there was a lot more playbook stuff than any other team. [Offensive coordinator] Josh McDaniels went through hours of an interview with him, with the playbook, when other teams were just basic."

"He barely ate there or anything. Didn't have time for it," Denise Garoppolo added.

But it's easy to see why the Patriots were enamored with Garoppolo and willing to snag him with the 62d pick.

"He's got a lot of qualities that we admire in a quarterback," Belichick said.

Garoppolo is an accurate passer (66 percent completions last year) with great footwork and a quick release. He has experience in a pro-style offense and the no-huddle, up-tempo attack. Eastern Illinois didn't huddle much the last two years or use a traditional playbook, but the Patriots aren't a traditional offense, either.

"Hell, you guys are NFL up-tempo, with Brady," Babers said. "If you took Jimmy, [Blake] Bortles, Bridgewater, [Johnny] Manziel, and [Derek] Carr, took their jerseys off and just had them throwing around, I promise you Jimmy Garoppolo would be in the top two."

Garoppolo already is impressing with his leadership, constantly quizzing his fellow rookies on the plays and their assignments during their long days at Gillette. Babers called Garoppolo "not good — awesome" in the film room.

By the third game of Garoppolo's senior year, Babers let Garoppolo call some of his own plays at the line of scrimmage. Garoppolo isn't a straight-A student, but he's always been solid in the classroom.

"He came to class, sat in the front row, notebook open, and took notes, notes, notes," said Kesha Coker, Garoppolo's retail management professor last fall at EIU. "You have to think strategically in retail, and I saw that in Jimmy."

Garoppolo has never sat on the bench since enrolling at Rolling Meadows as a freshman, but his parents are happy that he gets to sit and learn behind Brady for at least a couple of years.

He needs to improve his deep ball, and the NFL is two levels up from the FCS.

"I don't know that he's an Andrew Luck, ready to walk in and play," Tony Garoppolo said. "So he can learn from the best player, and the best organization. We couldn't have asked for a better situation."

The knock on Garoppolo is that he didn't play good competition at EIU. Christensen thinks Garoppolo should be even better in the NFL. He didn't have any 6-foot-5-inch monsters like Rob Gronkowski running down the middle of the field.

And he has some pretty good teachers in New England.

"You get someone with great technique and talent, add info from Tom Brady and Bill Belichick, and he can become a star," Christensen said. "He wants to be great, he's coachable, he doesn't have any baggage, he's willing to learn. He perceives it as bragging, but I told him as a senior, 'You could be Tom Brady.'"

Now, Garoppolo gets his chance.

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## The Providence Journal

### A master class in quarterbacking for Patriots backup Garoppolo

By MARK DANIELS

Published: November 29, 2014

FOXBORO — Before the 2014 NFL Draft, it was easy to compare Jimmy Garoppolo with Tony Romo since both quarterbacks went to Eastern Illinois.

But for Garoppolo, there's always been one comparison that he's liked more than others. The quarterback talked about it two months before the Patriots drafted him in the second round.

Related

"I like to think I'm pretty close in comparison to Aaron Rodgers," Garoppolo told CSN Chicago. "He's very athletic and gets the ball out quickly. He's very knowledgeable of the game, controls the offense totally and that's something I try to do. Just know the offense inside and out."

Garoppolo has always tried to mirror Rodgers. He did when he first learned how to play quarterback at Rolling Meadows High School, thanks to his quarterback coach, Jeff Christensen. When Garoppolo learned to throw, Christensen, who owns Throw It Deep, a quarterback and receiver training academy in Lockport, Ill., taught him by breaking down film from a handful of elite quarterbacks, including Rodgers.

He's also following in Rodgers' footsteps now by backing up a future Hall of Famer in Tom Brady. His situation is similar to the Green Bay Packers' quarterback, who spent the first three years of his career backing up future Hall of Fame quarterback Brett Favre before taking the reins.

As the Patriots head into Lambeau Field on Sunday, Garoppolo will get a closer look at the player whose story he dreams of following.

"He's a heck of a quarterback. That's for sure," Garoppolo said. "You see guys in the NFL when you're younger and you try to model your game after that. He was one of the guys I tried to do that with."

If all the pieces fall into place, perhaps that will one day be Garoppolo — taking the reins for the Patriots following a decade and a half of success by a Hall of Fame quarterback. All the right things will need to occur for that to happen, but if you ask the man who molded this quarterback, Christensen certainly sees the parallels.

"I don't think there's any question, he's going to be the next Aaron Rodgers," Christensen said. "I believe that in my heart. As someone who broke down the way they throw, I can selfishly say I think that's going to happen."

Garoppolo transitioned to playing quarterback full-time after his sophomore season at Rolling Meadows High School. He was a linebacker before that, and at first it wasn't pretty.

The only time this Illinois native ever threw was in baseball. So when he'd fire off a football, he did so with a long windup as if he were on a pitcher's mound. That's when his coach Doug Millsaps called up Christensen, who also played in college for Eastern Illinois and then in the NFL from 1983-1987 for Cincinnati, Philadelphia and Cleveland.

When he developed his training regimen, he did so by studying some of the best quarterbacks with the best technique. He said the sequence of footwork drills he came up is based on what Dan Marino, John Elway and Favre did, and what Brady and Rodgers do now.

When it came to throwing, Christensen taught Garoppolo efficiency, making sure his shoulder, arm, elbow, feet and hips are all working together in perfect mechanics.

"There's plenty of footwork drills. Getting the ball out fast. There's certain things that he does," Garoppolo, who still works with Christensen in the offseason, said. "I don't want to give away too many of his secrets, but he does little things that you wouldn't even think about, but you try it and it works, and you're like, 'Wow. OK. This guy knows what he's doing.'"

Garoppolo's comparison with Rodgers also comes with his lightning release. That's one part of his game that Christensen implemented from watching hour upon hour of Rodgers throwing.

"Yeah. You want to mimic that," Garoppolo said. "He has a very quick release and a very strong arm. If you can take a little bit of what he does and put it toward your own game, that's a good thing to do."

"It's the carbon copy of Aaron Rodgers," Christensen added. "Knowing what I know about Aaron and watching him closely at age 23 and watching Jimmy at age 23, he's better than Aaron Rodgers right now.... Now we're talking about specifically throwing the ball to point A to point B efficiently. He's ahead of where Aaron is at the same age."

The first time Christensen met Rodgers was in summer 2004 at the EA Sports Elite II competition in California. The weeklong competition is reserved for the best prep quarterbacks in the nation.

During that summer, Christensen's son, Jake Christensen, was one of the competitors, and Rodgers, who was recently drafted by the Packers, was a camp counselor. Christensen and Rodgers talked all week about throwing, playing the position and his mindset going into training camp with Favre.

"I said, 'When you get to Green Bay, watch what Brett Favre does and do everything he does,'" Christensen recalled. "I saw Aaron probably three or four years ago and said, 'How did that work out for you?'"

“He said, ‘You called it, coach.’”

The advice that Christensen gave to Rodgers is exactly the type of advice this Packers quarterback said he would give to Garoppolo.

“There’s no better quarterback coach than the guy in front of you. For me it was Brett, for him it’s Tom,” Rodgers said. “That’s the training right there; it’s invaluable. Quarterbacks usually don’t have the opportunity to gain when you can watch a guy like that who has been consistently at the top of their game for a long time. Pay attention to what he’s doing, listen to what he’s doing, how he goes about his business and try to pick up as many things as you can from him and try to incorporate the stuff you like into your own game.”

This season, Garoppolo said he’s been observing Brady from a distance.

“I’m in the same room as him, but I don’t want to ask too many questions or anything,” Garoppolo said. “You just kind of have to observe and see how he goes about his preparation. It’s very impressive. I’ve learned a lot.”

As the Patriots head into Lambeau Field on Sunday, the Packers haven’t missed a beat with Rodgers at the helm. It’s quite the contrast to how other teams — Miami with Dan Marino or Buffalo with Jim Kelly — in the league have struggled for years and decades after losing a franchise quarterback.

It’s a situation that the Patriots would undoubtedly love to be in when Brady’s time in Foxboro is over.

“It’s a long shot,” Garoppolo said of following in Rodgers’ footsteps. “It’s a good idea to have in the back of your head. You can’t think about it too much. Everyone has their own story. I just kind of got to go through the process and let the chips fall where they may.”

Of course, anytime he’s compared to Rodgers, Garoppolo will take it.

“That’s never a bad thing,” Garoppolo said smiling. “That’s for sure.”

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## K Stephen Gostkowski



### **He filled big boots: Gostkowski on cusp of own legend**

By: Adam Kurkjian

Sunday, December 21, 2014

FOXBORO — Stephen Gostkowski's pure numbers depict a kicker who epitomizes clutch. But in terms of pure emotion, the picture gets cloudier for many Patriots fans.

Unlike his predecessor in Foxboro, Gostkowski doesn't have that signature moment to elevate him to legendary status. When it comes right down to it, he simply hasn't had the opportunity.

For Adam Vinatieri, there was the January 2002 "Snow Bowl" kick against the Oakland Raiders that helped the team reach Super Bowl XXXVI. Vinatieri then booted the game-winner against the St. Louis Rams for the franchise's first Lombardi Trophy.

Gostkowski has played in two Super Bowls, but didn't attempt a field goal in the 2008 loss to the Giants. (In fact, Bill Belichick famously eschewed a 49-yard attempt by his then-second-year kicker for an ill-fated punt on a third-quarter fourth-and-12.) In the 2012 loss, Gostkowski made his only field goal attempt against the Giants, a 29-yarder in the second quarter.

What Gostkowski has lacked in drama, he's made up for in consistency.

"I just feel so comfortable when he goes to kick the ball and he does it in such a fashion that he makes them all," former Patriots kicker and radio analyst Gino Cappelletti said. "He's going to pump it through there."

The numbers bear that out. Currently, Gostkowski sits fourth all-time in field-goal percentage at 86.6. He's 71-of-74 in fourth-quarter attempts (one was blocked) and 3-of-3 in overtime. In kicks that could either tie the game or put the Patriots ahead in the fourth quarter or overtime, he's 20-of-21.

The only time he's blown a late kick that cost the Pats a game came two years ago in a 20-18 loss to the Cardinals, when he missed a 42-yarder with five seconds to play. Even in that game, he hit four field goals.

As Cappelletti said, "He's automatic."

#### **Keeping the task routine**

Gostkowski describes his approach to making a pressure-filled kick the same matter-of-fact way others may characterize their daily routine at any other job.

"I really don't think too much about it," he said. "I try to just treat it like a normal kick. It's hard to do, but I don't worry about the consequences. I just worry about what I have to do to make the kick.

"I'm not a big celebrator so I just try to act like I've been out there and done it before. I just don't want to show any kind of nervousness or any kind of panic. I just try and make everything look like I know what I'm doing."

It's safe to say he knows what he's doing. Last weekend, he passed Vinatieri for the franchise lead in career points, now with 1,165 — three weeks after surpassing Cappelletti for second place.

Gostkowski maintains as much humility as accuracy when it comes to his accomplishments.

"We have a good offense," he said. "We kick a lot of field goals. Other teams don't. I don't worry about that stuff. I'm just trying to make as many kicks as possible. When I do miss, I try to make sure that one miss doesn't lead to two and two to three. I try to just make as many as I can."

#### **When opportunity knocks**

Devin McCourty remembers the first time Gostkowski earned his trust as a big-game kicker. It was during McCourty's rookie season of 2010 and Gostkowski nailed the overtime winner against Baltimore.

"I just remember running on the field and everybody trying to run up to him," McCourty said of the 23-20 win in which Gostkowski both made the tying field goal with less than two minutes left in regulation and a 35-yarder to win it. "I think that might have been the first game I've ever been in where time's gone and it's all up to the kicker to make the field goal and Steve came through.

"Every time after that . . . I don't think there's (been) doubt in any player's mind. If we give it to Steve with any amount of time — to tie, to win, whatever it is — I think it's complete confidence throughout the whole team that he's probably going to win the game for us."

Gostkowski has his personal favorites, too.

"There's definitely ones that stick out: The game-winner I had my rookie year in San Diego," Gostkowski said of the 31-yarder with 1:10 to play that gave the Patriots the 24-21 divisional-round win in the 2006-07 season.

"I had a go-ahead in the AFC Championship my rookie year that (the Colts) unfortunately came back and scored."

He actually kicked two go-ahead field goals in the fourth quarter of that 38-34 loss.

"That was cool," he said. "Having some big kicks in the playoffs kind of helped me feel like I belonged here. I would say that my rookie year, any time you kick a bunch of fourth-quarter kicks, game-winner, tying, stuff like that, those are special."

But befitting a player whose hallmark is consistency, Gostkowski doesn't define himself by game-winners. He takes the most pride in converting the next attempt after a missed one.

"That kind of sets the tone for my mental toughness to where I'm not going to let one bad game lead to two or three bad games," he said. "That's what I try to pride myself on."

The Patriots, currently the AFC's top playoff seed, are among the favorites to make it to the Super Bowl. Presumably, Gostkowski could find himself in the same position Vinatieri did against the Rams.

"It was right down the middle," Cappelletti said of Vinatieri's winner. "I can see Stephen doing that as well."

Still, Gostkowski maintains he doesn't get caught up visualizing the type of kick.

"No, I don't think about that stuff," he said. "I just worry about what's going on. You can't make your opportunities. I'm ready for any opportunity that I get. I don't worry about that stuff."

When the time comes, his track record shows that maybe Patriots fans won't have much to worry about, either.

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## The Boston Globe

### Replacement player

**What pressure? Gostkowski has been an able successor to Vinatieri**

By Peter Abraham

February 4, 2012

INDIANAPOLIS - The statistics show that Stephen Gostkowski has been a better kicker than Adam Vinatieri over the last six years. He has made a higher percentage of field goals in his career and missed only one extra point.

Since Vinatieri left the Patriots for the Colts as a free agent following the 2005 season, Gostkowski has made 84.4 percent of his field goals and Vinatieri 82.9 percent.

The trend holds in the postseason. Gostkowski has made close to 87 percent of his field goals and Vinatieri a little more than 83 percent.

The differences are slight, but enough to lend credence to the idea that the Patriots did not take a step back when they replaced the popular and dependable Vinatieri with a rookie from the University of Memphis.

But Gostkowski, through no fault of his own, is missing an important line on his professional résumé. He has yet to win a playoff game with a field goal in the final minute.

"I'd welcome the opportunity. It just hasn't happened yet," Gostkowski said Thursday. "There's really not much I can do about that except be prepared for it when the time comes."

Such situations were a specialty for Vinatieri. His 45-yard field goal through the teeth of a blizzard tied a division playoff game against the Raiders in 2002 with 27 seconds remaining. He then won the "Snow Bowl" with a 23-yard field goal in overtime.

Vinatieri also kicked field goals to win Super Bowls XXXVI and XXXVIII. The first was as time expired and the second with four seconds to go. In all, Vinatieri kicked 18 game-winning field goals [regular season and postseason] with less than a minute remaining during his 10 seasons with the Patriots.

Gostkowski doesn't have any, although he did kick the winner with 1:10 remaining in the Patriots' 24-21 win over the Chargers in a division-round game in 2006. He also hit a 35-yarder with 1:56 remaining in overtime to beat the Ravens on Oct. 17, 2010. His 24-yard field goal with 1:51 remaining in regulation tied that game.

It would not be a surprise if Sunday's Super Bowl came down to a last-second kick. The Patriots were beaten, 24-20, by the Giants earlier this season and are favored by 3 points on Sunday.

"I'm just excited to play and kick as many field goals and extra points as possible. If it comes down to the end of the game, I'll be ready," Gostkowski said.

For Gostkowski, it's something he can't help but think about. But he does not want to dwell on it, either.

"This game is so hyped up and publicized. You know what you're getting into when you sign up. One thing is that I've never been scared to fail," he said.

Gostkowski believes his background helps him handle the pressure. He originally attended Memphis on a baseball scholarship before joining the football team as a walk-on. A righthanded pitcher with a 90-mile-per-hour fastball, he had a 3.99 earned run average as a sophomore.

Baseball is a sport of constant failure, and learning how to rebound from mistakes gave Gostkowski the confidence he might not have gotten from football alone.

"Kicking hasn't been the only sport in my life. I take experiences from everything I've done. I've dealt with difficult situations and I've struggled before in every sport I've played," he said.

"If you go into a game thinking you're going to screw up, you're probably not going to be at a professional level. Stuff like that doesn't cross my mind. When I go out in practice, I go out to make every kick. When I don't, I try to make the next one. If I freaked out about every kick I missed in the NFL, I wouldn't be sitting here right now."

Gostkowski has handled playoff pressure well. In addition to kicking the winner against the Chargers in 2006, he kicked a 50-yarder earlier in that game, a postseason franchise record.

Giants kicker Lawrence Tynes has both flourished and failed in clutch moments. He missed two potential game-winners against the Packers in the 2008 NFC Championship game, but made a kick in overtime to send the Giants to the Super Bowl.

Tynes also made a 31-yard field goal in overtime to beat the 49ers in the NFC title game this season.

"It helps you mentally when you've been there before and been successful," Tynes said. "Every kick is different, but I do have the advantage of having done it before."

Gostkowski isn't looking at the Super Bowl as a chance to show he can perform in the waning seconds. His goal is to contribute to a victory.

"This game is a team game and it's about winning a championship," he said. "If they need me to kick five field goals and the game-winner, that's great. If they need me to kick five extra points, that's great. I'm ready, and anything can happen in each game.

"The toughest thing about this position is that you don't know what situations you'll be put in. You can't make your own opportunities. You have to take advantage of the ones that you get the best that you can. That's what I feel like I've done."

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## TE Rob Gronkowski



### **Same Old Gronk—or Maybe Better**

*Rob Gronkowski's stunning return to dominance this season after two years battling injury highlighted the dedication that was mostly lost amid his party persona. Now wiser in his ways—well, maybe a little—he could be the key to another Patriots Super Bowl run*

BY PETE THAMEL

Wed Jan. 7, 2015

The black iron gates protecting the suburban Massachusetts estate swing open. A visitor walks up the long driveway to a five-bedroom house—bigger than a McMansion, smaller than an actual mansion—and is greeted by a man with thinning dark hair and the squat build of a former high school fullback. A red T-shirt draped over his beer belly reads, "I'm Kind of a Big Deal." He offers a firm handshake: "Rob Gronkowski, nice to meet you."

From a few yards away, near the doorway with its number 87 welcome mat, the real Gronk's laugh—"huh, hut, huh, hut"—sounds like a quarterback pleading for a snap. The man at the top of the driveway is actually Robert Goon (really), who along with being a friend and confidant serves as Gronk's contractor, dishwasher, airport chauffeur, security guard and roommate.

Goon's duties include driving and caring for the white party bus that's parked in the driveway. Gronk bought it from a church on Long Island last summer, thoroughly renovated it and nicknamed it the Sinners Bus. It seats eight comfortably and includes hardwood floors, blinking lights and the kind of sound system one would expect from a nightclub on wheels. Goon flew to Long Island to pick it up and drive it back to Foxboro. It now doubles as an airport shuttle and a tailgate vessel for members of the Gronkowski family flying in for game weekends. "Just a normal party bus, nothing too crazy," Dan Gronkowski, Rob's older brother, says nonchalantly.

Believe it or not, Gronk's ownership of the bus can be viewed more as a sign of maturity than of debauchery. After years of being an easy subject for iPhone paparazzi, with gawkers buzzing around him at bars and snapping shirtless photos that inevitably found their way online, Gronk has seen the value in hosting the party instead of seeking it. Goon serves as the driver and makes sure everyone gets home safely—instead of Uber, Gronk jokes, they have Goober. "You can still be having fun," Gronk says, "but maybe it's in more of a setting where people don't know what's going on."

Let's be perfectly clear: Rob Gronkowski, still only 25, is not a paragon of maturity and conformity. He wasn't suddenly transformed by the thoughts of career mortality that came with the six surgeries that forced him to miss 17 games over the 2012 and '13 seasons. When asked if he has considered what he would do after football, Gronk hesitates and says, "No." From the other side of the house, Goon screams, "MINI GOLF!" If you need more proof that Gronk is still Gronk, take a look at the new Entourage movie trailer, in which his beer-funneling skills are on full display. As the Sinners Bus demonstrates, Gronk is simply partying smarter.

They're celebrating with him all around New England. Gronk looms as one of the most important players in the 2015 NFL playoffs, thanks to a comeback from ACL and MCL tears that defied medical norms. Gronk's return resulted in 82 catches this season; his 1,124 yards and 12 touchdowns led all NFL tight ends. And with New England clinching home-field advantage through the AFC title game, having Gronk in full health—he played 15 games this season, missing only the meaningless Week 17 loss to Buffalo—and MVP form entering the playoffs for the first time since '11 could well mean the Sinners Bus ends up pulling into Glendale for the Super Bowl.

The last time we saw Gronk playing consistently at this level—requiring double teams, dragging three defenders through the red zone and flummoxing opposing coordinators—was in 2011. The Patriots predicated their offense that year on Gronk and Aaron Hernandez, and the second-year tight ends dominated all the way to Super Bowl XLVI. The Patriots lost to the Giants in that game, but everything changed for Gronk during that season. His name became a verb ("You've been Gronked!") and his quips ("Yo soy fiesta") landed on T-shirts. Something as simple as going to dinner in Boston's North End became such a chore that his teammates stopped inviting him to avoid the inevitable scene. He understood.

The moment Gronk morphed from NFL star to TMZ target can be traced to October 2011, when adult film actress BiBi Jones tweeted out pictures of herself and Gronk, who was wearing his goofy grin and no shirt. Jones revealed later in a radio interview that Gronk requested she tweet out the picture so he could get more Twitter followers. (She had about 100,000 and he fewer than 60,000; he's now up to 672,000.) The incident exhibited Gronk's most enduring and endearing trait: his simplicity.

As Gronk's profile rose, his core personality remained entrenched in the FGK House. That's the four-bedroom faux frat house in Foxborough where Gronk lived during the 2011 and '12 seasons with linebacker Dane (Freshman) Fletcher and journeyman linebacker Niko Koutouvides. Defiantly unrefined, they duct-taped the initials FGK (Fletcher, Gronkowski, Koutouvides) to the living room wall like fraternity letters. "[Gronk and I] were into the same things—girls and hanging out and having a good time on top of football," Fletcher says.

Fletcher, Gronk and Kouty didn't bother buying silverware, instead taking plastic utensils and plates from the Patriots' facility and washing them for multiple uses. A bum leg caused the kitchen table to topple over with the slightest nudge. Fletcher got endless entertainment from Henry, a fake mouse that he'd tie with fishing wire and place in the fridge and cupboard. "Rob never failed to scream," Fletcher says. "He's such a wuss."

Gronk worked harder than he partied, something his friends insist got overlooked as his public image grew. "Don't get lost in his awkward silliness," his college coach, Mike Stoops recalls saying. "It's not immaturity. He's a great competitor."

FGK hosted teammates for endless Cornhole tournaments and backyard archery, thanks to Fletcher's bringing his bow and arrow from his native Montana. As Gronk set an NFL record for tight ends by snaring 17 touchdown passes in 2011, Koutouvides estimates that Gronk washed his bedsheets about once a month—"if we were lucky." Kouty cracks up at the memory of the lone wrinkled navy suit and yellow dress shirt that Gronk tossed on the floor after every game, only to pick it all up a week later. Gronk donned the same pair of size-16 Converse sneakers he'd had since his rookie year: Fletcher witnessed the gradual corrosion of the kicks from sparkling white to garden-soil brown. "He does not care one bit about material items," Fletcher says. "That's the cool thing about him."

Gronk worked harder than he partied, something his friends insist got overlooked as his public image evolved into its Zubaz-clad, shirtless, dating-show phase. On road trips Gronk would arrive at the team hotel and go into a plank pose—a taxing yoga posture—for long stretches. He'd cook broccoli or mixed vegetables with almost every meal. Former Patriots offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien recalls Gronk's consistently running 30 or 40 extra routes with Tom Brady after practice. "He's one of the hardest-working guys I've ever been around," O'Brien says.

It soon became hard to ignore the buzz around Gronkowski. Steelers defensive back Ross Ventrone, who moved into FGK in 2012 while with the Patriots, recalls an afternoon trip to see a movie on a weekday turning into an hourlong impromptu autograph session. A simple man suddenly couldn't do the simplest things. "He's such a good dude," says Ventrone, "he could never walk away and never would."

Rob Gronkowski arrives in the Patriots' locker room by 7 a.m. every day and doesn't walk around so much as he bounces, like a puppy let outside after his owner's long hours at work. On a recent day he giddily read a Christmas message for fans in Spanish—"Yo soy Roberto Gronkowski"—while a smiling Brady walked by and declared, "And the Oscar goes to . . ."

The daily glee that Gronkowski brings to the office is in powerful contrast to the depths he reached in 2013. In November 2012 he had broken his left forearm while blocking on an extra point play; then he broke the arm again in January. Complications that off-season, including an infection that required surgery, delayed his recovery and forced him to miss the first six games of the 2013 season. He was playing in his seventh game that year when another major injury struck. Against Cleveland on Dec. 8 Gronkowski charged upfield after catching an over-the-shoulder pass from Brady. Browns safety T.J. Ward's left shoulder pad collided with Gronkowski's right knee with such force that it spun the 6-6, 265-pound tight end around like an Olympic diver, his head smashing into the turf so hard it knocked him unconscious. When he awoke to see his parents and the Patriots' training staff in the locker room, Gronkowski learned he had a serious injury, later diagnosed as a torn ACL and MCL. He recalls thinking, Why is this happening again? Why me?

Gronkowski needed to wait a month for the swelling to subside before having surgery. The day after the operation he looked at physical therapist Ryan Donahue and asked, "Am I ever going to play again?" Gronkowski had undergone five surgeries the previous two seasons, four that stemmed from the broken arm and one, in June 2013, to repair a herniated disk in his back. But those injuries did not compare in recovery time, rehab and career-threatening scope to the knee injury.

Gronkowski brought an intense focus to each tedious rehab session. Says Ryan Donahue, his physical therapist, "He felt like he had to earn everything."

Gronk's comeback was fueled partly by his work ethic and partly by genetics. Donahue rehabbed Gronk at the Andrews Institute in Gulf Breeze, Fla., for two weeks postsurgery and was so dumbfounded by how little Gronkowski's quad muscles had atrophied after the operation that he pulled aside legendary surgeon James Andrews to show him. Gronk also brought an intense focus to each tedious rehab session, which began with quad-muscle flexes and then progressed to simple leg lifts. Five or six days into his rehab, Gronkowski began trending back toward his usual puppy-dog optimism. He worked up to reps on a recumbent bicycle and soon requested a higher level, but Donahue held him back. To challenge himself, Gronkowski curled 35-pound barbells while working his leg on the bike. "He felt like he had to earn everything, which I really admire," Donahue says.

After the Andrews Institute rehab, Gronk moved to Miami for the off-season. Every weekday for three months he worked with physical therapist Ed Garabedian at Doctors Hospital in Coral Gables, while periodically checking in with Patriots trainer Jim Whalen. Garabedian is considered to be a knee Yoda: He has guided Frank Gore, Edgerrin James, Willis McGahee and Fred Taylor back into form after ACL injuries. On some mornings Garabedian arrived before 7 a.m. to see Gronkowski waiting for him. Other days, Gronkowski would call and say he didn't feel like coming, only to walk in the door a minute later saying, "Gotcha!"

To break up the monotony of rehab, Gronkowski took his own party to Miami. Bummed by the lack of music at the hospital, he brought in portable speakers to stream '80s tunes. Garabedian could usually tell if Gronkowski had gone out the night before, as his knee would be swollen from standing for hours, but he stresses that the tight end was a diligent patient. Gronkowski's work led to a recovery whose only comparison in terms of speed and effectiveness—he was essentially back in full form in nine or 10 months—is Adrian Peterson's return in 2012. "Medically speaking, we expected him to be playing and effective," Donahue says. "But as far as being an MVP candidate, that's unheard of."

Heading into the 2010 NFL draft, Gronkowski was a vexing prospect for Bill Belichick to evaluate. Gronk had starred during his first two seasons at Arizona—catching 16 touchdown passes—but missed his entire junior year in '09 with a lower-back injury. He still received a second-round grade, a testament to his athleticism and production. Belichick notes with his trademark Saharan wit that spending 10 or 15 minutes with Gronkowski may not create the impression that he's a consummate pro. ("It might be a little bit different," Belichick says, flashing a millisecond smile. "Potentially.") Belichick's homework included a 15-minute call with former Wildcats coach Mike Stoops, a notoriously frank evaluator, who offered an unwavering endorsement: "Don't get lost in his awkward silliness," Stoops recalls saying. "It's not immaturity. He's a great competitor."

When Gronkowski arrived for his predraft visit in New England, the Patriots simulated the team's classroom experience. O'Brien and fellow assistant Brian Ferentz taught him blocking schemes, which Gronkowski absorbed and then demonstrated after ripping off his coat. "We were laughing our asses off, he was blocking the hell out of us," says O'Brien, now the Texans' coach. By the end of the meeting, Gronk's yellow dress shirt was untucked and stained with marker from the grease board. And the Patriots were sold, trading up to get him in the second round, one of Belichick's shrewdest moves.

At 6-6 and 265, Gronkowski is one of the few players in football who can match up against any defender on the field. Here he tussles with 240-pound Jets linebacker Demario Davis. (AI Tielemans/SI/The MMQB) Since New England fully integrated Gronkowski into its offensive game plan in Week 5 against Cincinnati this season, the Patriots' offense has averaged 34.5 points per game (excluding the Week 17 finale when Gronk rested), compared with 17.8 when he was out or limited. Brady compliments Gronk's improved understanding of coverages and his ability to make "adjustments to adjustments to adjustments." Tight ends coach Brian Daboll says Gronkowski sees coverages from corners, linebackers and safeties, depending on the opponent.

Gronk's value to New England may best be quantified by a third-and-goal play from the three-yard line against the Dolphins in Week 15. When Gronk split wide right, just a few yards from the sideline, he pulled Miami safety Reshad Jones away from the middle of the field with him. Jones needed to shade over the top to help linebacker Dion Jordan, who couldn't expect to guard Gronkowski one-on-one. With a gaping hole in the defense, Brady checked down to a handoff, and running back Shane Vereen slithered into the end zone for a touchdown. Gronk can neuter a defense without coming close to the ball. "We're watching greatness," says Gronk's fellow All-Pro Darrelle Revis. "Tony Gonzalez. Antonio Gates. He's in the same shoes with them. He's a problem child out there."

Don't be surprised if that problem child reappears in the Super Bowl, Sinners Bus and all. And don't be afraid to jump aboard and crack a beer. After all, Goon is driving.

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## The Rob Gronkowski story not often told: Generosity to charitable causes

Mike Reiss, ESPN Staff Writer

November 5, 2015

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Two weeks ago, New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski was a surprise guest at a Massachusetts middle school. This Saturday, he'll welcome a child to Gillette Stadium as part of the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Everyone knows about the force that Gronkowski is on the football field, but this is the side of him that isn't often talked about.

Few Patriots give as much time to charitable and community endeavors as Gronkowski.

"I don't think that Rob has ever had a bad day," owner Robert Kraft said. "His happy, go-lucky attitude is infectious, which makes him a great ambassador when he is out in the community."

Such was the case in Gronkowski's most recent community appearance, on Oct. 20 at Holten Richmond Middle School in Danvers, Massachusetts. The parents of two students had bid on an auction item at the annual Patriots Charitable Foundation gala to bring Gronkowski to school, which is the second year the star power of Gronkowski has raised big money for the franchise's charitable arm.

The visit was a surprise to many, and as is usually the case wherever Gronkowski shows up in New England, a frenzied excitement erupted when he arrived -- from students and many staff members.

"It's all smiles, the whole school going crazy, everyone going wild," Gronkowski said. "When it's like that, it is fun for both parties."

Gronkowski answered questions at a school-wide assembly, took selfies, and then had a meet-and-greet with 30 students as he signed autographs and taught them how to spike a football.

"He was so accessible to the kids, down to earth," said Adam Federico, the school's principal. "He was at their level and they really enjoyed how authentic it was to spend time with somebody like him. The message was great to the kids, about the importance of being involved with sports and activities in school, and I think they took it to heart."

That appearance came five weeks after Gronkowski greeted military members and their families. The Department of Defense event, coming two days after the Patriots' season-opening win over the Pittsburgh Steelers, was for families who are adjusting to having a loved one overseas.

In July, Gronkowski visited Boston Children's Hospital, teaming up with a local foundation that raises funds for cancer research. Gronkowski has shaved his head at the foundation's annual buzz off event each of the last few years.

In June, he was at Massachusetts General Hospital as part of an employee recognition and volunteer program. Prior to that, he was part of the team's "trophy tour" to Foxborough schools in which the Lombardi Trophy was shared with students. He was also part of a Play 60 event in local schools to promote healthy diet and exercise.

Kids raced to decorate their favorite Patriots players like Christmas trees during the Patriots' annual holiday party. Courtesy of the New England Patriots

And he's always a regular at the team's annual children's holiday party where kids decorated him like a tree, as well as volunteering as part of the Patriots' annual Thanksgiving Goodwill event in which turkey baskets are donated and delivered to families' cars.

"If I call him to do something, he'll do it for me," said Donna Spigarolo, the team's director of community relations. "His enthusiasm is contagious, no matter where he goes, and he always brings a smile to the room. It's a joy to work with him."

Spigarolo recalled her first meeting with Gronkowski during his rookie season in 2010, as he was at a Patriots community event in which a new playground was being built. The two sat next to each other on the bus to and from the event, and by the end of it she remembers Gronkowski asking to be part of more of them.

He often was, before his rising profile changed the dynamics a bit.

"As he became more of a star, his time became torn between different places and he couldn't be with me every week," Spigarolo said.

Gronkowski's tough run with injuries late in 2012 and into 2013 also didn't help, but he still has exceeded expectations. The Patriots mandate players to make a certain number of community appearances each year, but Gronkowski has easily spiked the minimum requirements over the years, sometimes bringing his brothers and making it a family event. In addition to being part of Patriots-based charity and community endeavors, he also does some on his own.

"You can't do it all. You get many requests all the time, but I still have to focus on football, still have to live my life a little bit," he said. "But there are definitely times during the week when you want to take time out.

"I was always blessed growing up with opportunities and access to facilities, equipment, and playing with my brothers in the backyard to be the best athlete I could be," he continued. "Everyone always helped me out growing up, and everyone now supports me Sunday. So whenever there's a chance to give back, to the community, to the less fortunate kids so they have the opportunity to gain the most potential they can in their life to be success, it's always good to do."

On the field, Gronkowski's impact arguably has never been greater, most recently evident as he caught 17 passes for 221 yards and two touchdowns in the club's last two victories, and was credited by head coach Bill Belichick for creating opportunities for others even when he didn't register on the stat sheet.

He's also been productive in the marketing game, saying that he lives off his endorsement money and has never spent anything that he's earned as part of his contract. In fact, the first question Washington reporters asked him on a Wednesday conference call was about a party cruise he's sponsoring after the season.

Stories of Gronkowski the party man are plentiful, as are those of Gronkowski dominating on the football field. But even as his star has risen, and demands on his time have grown, he's still stayed grounded to the point that following through on community and charity events is important to him.

And, more importantly, to those he's reaching out to.

"I'm not sure Rob even knows how impactful his visits to schools and hospitals are," Kraft said. "I think he just genuinely enjoys meeting people and making them happy."

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## DB Duron Harmon



### **Football journey: Duron Harmon**

By Mike Reiss

November 16, 2013

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- With starting New England Patriots safety Steve Gregory unlikely to play on Monday night with a broken right thumb, rookie Duron Harmon is primed to move into the starting lineup.

Harmon was a surprise third-round draft choice out of Rutgers as many media-based draft analysts (and a handful of teams we've spoken with) had him projected to go in the later rounds, if at all. But the Patriots saw something others didn't and to this point it has worked out well for the team.

Harmon has played in eight games as the No. 3 option on the depth chart, totaling 125 snaps on defense (mostly in sub packages) while also contributing on special teams units. The Magnolia, Del., native has had an interception in each of the past two games and coaches have credited him with nine tackles.

He shares his "football journey":

**When he first started playing football:** "I've been playing outside ever since I can remember, but I actually started in a league when I was 10."

**What got him started playing football:** "My grandfather used to take me to Delaware State football games every Saturday, every home game, and we would sit in the same seats."

**First positions:** "Running back and I played corner in Little League. I didn't start playing safety until high school."

**Favorite players growing up:** "Michael Vick and Ricky Williams. At one point, I thought I was a quarterback and [Vick] was the guy at the time. And with Ricky Williams, when I played running back, I was also a Dolphins fan growing up. My mother bought me a Dan Marino jersey, a whole outfit when I was younger, and I used to just wear that around."

**Role models in his life:** "Definitely my mother [Dawn]. She's a middle school teacher in Delaware. Also my father [Derik] works hard every day, a blue-collar worker; he works at Kraft General Foods. He missed a lot of my games in high school because he works at night, but he's somebody I definitely look up to."

**Top football memories of Caesar Rodney High School:** "Winning the state championship -- growing up with a bunch of guys and doing what we set out to do our senior year, that was special."

**Choosing to play football at Rutgers:** "It was an up-and-coming program. I really liked the direction that Coach Schiano was taking the program, and it was close to home."

**Favorite football memories from Rutgers:** "Winning the Big East championship, even though the season didn't play out at the end that we all hoped it would. Still, being the first Rutgers team to ever win the Big East championship was special."

**Drafted in the third round by the Patriots:** "It was exciting. Any time you see your dreams unfold before you eyes, it's a great feeling."

**Reaction to being labeled a 'surprise' pick by draftniks:** "My agent was telling me 'You could go anywhere, you did well in workouts and a lot of teams like your numbers, so just keep watching, you'll definitely be drafted and things will be fine.' I can't really be upset that people didn't know too much about me. There were a lot of great players on the [Rutgers] team -- Steve Beauharnais, Khaseem Greene, Logan Ryan, Jonathan Cooper -- so for me to get overlooked, there isn't anything you can do about that. All I can do is continue to keep working, just trying to get better, and improving on my game."

**Describing life as a Patriot:** "It's been a learning experience. Things are definitely different in college football, so all I can do is try to soak up as much knowledge from players like Steve [Gregory] and Dev [Devin McCourty] and keep learning, using this year as a year to get better."

**What he prides himself on as a player:** "Consistency. Coming into the league, you're going to have your bumps and bruises, especially as a rookie. I'm just trying to learn how to be consistent, week in and week out."

**What he loves about football:** "The real question is what not to love about football for me. I like the idea of having a group of guys, a group of teammates, a group of brothers, and going out there and fighting for each other. I love that. I also the physicality of the game. I just like how you can apply what you experience in the game to life. There is always going to be adversity in football. No game is ever going to be the perfect game. When you can see that on the football field, it makes life a little bit easier. Are you going to stand up to it or run away from it?"

**Lowest point in football:** "I would probably say the Louisville game last year. There was a play that I could have made, I didn't make it, and they ended up scoring. It's a play that nine times out of 10 I know I'd make, but I didn't and we ended up losing the game. I put a lot of pressure on myself after that. It was a tough time to get out of that little slump, but I got out of it."

**Summing up his football journey:** "There have been ups and downs, highs and lows, some good days and some bad days; that's what I love the most about this game, it hits you with adversity and shows you what type of person you are and what type of person you want to be and can be."

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## LB Dont'a Hightower



### Football journey: Dont'a Hightower

By Mike Reiss

December 1, 2012

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Rookie linebacker Dont'a Hightower has made a favorable impression in his first season with the Patriots, earning a starting role on the strong side of the team's 4-3 scheme.

Hightower has played 42 percent of the team's defensive snaps, a total that would be higher if he didn't miss almost three full games with a hamstring injury. Coaches have credited him with 45 tackles (31 solo), which ties for the fourth-highest total on the team, to go along with his three sacks.

Strong against the run and still developing his game in pass coverage, the 6-foot-3, 270-pound Hightower doesn't carry himself like a rookie. Teammate Jerod Mayo previously referred to him as an "old soul."

The 22-year-old Hightower shared his "football journey" with ESPNBoston.com:

**When he first started playing football:** "As soon as I was able to run around, that's when I started. A few of my older cousins did around '97, and that's when I did."

**Favorite memories at Marshall County High School (Lewisburg, Tenn.):** "In 2008, winning Mr. Football in the state meant a lot. That was definitely one of my goals growing up. I had an older cousin, Ray Hightower, who won it in 2002. Through high school, I wanted to match everything he did and try to do it better -- from the weight room to the field."

**Why he attended the University of Alabama:** "I'm from a small place, from the country, so we're real big on tradition. Alabama is a really good school, education-wise and in football; Nick Saban has done a great job everywhere he's been. It came down to Alabama and Vanderbilt."

**Top memories at Alabama:** "My last year, winning a national championship. We had won it in '09, but I wasn't on the field."

**Selected by the Patriots in the first round of the 2012 draft (25th overall):** "It was a great experience. I feel like I've landed at the perfect spot. It's a lot like Alabama, big on tradition, great coaches and everybody is humble and comes to work every day. That's what I went through in college and it's something I hoped to come to in the NFL. I'm blessed."

**What he loves about football:** "Everything about it. The teamwork, the communication, and everything that goes in with it. Definitely the physical part; it would stink to be a big, fast guy and not be able to use it. I definitely try to use my size (6-3, 270) to that nature."

**Favorite players as a youngster:** "Growing up, I didn't really watch a lot of NFL. But when I did, there was a guy named Jason Gildon, an outside linebacker who played for Pittsburgh. I always liked watching him. Ironic as it sounds, I used to watch Mayo when he played at Tennessee. I used to love watching Patrick Willis play at Ole Miss. I took a [college] visit there, it was his last year, and I almost committed. Those are the three guys I loved watching play."

**Favorite teams growing up:** "I didn't really have one. I was a fan, more or less, and liked watching different styles of defense. I loved Dick LeBeau, so when I was going through the whole draft process, I got to finally meet him. I used to love watching what he does on the defensive side of the ball."

**Role models in his life:** "My grandfather [John Hightower] was always there for me, taking me to practices in baseball. He took care of me. I lost him in 2008, when I was just starting at Alabama. One of the things that made that easier was that he got to watch me. He's still with me in spirit and I know him and my grandmother [Lillian Hightower] are looking down on me now."

**Summing up his football journey:** "Definitely a dream come true. I couldn't ask for anything more from it, starting out small to now. God has given me all the valuable resources to do it, given me a great mom and sister, a great family. My girlfriend and her family did a really good job of taking care of me, looking out for me, making sure I'm still humble. Then just my friends, and my teammates with the Patriots and in college, it's kind of hard to mess up or not be focused and do the right things whenever you have Vince Wilfork and Tom Brady, Mayo, [Brandon] Spikes, Brandon Lloyd, [Niko] Koutouvides -- all the right guys around you to bring you up. I'm definitely glad I've been put in the situation with all these great players around me."

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## DE Chandler Jones

# The Providence Journal

### **Patriot fans yet to see the best of Chandler Jones**

BY MARK DANIELS

Published: September 20, 2014 10:56 PM

FOXBORO — Winters can be punishing in Endicott, N.Y.

We're talking the bone-chilling, face-numbing, when the average temperature for the month drops to 14 degrees. The type of cold that makes it hard to leave your house in the morning, especially when you don't have a ride to school.

The type of cold that can toughen any teenager. Not that Chandler Jones, at age 15, needed to be toughened up. That's not exactly the case when your two older brothers are probably tougher and more athletically gifted than almost any pair of siblings on the planet.

No, Chandler Jones didn't need those cold 6 a.m. walks over a mile to Union-Endicott High School to make him tougher. He needed those walks in the frigid wintery temperatures to reinforce his work ethic. And every morning before class started there he was, walking to his school's gym to add muscle to his already growing frame.

Ride or not, the high school sophomore always found a way to put the work in.

"It'd be bitter cold and snow, you name it and I'd find him walking in," former Union-Endicott football coach Shane Hurd said. "When you have that going for you, at 15 years old, that you're willing to walk a mile to the weight room at 6 a.m., well that doesn't go away. He has all the intangibles they would say — he's strong, athletic, has a great frame. But he put the work in. The size is God-given, but he made himself into what he is."

From those days on, Jones grew, got stronger, played faster and became the nightmarish figure for NFL quarterbacks that we see today. He credits his work ethic to his two older brothers — UFC light heavyweight champion Jon Jones and Indianapolis Colts defensive lineman Arthur Jones.

"Growing up, it was never mandatory for me to get up that early and go walk there, but I knew that it would make me better," Chandler Jones said. "Just being the younger brother, I saw my older brothers doing things like that, going to work out, and I felt like that's what comes into my success today."

Coming off an 11.5-sack season during his second year in the NFL, Jones looks even better this year. Those around him say it's inevitable that the best is yet to come.

Jon Jones laughed when asked about his younger brother's mean streak. That's because he doesn't have one.

In most cases, what you see is what you get with Chandler Jones. The 24-year-old has a big contagious shining smile. Stretching ear-to-ear, its visible through his facemask on Sundays. You'll see him do the Pee-wee Herman dance after sacks more than you'll see him throw a punch.

"I have never seen him get in an argument, honestly," Jon Jones said. "I've never seen him in a fist fight. I've never seen him shove anybody. I've never seen him show any signs of aggression."

That's a major difference between this defensive end and his UFC superstar sibling. The pound-for-pound top mixed martial artist on the planet, however, has an unwavering amount of respect for his kid brother.

"Chandler has been extremely dedicated since I can remember," Jon Jones said. "He always knew he had to follow in me and Arthur's footsteps and excel. He always had a tremendous amount of pressure and he's always been so dedicated. To this day, I personally look up to him and he's my little brother."

For Jon Jones, Chandler stopped being his "snotty-nosed little brother" during the NFL Combine, which only reinforced the fact that he too would be something special. Now he believes he's only getting started.

"He's definitely only scratching the surface. He's a big goofy kid that's out there having fun," Jon Jones said.

"He's not taking the game too serious. He's out there having fun, being a kid and getting to the ball. I think Chandler's going to get to a phase where he's going to have an even better understanding of the game. I'm really excited to see how he develops as he matures."

He's not the only one.

Chandler Jones, who has two sacks this season, is adamant about taking his game to the next level. He looked at 2014 as a time to make improvements, specifically to get stronger in his lower body. The hope is that it will help him get through the season. Last year, 10.5 of his 11.5 sacks came through Week 12. He only earned one sack in the final seven games, including postseason.

"I feel like there's always room for improvement and I say that in pretty much every interview, but it's honest," Chandler Jones said. "It's how I really feel. There's guys that are at the end of their careers and they could've improved. There's always room for improvement. I feel like me being such a young player, I'm going to try to take advantage of it while I'm here in the NFL."

The high school stadium went quiet. Parents feared the worst as coaches from both teams ran onto the field. The Shenendehowa High School quarterback lay there, stunned, in the middle of this varsity scrimmage.

In the previous play, that quarterback had rolled out to the sidelines and didn't see any of his receivers open as he tucked the ball to run — all while Chandler Jones was on the prowl. And then it happened — the sophomore, who was wearing a varsity jersey for the first time, hit the quarterback in the midst of his sprint.

"He hit the quarterback and it scared every adult on the field to death," Hurd said. "We put jerseys on the quarterbacks after that day. Red jerseys so they wouldn't get touched anymore. That was the end of it."

That play became the opening scene to his highlight tape for college coaches and it was that play when Hurd knew he had something special with Jones.

Syracuse defensive line coach Tim Daoust doesn't have a specific moment. He was wowed by Jones throughout his time with the Orange. It was his freakish athletic ability. The unbelievable flexibility to go with those long levers of arms he has. Jones made plays that coaches couldn't teach.

"His ceiling is unbelievable," Daoust said. "I think if he gets his mind right and really buckles down to it, I really think he could have a breakout year this year. I know he worked hard this offseason."

"If you know Chandler's work ethic and how much he cares about it, he's going to keep on putting the work in," Hurd added. "He's going to put the video work in. He's going to put the strength work in, the speed work in. I don't think he's anywhere near what he can be right now. If he wants to be better, darn it, he's going to be better."

In some ways, Chandler Jones is still that teenager trekking through the freezing Endicott winter just trying to keep up with his older brothers. He'll never stop working and won't let anything get in his way.

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## OL Josh Kline

# The Boston Globe

### **Josh Kline thrust into key role on Patriots' offensive line**

By Anthony Gulizia  
JANUARY 17, 2015

FOXBOROUGH — Darrell Hazell knew Josh Kline was hurting.

Yet Hazell, then the head coach at Kent State, also knew there was no way he'd persuade Kline to come out of that game in 2011, nor would he be able to move the 6-foot-3-inch, 304-pound lineman out of the huddle.

Kent State, trailing Eastern Michigan, 22-20, was driving downfield when Kline pinched a nerve in his neck, but he refused to see the trainers, not until the Golden Flashes scored and escaped with a 28-22 victory.

"He had some stinger problems where his arm went dead for a while, and he stood in the huddle, and you could just see how much pain he was in," recalled Hazell, who is now the coach at Purdue. "But yet, there was no way in the world you could get that guy out of the game. Just so much determination of being a great finisher.

"Every time he came off the field, he was hurting, but he's just a tremendous competitor."

Stork missed his third straight day of practice because of a knee injury suffered against Baltimore.

With rookie center Bryan Stork (knee) ruled out for Sunday's AFC Championship game against the Colts, the Patriots will be counting on Kline for more than just his toughness.

They'll be counting on the second-year player to be up to the task of holding strong against the Colts' improved defensive front, trying to stop the likes of tackle Arthur Jones and inside linebacker D'Qwell Jackson from disrupting the Patriots offense.

Kline, who is likely to make his first career playoff start, was thrown into the fire last Saturday when Stork injured his knee in the second quarter against the Ravens.

Without Stork, the Patriots shifted Ryan Wendell from right guard to center and inserted Kline, who held his own against the Ravens' aggressive front.

"Anything that's a positive for the team is a positive for me," Kline said. "If I can come in and help out the team one game, then it's definitely good for me.

"You've always got to prepare no matter what because you don't know what can happen. From a warmup standpoint, you always have to stay warm as much as you can on the sideline."

Kline has helped the Patriots in more than just one game. He started in Weeks 6 and 7 when Stork was out with a concussion and Wendell slid over to center.

In Weeks 16 and 17, Kline provided backup on the left side, starting in place of injured guard Dan Connolly.

"Well, from my perspective, he goes about his business every day, he's always working hard," said left tackle Nate Solder.

"I see him doing a little extra film study after practice and stuff, and that gives me a lot of confidence in him as a teammate."

Kline demands the best from himself and wants to please his veteran linemates.

"I expect a lot of myself and so does everyone else," Kline said. "Be accountable for yourself and have other guys tell you when you do something wrong or correct you, then there's upside to that."

Kline the Student has also played the role of Kline the Teacher.

At Kent State, Kline wasn't a captain, but that didn't prevent him from being vocal on the offensive line.

"He was very demanding of the guys next to him," Hazell said. "If they didn't do it right, he made sure they did it right next time. I can't pick a specific, but I remember him getting on the center for not making the block or the right call."

Solder can see those qualities in Kline, as he tries to soak up all he can from his teammates.

It's that quality that has allowed Kline to succeed whenever he has been called on this season, and why Solder expects him to continue his strong play Sunday.

"He clearly has high expectations of the way he plays and he takes it to heart," Solder said. "He's been getting better and that says a lot."

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## Football journey: OL Josh Kline

By Mike Reiss

November 30, 2013

When offensive lineman Josh Kline first joined the New England Patriots in May as an undrafted rookie free agent out of Kent State, he was a long shot to make the 53-man roster. Now he's one injury away from being in the starting lineup.

The 6-foot-3, 295-pound Kline projects as the top backup at guard on Sunday, and also played right tackle in college. Similar to former Patriots guard Stephen Neal, he has a wrestling background as he was an Ohio state champion in his senior year at Mason High School, posting a 45-1 record.

Thanks in large part to offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia, the Patriots have had success in developing unheralded players into top contributors, and Kline, who turns 24 on Dec. 29, is one of the most recent blockers added to the pipeline.

**When he started playing football:** "Third grade. I was in Mason Pee Wee. All throughout Pee Wee, I had to cut weight. I ran every morning, because I was always a couple pounds over the weight and I didn't want to go up [one level] because I wanted to be with my friends. I wore soccer shoes, anything that was lighter, because you had to weigh in with all your stuff on."

**First positions:** "Running back and linebacker. Then in middle school, I played some tight end and defensive end. In eighth grade, I moved to tackle, then played some center in my junior and senior year."

**What got him started playing football:** "It was always my passion. Me and my brother always played in the backyard, with a bunch of kids from the neighborhood. It's a game that I love and I still love it to this day."

**Favorite teams and players growing up:** "I was a Browns fan. My dad was from Northeast Ohio. I didn't really have any favorite players. I just loved watching the game."

**Recollections of rooting for the Browns:** "It was really devastating when they moved. That kind of hurt us. I always watched the Bears too, because I was born in Chicago and my mother [Julie] is from there. I had them to watch when [the Browns] were gone. When they came back [in 1999], I watched them a lot, even though they had some bad years. Cleveland is a blue-collar city and that's how the team is – through thick and thin, you stay with the team."

**Top memories of football at Mason High School:** "The camaraderie that you had with your buddies. You have the 'Friday Night Lights' going. You still miss it to this day. You have nothing like that, in college or even now. You'll have camaraderie but it's not with the people you grew up with for most of your life."

**One high school moment that stands out:** “Maybe when we came back from Middletown my senior year. It was a shootout game and it was fourth-and-goal from either the 2 or the 1, and they ran it behind me and my buddy, Pete Noxsel, the left guard, and I just remember him growling that we got it in [the end zone].”

**Enrolling at Kent State:** “I grew up, before moving in second grade, in Hartville, which is probably 10 miles south of Kent. My grandparents still live there. I was familiar with Kent and knew the area well. I preferred it to Akron. I got recruited by the other MAC schools but it was a combination of having a chance to play and an opportunity to help change the culture a little bit. We did my senior year. It was a good experience and I’m glad I picked it.”

**A familiar face at Kent State:** “I got recruited as a center, and when I got there my freshman year, I was on the team with Julian [Edelman]. That was his senior year. I didn’t play any games, so I kept my redshirt.”

**One Kent State moment that stands out:** “Probably this past year. Just winning all those games and having such a great season. It was just a totally different experience after those losing seasons. We didn’t finish it like I wanted to, but it was great to go to a bowl game, and great to go out with a bang like we did as a senior class.”

**Expectations leading into the NFL draft:** “You always want to get drafted, but I knew I would get picked up as a free agent somewhere if it didn’t happen. I really didn’t worry about it much. I went golfing on the first day of the draft with my buddies to get my mind off it. It’s hit or miss and you never know what can happen.”

**Going undrafted and signing with the Patriots:** “It wasn’t a surprise, but I just had to get on the phone with the teams that wanted to sign me as a priority free agent and see what my best chances were on making a squad. I picked the Patriots, because if you want to be the best you want to learn from the best. The Patriots are a great organization and I wanted to be part of that.”

**Summing up his rookie season:** “It’s definitely a learning experience, from being an undrafted rookie and moving up and down [between the practice squad and roster]. They told me I would do that, so it was to be expected. You just have to get better every day, that’s what I’ve learned.”

**What he loves about football:** “Hitting and the camaraderie that comes with it. It’s not like basketball and the other sports where you can have one person take over the game. You have playmakers out there who can do that in football, but if one person screws up, it’s going to screw up the whole play. It’s just a great team game.”

**Role models in his career:** My older brother [Chad] and my father [Rick]. My grandfather [Glen] too. I’ve had great role models in my life. I feel blessed to have those guys in my life, and some coaches growing up. There are a lot of people I could say helped me along the way.”

**Summing up his football journey:** “It was my dream to make it to the top tier in the NFL. I feel very blessed and very grateful to be in this position, and now it’s about setting other goals and strive to achieve those.”

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## WR Brandon LaFell



### **LaFell's rise crucial to Pats' success**

By Jackie MacMullan

January 15, 2015

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Brandon LaFell is suiting up for the AFC Championship Game on Sunday, just as he planned last summer when he was an NFL free agent on the cusp of signing with a contending team led by a Hall of Fame quarterback.

But then, the Denver Broncos spurned him and chose to sign Emmanuel Sanders instead. That meant LaFell needed to quickly warm to the idea of cozying up to the very team he had been prepping himself to abhor as a Bronco: the New England Patriots.

The Patriots, who also fervently courted Sanders, felt LaFell could contribute as a second or third receiver with size and sound technique to run out routes for Tom Brady.

It was an alluring, as well as imposing, scenario for LaFell, who did his research and learned New England's offense was predicated on intricate sets with several moving parts and had thwarted the career aspirations of a number of receivers before him.

"It's very complicated here," LaFell acknowledged. "The playbook is so long.

"Plus, you had guys like [Julian] Edelman and DA [Danny Amendola] who had been here a while, and a couple of guys [Aaron Dobson, Kenbrell Thompkins] who showed a lot of promise, and I'm looking at it thinking, 'I've got to figure out a way to fit in.'

"I had to find a way to go out and give Tom a reason to throw me the ball."

He arrived from the Carolina Panthers with a lingering reputation of a receiver who wasn't completely reliable because he couldn't secure his catches. According to ESPN Stats & Information, LaFell dropped six percent of the passes thrown to him in 2013, compared to the previous season's drop rate of 2.7 percent. (The league average in 2014 was 3.6 percent).

The memory that chagrined Panthers fans couldn't discard was the December 2012 game in which LaFell let a 52-yard pass from Cam Newton slip through his hands in a particularly galling loss to the Kansas City Chiefs.

Former Panthers general manager Marty Hurney, who drafted LaFell, said the one issue about the big, fluid receiver coming out of LSU was "his ability to catch the ball consistently."

"We knew he had small hands," Hurney said. "We must have spent two weeks talking about his hands. But he always made the catches he had to make. I just think he's an excellent receiver.

"I thought he was a perfect fit in New England because they like receivers who run precise routes, which is what Brandon does."

LaFell was in New England's organized team activities for all of an hour before he realized a drop would earn him a death stare from No. 12 and a dreaded shake of the head from the coach in the hoodie. Coach Bill Belichick wasted no time in peppering LaFell with questions as he ventured into his first team meeting.

"I'm barely through the door and he's asking me, 'LaFell, what do you think about this guy? What coverage are you in? What do you have to do to shake him?'" LaFell recalled. "He's tough, man. It keeps you in that playbook on Monday and Tuesday, and those are supposed to be our days off."

He conceded that after OTAs he was "shell-shocked" by the team's complex offensive system. After camp broke in August, he candidly admitted he had dropped too many balls. "I haven't been finishing enough plays," he said.

LaFell looked for a sign -- any sign -- of how he was performing. The coach gave him nothing. Brady pulled him aside and worked on his timing and his technique, while LaFell logged extra time in the film room and plowed through some injuries that probably should have sidelined him. When he made a mistake, he simply put his head down and jogged back to the line. The silence during those miscues could be deafening, but he was used to it.

"I played with Steve Smith for the last four years," LaFell explained. "When I first got to Carolina, he told me, 'If you're not catching balls and blocking, I'm not talking to you.'"

In Weeks 1-3, LaFell was targeted on just 12.6 percent of New England's offensive plays. He was on the field for 51.9 percent of the snaps and was averaging just 1.3 receptions a game. He didn't score a touchdown in those first three weeks, and his drop rate was 7.1 percent.

The narrative quickly evolved into a possible disconnect between Brady and LaFell. Why weren't they on the same page? Did LaFell know the routes? Why couldn't he hang on to the ball? What few outsiders knew was the quarterback and the receiver were quietly developing a relationship rooted in their attention to detail.

The playbook was daunting, but so was the cadence of the offense orchestrated by that persnickety quarterback who had very specific ideas on how things should go.

"It's not just a matter of remembering the plays," Amendola explained. "It's understanding how the whole machine works; the timing in between plays, subbing in and subbing out, getting in and out of the huddle, finding [the rhythm] of what we're trying to accomplish."

LaFell was targeted six times in Week 1 but didn't catch a ball. He wasn't targeted at all in Week 2 and was utilized primarily as a blocker. His presence as a potential deep threat was compromised by an offensive line adjusting to the loss of veteran Logan Mankins, who had been traded to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. In those early weeks, Brady simply didn't have enough time to look downfield.

Patience, LaFell told himself. Resiliency. Although his new teammates said little, they had already taken note of his mental aptitude and physical endurance. One offensive teammate said LaFell's ability to battle through a painful shoulder injury all year was impressive.

"He earned our respect by being there on every play, every snap, through training camp, through OTAs," safety Devin McCourty said. "No matter what was going [on], whether he was hurting or not, he proved to be a guy we could count on."

"That's a very big thing on this team. That's what toughness is in this league."

LaFell's moment came at the lowest point of New England's season, in the midst of a 41-14 blowout loss to Kansas City. The Patriots were being pounded 27-0 when LaFell hauled in a Brady throw, shed two defenders and rumbled 44 yards into the end zone. It didn't turn the game around, but it didn't go unnoticed. The new receiver wasn't a quitter.

"All up and down the sidelines, all the coaches kept saying was, 'Don't give up, don't give up,'" LaFell said. "Tom was in the huddle shouting to us, 'Let's keep fighting.'"

"You are as good as you look on film. Who wants to look terrible on film because you didn't play hard enough?"

The touchdown was his first in a Patriots uniform. LaFell emerged as a lone bright spot on an otherwise dreary football Sunday for New England.

"After that game," LaFell said, "everything changed."

Since Week 4, LaFell has averaged 5.4 receptions and 69.2 yards per game and has scored eight touchdowns.

The drop rate? It's down to 1.8 percent since that loss to Kansas City. By way of comparison, Indianapolis Colts receiver T.Y. Hilton's drop rate is six percent.

"Every time you drop a pass, you hear about it," LaFell acknowledged. "As long as I've been playing football, I've never seen a receiver go the whole season without dropping a pass. It is what it is. I'm not going to listen to people outside this locker room."

"If I do drop a pass here, during that long walk back to the huddle I'm not getting cussed out. I don't hear anybody jumping down my throat. What I'm hearing is, 'Let it go. Get it next time. Let's make another play.'"

Since Week 4, LaFell has been on the field for 87.7 percent of the team's snaps, according to ESPN Stats & Information, and Brady has targeted him 20.6 percent of the time. Tight end Rob Gronkowski is still the primary immovable force and Edelman remains the redoubtable choice underneath, but LaFell has emerged as a dynamic third option who can stretch the field. It is a dimension that had been lacking in New England's arsenal.

The foundation for LaFell's connection with Brady was laid in that Kansas City loss but cemented in a Week 8 win over the Chicago Bears in which he caught 11 balls for 124 yards and a touchdown.

"All week in practice before that game Tom was coming to me on every throw," LaFell said. "I was thinking to myself, 'Man, I haven't been around long enough. This is fine in practice, but there's no way he's coming to me this much in the game.'"

"But then, he did. Thirteen targets. That's a lot of throws. It was crazy, man. He was looking at me at the line of scrimmage and checking off to run plays for me. I was like, 'OK. It's on.'"

It was a Brady-to-LaFell 23-yard, game-winning touchdown that enabled New England to squeak past the Baltimore Ravens last week in the divisional playoffs and advance to Sunday's game against the Colts. While LaFell received many deserved accolades for that catch, including a declaration from Brady that he's "the toughest guy I've ever played with," he also scored points for his blocking.

Belichick, who, according to LaFell, still hasn't offered a single word of encouragement since LaFell arrived, paid him the ultimate compliment in a recent interview with Patriots.com regarding his role in the Brady-to-Amendola touchdown.

"One of the things you really love about LaFell -- I love coaching him -- is this type of play right [there]," Belichick said. "He sees [Darian] Stewart coming over to make the tackle, he has got [Rashaan] Melvin and he just comes off and nicks him so Danny can get into the end zone. A heads-up play, a smart play, a play that, honestly, most receivers aren't really looking to make. He's not only blocking his guy, but now he sees a more dangerous guy coming and he takes care of him so Danny can get in the end zone."

Like most athletes, LaFell has thrived as Brady and Belichick's confidence in him has grown. It has been a work in progress.

"I've played with a lot of good quarterbacks, but none of them want to be as perfect as Tom," LaFell said. "Even that ball the other day. It was perfect, but he's coming up to me and saying, 'Next time I'm going to get a little more outside so it won't be so tough for you.'"

"When you earn Tom's trust, it doesn't matter if you are in double coverage, he's going to throw you the ball and let you make a play. As a receiver, that's what you live for."

Edelman understands all of it. He remembers the first time he stepped on the field and tried to navigate the demands of an uncompromising quarterback and coach who he knew would either solidify or shred his future.

"It's a little intimidating," Edelman confirmed, "but Brandon has handled it better than almost anyone I've seen since I've been here."

LaFell has already established career highs in receiving yards (1,015), touchdowns (eight) and yards per game (59.7) this season, including the playoff win over Baltimore.

Asked what effect he thought LaFell would have on the AFC Championship Game, Hurney answered, "He'll be exactly where Tom Brady wants him to be."

Forgive LaFell for noting exactly where the Denver Broncos and Emmanuel Sanders will be on Sunday -- home, watching the Patriots and their quarterback and his big, fluid receiver who has finally caught on.

## **From an early age, Patriots' Brandon LaFell strived to prove himself**

By Adam Kurkjian  
October 5, 2014

FOXBORO — If not for a few boastful freshmen at Lamar High in Houston, Brandon LaFell probably doesn't catch six passes for 119 yards and a 44-yard touchdown last Monday night for the Patriots.

In fact, he probably doesn't make it to the NFL, play major college football at Louisiana State University or even play varsity high school football. A basketball career at some mid-major college — and who knows after that — would have been more likely.

But as fate would have it, a few kids at Lamar opened their mouths one too many times about how great they were, and it lit LaFell's competitive fire to prove he could be just as good if not better.

It's safe to say that LaFell's made his point.

As has been his theme, a little motivation goes a long way. In this case, it took LaFell from one of the roughest sections in Houston to the highest level of football.

But as a freshman at Lamar, LaFell had all but given up on the sport, convinced basketball was his pathway to a Division 1 scholarship. Now 6-foot-3 and 210 pounds, he then stood just 5-9 and figured he was too small to be a quarterback, the position he was playing at the time.

"We had a lot of guys talking mess and I kept hearing about they're the best quarterback and this and that," LaFell said. "And I was like, 'Man .. I used to run over your team in middle school. But y'all used to beat us because y'all had a better team. But I used to do my thing against y'all guys.'"

It was only a matter of time before LaFell made the switch to wide receiver and worked to prove he could excel there.

"Oh, yeah, he always had ability," said Tom Nolen, LaFell's coach at Lamar. "He just, his junior year, he just needed to play some football. ... He just needed some time to get out there and play and then everything is self-confidence."

### **Humble beginnings**

Nolen recalls LaFell's initial culture shock at Lamar. LaFell hails from the Fourth Ward section of Houston, an area Nolen simply calls, "one of those places if you don't live there, you don't need to be in there, believe me, whether you're black, white or brown."

Said LaFell: "I'm coming from one of the worst neighborhoods in the inner city where nobody had nothing. The only thing we had was what we got from the neighbors or just the help we had from the neighbors and the community."

Lamar, though, has a mixture of students from that area and the wealthy suburbs.

"My classmates might be driving BMWs and their father's old Yukon Denalis and Tahoes and I'm still catching the city bus," LaFell said. "It was a big culture shock, but the friends I had at Lamar — white, black, Mexican — nobody really like stereotyped you. ... We all looked out for each other and sports all brought us together. So it didn't matter where you were from, as long as you were at Lamar, you was family."

It was there he showed the type of work ethic that Tom Brady lauded all offseason as ranking among the best of the Patriots' receiving corps.

"We found out early on that Brandon had that quality about him," Nolen said. "He didn't want the teachers to let us know, but he tried extremely hard in class, was always the one, (when) nobody could get the problem, he would volunteer to try it.

"The best thing about it is Brandon is just such a good listener. If he has respect for you, he will listen to every word you say, you know, genuinely.

"There's a lot of drugs in his neighborhood and he's always just been above that. Our biggest problem was just getting him to trust us, and once the light kind of came on that we were on his side, Bam! We really had something."

### **More to prove**

Every step along the way, LaFell had to wait his turn behind talented receivers. At LSU, he was the low man on the depth chart behind eventual NFL draft picks Dwayne Bowe, Early Doucet, Craig "Buster" Davis, Skyler Green and Bennie Brazell.

"That's another reason why I went to LSU. I went there and watched those guys practice," LaFell said. "I'm looking at these guys going out there running routes, lifting weights. Man, I'm like, 'I can learn a lot from these guys.' And that's exactly what I did."

By the time he left, LaFell had compiled 175 receptions for 2,517 yards and 25 touchdowns.

When LaFell was drafted by the Carolina Panthers, their No.1 receiver was Steve Smith, but LaFell nevertheless made his mark with 167 catches for 2,385 yards and 13 touchdowns over four years.

So when LaFell signed as a free agent with the Patriots in March, he wasn't expecting to walk right in and get every look from Brady.

"I kind of expected it to take some time because, you know, I'm the new guy around here," he said. "Brady's been here with (Rob Gronkowski) for the last four or five years, (Julian) Edelman the last couple years, (Danny) Amendola — you know, those are his guys."

As last week began to show, though, LaFell has started to work into that group.

When his NFL career is over, LaFell hopes to go back to Lamar and coach football and basketball. If that happens, he will no doubt know how to deal with any mouthy freshmen.

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## **DB Devin McCourty**



### **McCourty is the hot corner for the Pats**

By Glen Farley

Posted Aug 16, 2011

FOXBORO — Competitive type that he is, Devin McCourty entered his first NFL season with expectations. Then he went out and exceeded them.

"(You're) expecting to always do well as a player, as a competitor," the Patriots second-year cornerback said, "but I don't think anyone can imagine coming in and having that kind of year. So I'm just trying to get better and build on that."

The foundation he laid was indeed impressive. After all, McCourty played to rave reviews.

"He was tremendous," said Kyle Arrington, who joined with McCourty to form the Patriots' starting tandem at cornerback last season. "To be able to come in that young and be asked to do what he did, you really can't put into words (the manner in which he performed). I really can't commend him enough."

The 27th overall pick in the 2010 NFL Draft, McCourty emerged from Rutgers to perform at a level his rookie year that made him worthy of mention alongside Mike Haynes and Ty Law, the greatest cornerbacks of Patriots past. A starter from Day One, McCourty tied Pittsburgh's Troy Polamalu and Patriots-turned-Philadelphia Eagles cornerback Asante Samuel with seven interceptions, second in the league only to Baltimore ball hawk Ed Reed's eight. The total was also the second most by a rookie in Patriots history to the eight passes Haynes stole in the first year (1976) of his Hall of Fame career. Selected to the Pro Bowl, McCourty became just the fourth rookie in Patriots history to earn that honor, following in the footsteps of Haynes, John Stephens (1988) and Curtis Martin (1995) before him. Haynes' footsteps took him straight to Canton, Ohio, a fact not lost on McCourty, who strives to be what his predecessor from another football era was.

"He's a Hall of Fame corner so I don't think anybody that's played this game can not have an appreciation for guys like that," McCourty said following another day of practice at the Patriots' Gillette Stadium training complex. "I was thankful to meet him and get to talk to him.

"Getting a chance to meet Mike Haynes after one of the games and talking to him for a little while, I think that's the beauty about playing this game. When you get those opportunities to meet the players before you that have broken records and have made a name for themselves, when you kind of follow in their footsteps, get a chance to meet them and talk to them, I think that's one of the great opportunities you have playing in this league."

McCourty's appreciation for the game's history began at an early age. "I won't say I patterned (my game after other cornerbacks)," said McCourty, "but I watched all the greats.

"When Deion (Sanders) was playing and Darrell Green was playing for years down there in Washington, (I watched them). (I remember) watching Rod Woodson, all those great guys. I was a big Cowboys fan so watching Larry Brown and all those guys compete and go against different receivers, that's where it all started for me playing the cornerback position - just having that competitive mindset to go out there and just compete."

Now, McCourty aims to continue what he started, hoping to transform the sudden impact he made in 2010 into prolonged consistency for years to come.

"The kid, he does everything right," said Matthew Slater, the Patriots' special teams standout who doubles as a wide receiver on the side. "I really respect him and I'm happy to be his teammate. He's got some great God-given ability and tries to do everything he can."

"I feel like I can still learn so much at this cornerback position and as a player," said McCourty, "so I came in kind of anxious to learn more having a vet back in Leigh (Bodden, who missed all of last season with a rotator cuff injury) and a bunch of guys coming back. We have a bunch of corners that have played in this league so I think each day we're trying to get better, having that same approach each day."

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## DL Keshawn Martin



### **Quiet confidence helps Keshawn Martin succeed on field**

By: Adam Kurkjian

FOXBORO — Terrence Samuel had a problem.

The Michigan State wide receivers coach needed to build a rapport with Keshawn Martin. This proved difficult.

"He didn't say anything," said Samuel, who joined the Spartans in February of 2011 before Martin's senior year. "He was just a quiet guy."

Martin's demeanor didn't exactly fit in with what Samuel expected of his players. Not only did Samuel want to better learn how to communicate with his charges, but sometimes the quiet players are shy, a trait that doesn't always carry over on the football field.

"He always had the skill-set, the ball skills," Samuel said of Martin, who came to the Patriots in a mid-September trade with the Texans. "(But) he was so quiet, you didn't know if there was a lack of confidence."

Martin knows no other way, really.

"I mean, that's just how I am," he said Thursday as he prepared for practice for tonight's game against the Colts.

The Michigan native didn't have to tell Samuel when he understood something. He knew, and eventually Samuel just learned to trust that the 5-foot-11, 194-pounder knew what he was doing before being told what to do at times.

And the confidence? No problem.

"Yeah, a very quiet confidence," Samuel said "There's nothing that he thinks is beyond him."

Or as Spartans coach Mark Dantonio told Samuel: "He doesn't talk much, but he's electric."

Fast to accelerate, adapt

When it came to physical first impressions, Martin stood out right away upon arriving in East Lansing, Mich.

"You're dealing with so many guys that are just straight-line speed, track speed," Samuel said. "The guy that can change direction with speed is very special. That's the key. To find somebody that can see someone out of the corner of their eyes, change direction, but still accelerate fast.

"He's a Percy Harvin-type with great speed and then his acceleration is like 0-to-60."

Martin would not toot his own horn to that extent, his quiet confidence apparent when he described what he could do on the field.

"I mean, that (acceleration ability) is something that I've had and I continue to work to get better," Martin said. "Anything I can get better at, that's where I want to go. That's something that I want to do."

Michigan State's offense, which has produced NFL quarterbacks Kirk Cousins and Brian Hoyer under Dantonio, runs a pro-style system that took advantage of Martin's intelligence and ability to think on the fly.

"His skill-set during that time, he was still developing," Samuel said of Martin, who fell under the radar a bit during the recruiting process because he played quarterback in high school. "(The Spartans) were using him . . . he was still more of a reverse guy, gimmick guy. Then once I got there and I said, 'Look, we're going to put you in here the whole, entire time and do what you do.' And it just kind of freed him up, and he kept growing."

But for as much as he developed, he wasn't starting from scratch, either.

"That's something since I was little," Martin said of his all-around ability. "I was always comfortable with it, and then at State is when I really did a lot of that stuff. So I've been comfortable with it for a long time."

Predisposed to the pros

It was no surprise, then, that when Martin was drafted by the Texans in the fourth round of the 2012 draft, he adapted quickly to pro concepts. Although he did not put up eye-popping numbers in his first three seasons (two starts, 38 receptions), Martin appeared in all 16 games each year.

"It helped a lot," Martin said of the preparation at Michigan State. "Just going from that system, the Houston system, I'm not going to say (it was) easy for me because as a rookie, it's not easy at all, but it made me a little more comfortable."

Said Samuel: "I told people he's going to be able to fit in. He's got the quickness, catches everything around. I just knew being in this offense it was going to be a very easy transition for him. It was always about getting him to the right team. And he got with the Texans and he played right off."

It also didn't hurt his chances to get on the field quickly in Foxboro after playing for former Pats offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien his last two years in Houston.

"It's similar," Martin said. "Stuff is similar, but I've just got to continue to get better every week and continue to learn."

He learned quickly. In his first appearance in a Pats uniform, he caught three passes for 33 yards and a touchdown against Jacksonville, then caught two more against Dallas last Sunday, giving him one fewer reception than he had in all of 2014.

"I think he's in a really good situation right now," Samuel said.

In Martin's case, that goes without saying.

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## DL Rob Ninkovich

# The Boston Globe

### **There is no quit in Patriots' Rob Ninkovich**

By Michael Whitmer  
JANUARY 09, 2015

FOXBOROUGH — Disinterested, disgruntled, and on one memorable occasion completely disgusted, Rob Ninkovich had every intention of quitting.

Ninkovich, then a teenaged eighth-grader in the Chicago suburb of New Lenox, Ill., exceeded the youth football weight limit, so he decided to give wrestling a try. He hated it from the start. As a 180-pound heavyweight, Ninkovich was paired against bigger, more experienced wrestlers. The worst was when he hit the mat after another wrestler in a prior match had vomited.

So Ninkovich, as teens sometimes do, complained to his parents. Mike and Deborah Ninkovich, as sensible, responsible parents often do, delivered an answer the teen didn't exactly appreciate.

"I came home and said, 'Dad, I don't like this.' And he says, 'Well, you're going to have to see it through,' so I had to finish the whole thing," Ninkovich said. "I got better as I went along, but it wasn't my thing. Longest year of my athletic life. I wanted to quit after the first day."

Only he didn't. It wouldn't be the last time the future NFL defensive end chose not to quit, and the Patriots are better for it. Because of the lesson handed down years ago to Ninkovich — the son of an iron worker, and the grandson of an iron worker — he knew that when life appears to take an unsavory turn, something sweet might be waiting right around the corner. He's seen it in his professional life, and his personal one.

Inner drive

Before Rob Ninkovich became the player who will start at defensive end for the Patriots on Saturday in their playoff game against the visiting Baltimore Ravens, he was a senior at Lincoln-Way Central High School with no college scholarship offers. After spending two years at nearby Joliet (Ill.) Junior College, it took Ninkovich one day to convince himself he'd someday play in the NFL.

"He may not be the most athletic guy they've got, but he'll outwork you, he's smarter, and he'll do things the way you coach him, while others might say, 'I'm going to do it my way.' Robbie only wants to get better," said Tom Minnick, who recruited Ninkovich to Joliet and is now the head coach at Arizona Western College. "His goal was to play in the NFL, like a lot of kids, but he took advantage of it. I knew he'd be successful, because he didn't do everything you asked him to do. He did more."

Back to the day that convinced Ninkovich he'd become a pro.

"I knew the first day I walked onto the field for spring ball at Purdue that I was going to be able to play higher than college," he said. "Knew it. I've surprised many people, but I've never surprised myself. That's the story of my life, I guess. Every place I've been, I've surprised people."

Some saw Ninkovich's drive to succeed right away. Some still see it.

"He had unbelievable quickness, a suddenness to his game, had a high football IQ. But if you looked in his eyes, there was a want-to. You could tell he wanted to play the game, you could tell he wanted to be good, and he worked at it. Look in his eyes. You can see it," said Tony Samuel, who was Purdue's defensive line coach during Ninkovich's senior season. "In one year, I can't tell you that there was one play he took off, in practice or a game. That's the ultimate compliment."

The only place Ninkovich didn't want to go after leaving Purdue was the place he wound up going. As the fifth round of the 2006 NFL Draft was beginning, Ninkovich thought he'd be selected by the Patriots, who had the 136th overall pick. Instead, he went No. 135, to the New Orleans Saints.

"My mom asked me, 'Where do you not want to go play?' I said New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina had just hit," Ninkovich said. "I love New Orleans now."

That's primarily because he met his wife, Paige, while briefly playing for the Saints. He and Paige are the parents of an 18-month-old daughter, Olivia.

#### Opportunity knocks

Spend some time with Ninkovich and details emerge. He's humble but has always been extremely confident. He's stubborn but responds best when coached by old-school, military-type (his words), strong individuals (sound like anyone in particular, perhaps favors a hoodie?). He's quiet, but not afraid to speak up.

"I'm stubborn. I would say it's helped me get to where I'm at, because I was persistent, and being stubborn helped me forget about things that could have kept me out of the league," Ninkovich said. "I think that goes back to having confidence in yourself. I was always confident that I could get to a high level and play at a high level. I just needed the right chance, the right opportunity. Life's all about opportunity."

"Sitting in Cam Cameron's office asking for playing time when we're 0-10, was that a bold thing to do? I don't think so. I was trying to play on a team that wasn't any good."

That was in 2007, when Ninkovich ended up appearing in four games for the 1-15 Miami Dolphins. His first three seasons in the NFL were marred by injury and uncertainty. He tore knee ligaments twice and was released four times, bouncing between the Saints and Dolphins, active roster and practice squad. When he signed with the Patriots on Aug. 2, 2009, Ninkovich had eight NFL games to his credit, a question of what position he'd play (defensive end, linebacker, long snapper), but the unwavering belief that all he needed was a chance.

Bill Belichick, the Patriots, and defensive end — although he filled in at long snapper against the Chargers this season — have all been perfect fits for Ninkovich.

"Rob's a tough Croatian, tough Croatian kid," Belichick said earlier this season (like Ninkovich, the Patriots coach also has Croatian roots). "He's really strong for his size, been durable. He's athletic, he's been able to definitely take care of himself out there and play in a lot of different situations. He's strong enough to play against bigger people, and athletic enough to play in some space and coverage situations, whatever the requirements are. I don't think anybody is looking to take him off the field."

Certainly not Ninkovich, who compares his job at defensive end to a chess match.

"There's something about being a defensive end . . . that guy [quarterback] is a target, I'm going against someone that's trying to stop me. That's a great challenge, to go against somebody that's trying to stop you from getting to his prized possession. If you can consistently beat that guy, it's fun, there's nothing like it," Ninkovich said. "It's all a mind game of where you're going to be, how's [the offensive lineman] going to set you. Do you go with power, do you run around him, do you come underneath him?"

"There's so many different things you do as a defensive lineman. I love that. It's kind of like a progression through the game: How am I going to start off the game, where am I going to be in the third quarter, and then on a gotta-have-it play, what am I going to do, it has to be something that he's never seen me do yet."

#### Applying the pressure

He'll be chasing Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco on Saturday, looking to add to the team-leading eight sacks he had in the regular season. That's been a popular number for Ninkovich: He had eight sacks this season, eight sacks last season, eight sacks the season before. He had eight sacks as a senior at Purdue, and eight sacks as a junior. Counting the playoffs, Ninkovich has 39½ sacks in his six seasons with the Patriots; he's missed just one game during that time, and has started every game in each of the last four seasons.

It's his body of work — the durability, consistency, productivity, and nose for the ball (13 fumble recoveries the last five seasons, which leads the league) — that's endeared Ninkovich to his teammates.

"Other than his sacks? I love his sacks," said safety Devin McCourty, when asked what he likes best about Ninkovich. "I really admire Rob's attitude toward the game. From getting to know him since I've been here, [he's] a guy that's fought and clawed all through his career. His ability to make big plays in clutch moments, that's been key. He's done it time after time."

All this from someone who, because of injuries and pink slips early in his NFL career, had opportunities to give up the chase. Maybe the unhappy wrestler in him still lingers, because Ninkovich kept pressing on, despite being told by some NFL coaches that maybe he wasn't good enough.

Why didn't he just quit?

"Because I knew deep down that I could play," Ninkovich said. "In high school, I knew I could play higher. In junior college, I knew I could play higher. In D1, I knew I could play in the league. When I got here, I knew I could start, make a lot of plays, have a good career."

"I'm 30 years old. I don't even count the first three years when I didn't play at all. This is my ninth year, but take away three. It's only my sixth year, really. I feel like my body doesn't have a lot of wear and tear from the first four years of my career. I feel great. I've played at a high level for the last four years, and I don't see why I can't keep improving. I continue to have that mentality, not just with football, with everything. Just keep chipping away, everything will work out."

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## CB Logan Ryan

# SUN CHRONICLE

### **Patriot rookie not so green**

#### **Ryan has come a long way**

By Mark Farinella

January 2, 2014

FOXBORO - There's a feeling in professional football locker rooms that once you've played a full regular season, you're not a rookie any more.

"I don't think anyone's a rookie any more once you've got that many games under your belt," said Patriots' cornerback Logan Ryan, who's come a long way since he stepped on a pro football field for the first time back in September.

Ryan, who leads the team with five interceptions, will likely see a lot of action when the Patriots begin their playoff quest a week from Saturday at Gillette Stadium against a yet-to-be-determined opponent. With Alfonzo Dennard still limited with a knee injury, Ryan has become a frequent option for regular shifts as opposed to simply being inserted in nickel or dime coverage packages.

Ryan, a native of Voorhees, N.J., and a member of the significant Rutgers contingent on the Patriots' roster, said he feels the difference between now and when he was legitimately a raw rookie.

"I just feel like I'm in a rhythm," he said. "It's the same routine, week in and week out. This is my first year that I can focus solely on football and not have to worry about school, and I don't have to worry about other things like that. I think that helps out a lot, too.

"It's a job now," he said. "That's how I approach it each and every day, I wake up and go to work."

The 5-foot-11, 195-pounder said he has figured out, from personal observation and the friendly advice of others, that the intensity takes a big step up when the games become single-elimination in nature.

"Football is football," Ryan said, "but everything's more important in the postseason. You want to make sure you have your best game, but at the end of the day, it's still football.

"I would say there's more focus, but to play for this organization, you've got to be really focused and very detail-oriented. It just goes along with being a Patriot," he said.

Among the veterans that have tried to spread the message of what to expect in the playoffs are a few that were injured and sidelined earlier in the season, like Vince Wilfork and Jerod Mayo.

"That says it all," Ryan said. "That says a lot about that those guys who are on (injured reserve) but they stick around the locker room still, giving advice to young guys like me. It shows the chemistry of this team and it shows the standards of a Vince Wilfork and a Jerod Mayo, that they uphold. You don't want to let them down."

The bye week has been dedicated to self-scouting, and Ryan said he certainly needed to review his performance and improve what needed to be improved.

"I had some good plays throughout the year, but also had some bad plays, some I wish I could get back," he said. "So I'm going to try to tighten that up and limit the bad plays through the postseason.

"The bye week's been good," he added. "We've been improving each and every day and have been looking back at what we did, what we need to work on, and we're trying to fix that stuff up."

Some players won't be watching this weekend's televised playoff games, but Ryan said he'll be parked in front of the TV on both days.

"I'm going to watch all of them," he said. "I'm a football fan first and foremost. So I'll watch all the games and definitely all the teams we can end up playing, so it'll definitely be interesting."

## DL Jabaal Sheard

# The Boston Globe

### **Jabaal Sheard excited to join Patriots, but not showing it**

By Shalise Manza Young GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 16, 2015

FOXBOROUGH — In the few months he's been with the Patriots, Jabaal Sheard has given a handful of interviews. To say he's been low-key is an understatement.

Certainly not rude, and clearly happy for the chance to be with a team that is a model of stability rather than one in Cleveland that underwent wholesale changes seemingly every year, Sheard has essentially been Joe Cool when the microphones are around.

Until, that is, the night of the Patriots Hall of Fame induction, when the name of honoree Willie McGinest came up. Suddenly, Sheard was excited.

"That's a guy that I watch film on still to this day," Sheard said. "How he used to rush, how he'd attack, how he was relentless. It's amazing to be out here with him.

"The heart he had, that dog. He would get after the quarterback, get after the run. He was so into the team, whatever they asked him to do, he would do it."

So, we know Sheard is a fan of McGinest. He's also a proud father to preschool-age son Jaiden, and he likes getting to the beach in the offseason, natural for a man who grew up in Hollywood, Fla., just south of Fort Lauderdale.

He's also community-minded: In 2013, Sheard was named the Browns' Walter Payton Man of the Year, given to a player on each team who excels on the field and is a dedicated volunteer off it. Just before returning here for the start of training camp, he hosted a free football camp for 200 kids in Hollywood. That came a couple of weeks after spending a day chatting with and encouraging players and cheerleaders from the Hollywood PAL program, where he got his start playing football.

'[F]or the most part I'm more quiet and like to sit back and learn about guys and listen. I'm a great listener.'

Not that we'd expect him to freely offer such information.

With the Browns, who drafted him 37th overall in 2011, Sheard had 21 sacks in his first 45 games, all starts. Last season, the first with Mike Pettine as head coach, Sheard was a reserve outside linebacker in a hybrid 3-4. He started five games and had only two sacks.

Though his numbers make it look like he fell off, Sheard still had a fan in New England. Mike Lombardi, the Browns' general manager in 2013, came to work with longtime friend Bill Belichick last year with the nebulous title of "assistant to the coaching staff."

When Sheard became available in free agency, New England scooped him up with a two-year, \$11 million deal, with Lombardi's insight playing a role.

Sheard played just 23 snaps against the Packers, but drew a penalty when he pressured Aaron Rodgers.

Though changing teams meant Sheard had to learn yet another defensive system — in four years in Cleveland, he'd had three head coaches and three defensive coordinators — he feels it's a benefit that he's had to adapt to so many different philosophies.

"It makes you have short-term memory, you forget defenses fast and learn a new one. Working with so many different coaches, I feel like I know a lot more about defense, period," Sheard said. "The coaches are doing a good job helping me learn the system, and like I say, one day I think I could be a defensive coordinator, you know? As long as I can learn the system in and out."

Asked if he really would pursue coaching when his playing days are done, Sheard paused.

"I've given it some thought," he said. "Coaches put a lot of work in and that's something I've learned to respect about them. I don't know if I could put that [time] in."

For now, Sheard is dedicating his time to the task at hand, learning the Patriots' defense and how he might best be able to fit in with a line that has depended heavily on ends Rob Ninkovich and Chandler Jones in recent seasons.

"It's unfortunate he had to learn three different defenses [with the Browns], that's not an easy thing to do, but the fortunate part of that is he was able to have experience in a lot of different schemes," Ninkovich said. "The more experience you have at different things, the better you're going to be on the field. Having different coaches, different installs can help you learn a fourth defense really quickly."

"Our system is a little bit different, so there's been an adjustment for him there with some of our techniques or assignments," Belichick said. "Overall, a lot of things that we do he's done, so there's been a little bit of an adjustment, but he's done well with that."

"He's a good player. He's long, has good playing strength, pretty instinctive. He's played on the end of the line for his whole career going back to Pitt and in the NFL and now with us. That's pretty much where he's going to play for us."

Quick off the ball, as some of his offensive line teammates who have had to face him in practice can attest, Sheard is also fluid in pass coverage.

In the Patriots' exhibition opener Thursday night against Green Bay, Sheard played just 23 snaps and was credited with one solo tackle and one assist. But he also drew a holding penalty and got good pressure on Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers.

In terms of personality, Ninkovich sees a bit of himself in his new teammate.

"He's not going to say too much, he's not going to be that outspoken guy and talk your head off," Ninkovich said of Sheard. "I respect that, when guys lead by example and work hard. I think that says more than saying something."

Asked if Ninkovich's assessment is correct, Sheard smiled slightly, as though he'd been found out.

"Most people say I'm quiet. I've always been a quiet guy, but we have fun," he said. "I definitely interact with guys and we get things done, but for the most part I'm more quiet and like to sit back and learn about guys and listen. I'm a great listener."

If Sheard is the playmaker many believe he can be, he'll be listening to more than just his fellow Patriots. He'll be listening to the roar of the crowd, as well.

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## **Jabaal Sheard aiming for new heights with Patriots**

By: Adam Kurkjian

FOXBORO — Jabaal Sheard didn't always like the coaching style of Greg Gattuso, his former defensive line coach at the University of Pittsburgh.

"Coach, you don't have to coach me as hard as you used to," Gattuso said, recalling Sheard's words. "Especially his second, third year, he didn't like that I coached him hard all the time. And I used to say, 'Jabaal, when you get good, I promise, I won't say a word to you.'"

Sheard believed at the time he could almost coach himself.

"I kind of just like to watch film by myself, blast some music and go into a different zone," Sheard said.

His music of choice became Rick Ross, a South Florida-based rapper with a deep registered voice.

"That boss voice," said Sheard, who hails from Hollywood, Fla. "It's humbling sometimes because a lot of times I can relate to it."

But his first time on an airplane? Humbling? No. Terrifying? That's more like it.

"My first time flying was to Pittsburgh and it was the scariest flight ever and we're coming down and the plane's shaking," Sheard said. "We're going through a thunderstorm. I was like, 'I don't ever want to fly again. I'm over flying.' I told myself I was going to Miami. 'I'm going to Miami.'"

On National Signing Day, most faxed letters of commitment arrive around 8 in the morning.

When noontime passed on signing day in February of 2007, the hours ticked by and the pressure from the rest of the staff began to build on then-Pitt assistant Charlie Partridge, the recruiter taking the lead on Sheard, when no fax arrived from the defensive stud.

"We were a little panicked," said Gattuso, now a coach at Albany, "because (Sheard) was a good player. . . . It was like 3 o'clock in the afternoon and we were going crazy. I don't really know what happened."

The reason Sheard waited that long to send his commitment is he was still wavering. Can't fault the kid for not wanting to fly back to Pittsburgh in the winter, can you?

"I got a little bit better (at flying over the years)," Sheard said. "I have my headphones and get a little music and there's so many things to distract you. But back in the day when they said you have to take off your headphones, no music, I couldn't do it. I'd be there shaking and just focused on the plane and focused on your music, your movie, whatever else."

In the end, Sheard decided the Pitt coaching staff was too good to turn down, so he committed.

A take-charge guy

While at Pitt, playing under then-head coach Dave Wannstedt, Sheard was on a dominant defensive line that included future NFL players Greg Romeus and Nick Williams.

Not only did they share a wealth of talent, but a camaraderie, a natural chemistry.

"It was one of the most entertaining group of kids I've ever been around," Gattuso said. "The funniest thing I can remember about it was LeSean McCoy was our running back and in an inside-run period, Shady would say something and immediately, those guys, it would be on. They would rib him hard and taking it, just killing Shady."

"Oh, yeah, man. Camp days," Sheard said. "Competing. Everybody's competing, everybody's raw. Everybody's out there. You're trying to get each other better."

But when the competing stopped, the studying resumed for Sheard. Headphones on. Just him and the film.

"I can't even overstate how many times I've walked out of my office and he's sitting there at 9, 10 o'clock at night," Gattuso said.

"Our conference rooms and offices were in the same room basically. I had many, many late nights in my offices and until I was done and I came out and he was sitting there by himself watching tape. No one knew he was doing it, he wasn't telling anyone he was doing it. It was just the way he worked."

"His senior year, I don't know that I had to say a word to him. Literally. He just grew up into that kind of kid and player."

Help wanted at end

Over the past few years, when the Patriots started showing more 4-3 looks, the defensive ends have shown flashes of production, but at times, late in games, it dropped off with a lack of depth as the wear began to show on Chandler Jones and Rob Ninkovich.

Enter Sheard.

After four years with the Cleveland Browns, the Floridian had become used to the cold weather. The change of scenery wasn't as big of a deal this time for a 26-year-old NFL veteran as it was the 17-year-old prospect who had never experienced flying into torrential weather.

On March 12, two days after his birthday, he signed with the Pats on a two-year, \$11 million deal with a \$5.5 million signing bonus.

It helped that the Patriots had hired Mike Lombardi as a personnel assistant. As the former general manager of the Browns, Lombardi knew what Sheard brought to the table.

"My agent (Drew Rosenhaus) had a good relationship with (Lombardi), obviously," said Sheard who was drafted 37th overall by the Browns in 2011.

As for the study sessions, headphones on, critiquing his every move?

"That was one of their checkmarks," Partridge said of the Patriots' interest in signing Sheard.

Through two games, Sheard, Ninkovich and Jones comprise a group of ends that have shown an uptick in production. Through just two games, they've combined for five sacks, five quarterback hits, and five penalties drawn.

"We're all cool," Sheard said with a shrug of the chemistry. "A lot of great leaders around here, man. Everybody comes to work and gets the job done. That's what we're here for."

Same goes for the airplane rides.

"As long as everybody on the plane's calm," he said. "I'm good."

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## DL Sealver Siliga



### **Family support carries Sealver Siliga**

By Mark Daniels

January 11, 2014

FOXBORO — The TV was on, but he couldn't bear to watch. Too painful.

For Sealver Siliga, the NFL highlights on ESPN only made the feeling worse. Seeing the game reinforced the idea that nobody in the game wanted him. And during a time where he was surrounded by family, Siliga, for a moment, felt all alone.

The defensive tackle was released by the Seattle Seahawks on Oct. 4. He moved back into his parents' home in West Jordan, Utah. And after multiple tryouts, he hopelessly waited over the next three weeks for a call.

"It (hurt) every day. It got to a point where I didn't even want to watch ESPN or anything just because it reminded me," Siliga said. "When that happened, it really hit home. Like, nobody wants me. That really was tough."

In 2012, he nearly made it. Siliga was on the Denver Broncos' active roster, but appeared in just one game. It was a step up from 2011, which he spent on the team's practice squad.

Now, he was out of football. It tested his patience and will. Before the Patriots signed him on Oct. 24, Siliga had too much to lose to give up. He couldn't let it end. Not with what his family's been through.

All he had to do was think about his mother, Sinatala, who worked night and day to support her kids. Or what his family suffered in San Bernardino, Calif., and the gang culture that swallowed up his five older brothers.

"All the strength I have (is from my family)," Siliga, 23, said. "I'd be lying if I'd say I'd do this all alone. I couldn't have done this all alone. If it was just me, I would have quit a long time ago."

### **Band of brothers**

There's 634 miles between San Bernardino and West Jordan, Utah, a location that was perfect for Sinatala and Siala Siliga. They wanted better for their family and their youngest, Sealver, who was 1 when West Jordan gave them a place to practice their Mormon faith. It also gave them a chance to escape the city that nearly tore everything apart.

Both parents came to America from Pago Pago, American Samoa, looking for opportunity, but got more than they bargained for in the gang-enriched San Bernardino Valley. By the time they made the move, all five of their oldest sons were entrenched in the gang lifestyle. Two with devastating consequences.

"One of my brothers is in prison for life and the other has passed away," said Siliga. "The late '80s, early '90s, the gang lifestyle in California was on the rise big time. My parents were like, 'Let's go to Utah. There are no gang problems over there.'"

Siliga never had to look far to see what his life would be like if he made poor choices. He grew up watching his three other brothers — Michael, Sofa and Mo — get out of the lifestyle, and he's also stayed in contact with his imprisoned brother.

"I write letters and stuff and that's probably the closest I've gotten to him. I haven't seen him since I was 1 year old," Siliga said. "He's been in there a long time. He's the second oldest. He got caught up deep in the lifestyle and it put him behind bars for life. He's in there for some bad stuff."

Michael, Sofa and Mo, who range from 15-20 years older than Sealver, didn't want their younger brother to make the same mistakes.

"Seeing what they went through, it put a guideline in front of me," Siliga said. "So I mean, I do this, this is going to happen. If I do the opposite, who knows what's going to happen?"

## **Moving time**

Going to Utah didn't solve everything.

Siliga's father, who seriously injured both knees, was unable to work so his mother supported a house of seven. Working day and night at Shafter Beverages, she put clothes on her children's backs and food on their table. She worked so much there were days Siliga didn't see her. So when it came to football, Siliga worked hard in hopes he could support his family.

University of Utah head coach Kyle Whittingham described Siliga as the type of player a college coach dreams of having. The defensive tackle worked hard to lose 60 pounds so he could play as a true freshman. He quickly became a leader and a force.

"He was really a motivated, driven individual and really wanted to succeed," Whittingham said. "He had a burning desire to succeed."

## **Taking advantage**

That desire was fueled by his family's hard times. After his junior year, Siliga turned pro to help his loved ones financially.

"They had some struggles. There's no doubt," Whittingham said. "And that's part of the reason Sealver decided to come out early. One of the primary reasons was so he could help out his family and try to give them some support."

Siliga earned an opportunity with the Patriots after injuries to Vince Wilfork and Tommy Kelly. He made the most out of it, finishing with 23 tackles and three sacks in five games. Tonight, he'll make his postseason debut against the Colts.

It wasn't easy to get to this point, but Siliga knew if his family could fight through the hard times, so could he.

"It helped me with dedication," Siliga said. "Even when things look hard, knowing that if I keep pushing, it'll work out."

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## **The 'heartbeat' of the Patriots plays special teams**

By Mark Cannizzaro

January 25, 2015 | 10:46pm

When the Patriots make their anticipated Arizona arrival for Super Bowl XLIX on Monday, most eyes will be on their Deflategate-embattled coach and quarterback, Bill Belichick and Tom Brady.

The rest of the Patriots players will deplane, exit the team buses and disappear into the team hotel in relative anonymity by comparison — none more so than Matthew Slater.

Slater, with his unassuming, bookish, bespectacled look, easily can be mistaken as someone from the team's non-football support staff — a media relations or community relations official or an IT intern — not the four-year team captain he is.

On Sunday at University of Phoenix Stadium, Slater will be one of the integral forces attempting to lead the Patriots to their fourth Super Bowl title since 2001 and first since 2004. He is a glue that bonds the Patriots.

There is not a player on the Patriots roster who better embodies what his demanding coach seeks in a player. Slater is the quintessential Belichick player: ego-less, versatile and smart.

"There are zero words to properly describe Matt Slater's impact on this team," running back Shane Vereen said. "He's the heartbeat. He is who everyone looks to — other than Tom [Brady]."

Belichick has a phrase he uses with his players, a saying he probably gleaned from his father, Steve, also a lifer football coach: "The more you can do ..."

There isn't a lot Slater doesn't do for the Patriots in his role as their special-teams captain.

Yet if you surf the Internet and look at his statistics you might be led to believe he doesn't do much at all and wonder how it's possible he has been on the Patriots roster for seven years.

Slater was selected in the fifth round of the 2008 NFL Draft as a receiver. Yet he has one career catch for 46 yards. That took place in 2011. He has one career carry for 6 yards. That took place in 2009.

How has an offensive player who has one reception and one carry lasted seven years under Belichick?

"He's like our quarterback on special teams, the player-coach of special teams," running back Brandon Bolden said. "He works harder than anyone — and I'm not talking about just on this team, I'm talking about the whole league," Vereen said. "He's a hard-nosed, doesn't-back-down type of player. He's what this team needs. You can ask any guy in this locker room and they will tell you the same thing I'm telling you about Matthew Slater. I can't say enough about the guy."

Matthew is the 29-year-old son of Jackie Slater, who carved out a Hall of Fame career as an offensive tackle for the Los Angeles Rams and taught his son a thing or two about how to survive in a league that is constantly trying to get younger and cheaper with its revolving personnel grind.

"I always told Matthew that if he was going to play the game of football he has to respect it enough to do the hard things, to do the things that nobody else was going to be willing to do so that you and your role can be part of the overall team success," Jackie Slater said.

"My father taught me that in the NFL, nothing is owed to you, that everything that you get in this league you have to work hard to get it, you have to sacrifice; there's a price to be paid," Matthew said. "His work ethic over the course of his career stands out more to me than anything, because I remember him training in the offseason more than I remember the games."

Matthew made note of the fact his father didn't start until his fourth NFL season. Matthew never has started a game in seven years in New England, yet he's one of the most important players on the team.

"When I came here, we had [receivers] Wes Welker, Randy Moss, Jabar Gaffney — players that were very accomplished in this league," Matthew said. "My mentality was to do whatever I can to make the team, whether that's running down on kicks, giving looks on scout teams, whatever that was. I understood that everybody couldn't be a star player. But there was a need for role players. In order to have a good football team you've got to have good role players."

Those last words: music to any coach's ears.

When I suggested to Jackie Slater his son was the model Belichick player because of his ego-less manner, he said, "Well, that's Matthew. There's never been any other way with him. He was always a guy that worked real hard and wanted to do his part to help the team."

Matthew, with four Pro Bowls, is catching up to Jackie, who was voted into seven. Only the Manning family, with 19 (Archie's two, Peyton's 14 and Eli's three) has combined for more Pro Bowls than the Slaters' 11.

Jackie Slater called his son's four consecutive Pro Bowls "an amazing feat in my opinion, because it's not like they're taking three offensive tackles to the Pro Bowl; they're taking one special-teams guy."

One special, unique player.

"I never would have thought I'd be here seven years, but it's definitely been a fun ride," Matthew said. "I'm thankful for the experiences, the relationships and everything I've been able to do here."

Asked if he feels appreciation from Belichick, Slater said: "I know he appreciates me because he's still got me around here. That's good enough for me. He says everything he needs to say by allowing me to be on this team every year and I'm thankful for it."

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## The Boston Globe

### **Patriots' Matthew Slater got work ethic from his father**

By Shalise Manza Young  
January 6, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — The game is violent, made for large men like him, and carrying his name onto a football field would be a burden.

Or so the father thought.

As Jackie and Annie Slater raised their two sons in the Anaheim, Calif., area, they tried their best to steer them away from football. Jackie coached their older son, Matthew, at the YMCA, introducing him to soccer, baseball, and basketball.

But when they weren't at the Y, young Matthew went with his father to work, at the Los Angeles Rams practice facility. After his father ran, Matthew ran. When his father was in the weight room, Matthew watched, his wrists taped so he looked the part.

While his father was putting in all the hours necessary to stay on the field, to rehab from injuries, to honor the game he loved, Matthew had a front-row seat.

Jackie Slater, a 6-foot-4-inch offensive lineman, was with the Rams for 20 seasons. A third-round pick out of Jackson State in his native Mississippi in 1976, he didn't become the starting right tackle until his fourth season. Once he took over the job, however, it was a long time before he surrendered it.

Matthew was born at the start of the 1985 season, midway through what was a Hall of Fame career for his father.

Jackie never intended that the time Matthew spent with him at the Rams facility would be on-the-job training.

"It was a really hard way for me to go, and it was very physical and very demanding, and I was a big guy, I was always a big guy, and I have always felt football is a big man's game," Jackie said.

"I saw that he was going to be a little man and there was very little I was going to be able to help him with as a smaller player. I didn't know enough about the skill positions to teach him and help him and so I just kind of discouraged him away from it.

"To be perfectly honest with you, I just didn't think that he was going to be cut out to play the sport."

Matthew was smaller than his father — though, of course, most men are. But he was fast. And he loved the game his father played, in spite of Jackie's reluctance. He begged his parents to let him take up football.

"My dad did everything in his power when I was young for me not to play," Matthew said. "I think part of that was he didn't want me to feel the pressure of living up to being 'Jackie Slater's son' and secondly he didn't want me to get injured because he understands this is a dangerous game and he wanted his son to be healthy.

"But what he didn't know is he was the reason I wanted to play. Because even talking to my dad now, you hear him tell the stories of when he played, he still loves the game so much. You can see it in his eyes, and that was kind of contagious for my brother and I — what is this game that's bringing so much joy and passion in my dad?"

Eventually, the Slaters relented.

### **From Bruin to Patriot**

Annie Slater isn't sure when Matthew started excelling at football. He was a stellar student at Servite High, the top-notch all-boys Catholic school he attended, and his college choice came down to two schools: UCLA, not far from home, or Dartmouth, an Ivy League college in the East.

He was a standout track athlete, tying for second in the 100 meters at the California Interscholastic Federation state meet in 10.67 seconds, and was part of a state-champion 4 x 100-meter relay team.

On the football field, though, he had modest numbers: 39 receptions for 707 yards as a senior. But he had enough tools that he was appealing to college programs. He settled on UCLA.

Slater was a versatile performer with the Bruins, playing at receiver, in the secondary, and on special teams. He had the most impact as a kickoff returner, obliterating the school's season record for kickoff-return yards in 2007 with 986 yards on 34 returns (a school-record 29.0 yards per return), with three of those going for touchdowns.

What former UCLA coach Karl Dorrell most remembers, however, is Slater's work ethic.

"His effort and how he did things, it stuck out like a sore thumb, so to speak," said Dorrell, now quarterbacks coach for the Houston Texans. "If you go through practice and scan everybody that was practicing, there was always one guy that was just going so much harder and so much faster than everyone else, and that was Matthew Slater.

"He just kind of stuck out that way."

When his career with the Bruins was over and the draft process began, Slater had no sense of what would happen for him. He had established himself as a special teams player, but he didn't know whether that would be enough to earn him a shot with an NFL team as a free agent, let alone receive a phone call telling him he'd been drafted.

If Dorrell had gotten his way, Slater would have been a Dolphin. After a 6-6 season in 2007, he was fired by his alma mater and wound up in Miami as receivers coach.

"He can do so many different things, and his effort and how he did things was really unmatched compared to what most people would do," Dorrell said. "I was trying to get [the Dolphins] to draft him because I felt that strongly about his ability."

But Miami didn't draft Slater. A surprise team, one that he'd had little to no contact with in the previous weeks, chose him in the fifth round: the New England Patriots.

"When you look back on it, it was a perfect fit because they appreciated guys like me around here and they still do," Slater said. "They view things a little bit differently in regards to special teams. So it was a perfect fit with the way my college career went for me to end up here."

His rookie season of 2008 is not one Slater remembers fondly. He struggled on the field, averaging just 14.1 yards on 11 kickoff returns, and off the field, the transition from college student to professional — far from his family and his familiar Southern California surroundings — was difficult as well.

And then came Scott O'Brien, the mustachioed, frenetic special teams coach the Patriots hired after Slater's rookie year, the yin to Slater's quiet yang.

O'Brien rebuilt Slater's confidence, believing in the young speedster, making him believe he could be a great player.

### **Appreciating the grind**

Jackie Slater believed that his son liked the grandeur of the game, that he enjoyed sitting in the stands with his mother and brother and seeing the Rams welcome different teams to Anaheim Stadium.

That was not the case.

"What I much later found out, the thing that had the biggest impact on him was, he'd watch me go through the grind, and I think the biggest thing that happened out of all that to him was he just learned to appreciate the underside of it, the mundane side of it, when nobody's watching and you just have to go to work and get yourself ready," said Jackie Slater.

"Those are some unique times, when we actually spent quite a bit of time together, when I was trying to retard the aging process and he saw that. He got up close and personal with the grind of the game, the hard work and everything that goes into it, the respect that you have to pay the game on a daily basis, the practices — that's the thing that he seemed to have remembered the most."

Matthew believes "95 percent of what I've learned as far as being a professional and how to work as a pro, and how to respect the game of football" came from his father.

"If there's one thing I remember about my dad, it was his work ethic," said Matthew. "As a little kid, going to Rams Park with him and watching him work out, and I didn't understand why he was doing so much and why he put so much time into it, but as I got older, I began to realize why he was doing that and he always — even now — is talking to me about being a professional, what it means to be a pro, what it means to respect this game."

"This game owes none of us anything; we're very privileged to be playing this game and we have to give it its just due in the way we prepare on the field and off the field so we'll have no regrets at the end of the day. I got a lot of that from my dad."

### **'This is my craft'**

For most players, special teams is a means to an end: It's a way to get on the field as a young player, with the hope of getting more snaps at your preferred position later in the season.

Though he practiced as a defensive back and receiver in his first years with the Patriots, Matthew Slater, now 6 feet and 198 pounds, at some point realized that special teams was his position, and he set his mind to excelling at his position.

"I can't tell you how much I love this game of football," he said. "This game has been really good to me and my family, and once I got on the field and was able to play, I really saw that hey, this is fun. I like doing this."

"I'm very competitive by nature. I want to be great at whatever it is I'm doing, it doesn't matter if we're playing tic-tac-toe."

"In college, when I would see guys not take special teams seriously, I would feel like they were slighting the game, like they weren't respecting the game."

"This is a huge part of the game. It's not a job, it's my craft, and I want to be a master at my craft. It's not just me coming in punching a clock, going from 9 to 5 and doing the bare minimum."

"This is my craft, I want to perfect it."

Working on his own, working with O'Brien, Slater improved. He draws double-teams when he's on the field, opponents doing whatever they can to keep him from making a tackle on punt coverage or kickoff coverage.

More times than not, he's still the first player to get to the returner.

He has refined his craft to the point that he is considered by some the best special teams player in the NFL; last month, he was named to the Pro Bowl for the second straight year.

"There's something that sets the elite apart from everybody else, at any position, and to me it's really a desire and a passion that you have for what you do," O'Brien said. "Not only understanding it and wanting to be good at it but wanting to be the best at what you do. And the positions he plays are the hard ones, so that's a credit to Matt."

"When I talk to my peers, other coaches from different teams across the league, and they come up and say, 'Did you have Matthew Slater at UCLA?' I'm excited to talk about him," Dorrell said.

"I was very proud of what he did at UCLA but I'm even more proud of how he's established himself with such a great reputation, and also to be recognized as really the best special teams player in the league, that says a lot.

"He's a self-made man and he did a lot of that on his own because of how hard he works."

For the father, who didn't think his son was cut out for the game, who for a long time didn't appreciate the work done by special teams players, seeing his son's success is humbling.

"I always knew [special teams] was an important aspect of winning, it was just, in my heart of hearts, I didn't value it as much as some of the other positions," Jackie said. "It's been humbling to watch my son go that route.

"This is the opportunity that he was given to get on the field at UCLA, this is the opportunity he was given to get in a training camp in the National Football League, it's the opportunity he's taken advantage of to make one of the best teams in the country, and it's the opportunity he's taken advantage of to distinguish himself as one of the best players in the best league in the world."

### **Proud of the burden**

When Matthew Slater steps onto the football field, it is with the last name of a Pro Football Hall of Fame player on his back.

He is glad he isn't an offensive lineman, with the burden of playing the same role his father did, with the expectations of playing it at the same level. There was pressure enough when he was younger to be like his father.

But Jackie raised him to be his own man, and on the football field he certainly is.

"It's hard because, no matter what I do, I'll always be the son of Jackie Slater," said Matthew. "But you know what, I'm OK with that. I'm OK with being the son of Jackie Slater because I am the son of Jackie Slater.

"But what I have to remember is I can't be him, I won't be him, I just have to be Matthew. He told me that at a young age, and even though at times I may struggle with that, I just have to be me and try to represent the name as well as I can."

On and off the field, he does.

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## OL Bryan Stork

# The Providence Journal

## **Bryan Stork wasn't going to let anything stand in way of NFL career**

By MARK DANIELS  
September 28, 2014

FOXBORO — Bryan Stork was ready for the worst. He knew it would happen at any moment. His coaches knew. His teammates knew. His family and friends knew.

His father was going to die.

Larry Stork's battle with colon cancer started when his youngest son was in eighth grade. By the time Bryan Stork was a senior at Vero Beach High School, the condition worsened and his dad was moved to a local hospice that September.

Former Vero Beach coach Gary Coggin remembers that time well. It'd be hard to forget, he said. Bryan Stork didn't practice much during the weeks leading up to Vero Beach's big district game against Jupiter High School. The budding offensive lineman was in and out of practice. Every time he left, they expected the worst.

And then it happened.

On Oct. 22, 2008, Larry Stork passed away. It was a Wednesday, two days before that game with Jupiter. After the funeral, Coggin told Stork that it was OK for him to take some time off to spend with his family, but the 17-year-old refused.

"He looked at me like Bryan does and said, 'Coach, there's no question. I've got to play tonight,' " Coggin said. "He knew his dad was watching."

On Oct. 24, a grieving Bryan Stork strapped on his helmet, put on his Vero Beach uniform and took out his anger, his pain and every feeling of sadness on those opposing Jupiter Warriors.

They didn't stand a chance.

"He was a monster," Coggin said. "His side of the ball was just killing people. We just kept running it behind him and whatever we needed we were getting."

Vero Beach won the game, 29-6.

"I'm telling you, it was the greatest game he ever played. Ever," Coggin said. "He was so motivated and so focused. His foundation was solid. He knew that his dad had been hurting so long and he had no more pain and was there to watch and support him. I may even start tearing up here thinking about the story again. My missus cries every time we talk about it."

Bryan Stork was forced to grow up fast, but it set a rock-solid foundation that's carried this ever-tough Florida native to the Patriots today.

YOU CAN'T TEACH toughness. Some have it. Some don't. Bryan Stork was forced into it by a cruel twist of fate that forever affected his family. But even during those hard nights when his father was sick, the teenager always pressed on.

"If two words can describe Bryan, it's mentally tough," Tom Siano said. "That would be my definition of that young man all the way around."

If there's anyone who can accurately define who this soft-spoken rookie center is, it's Siano. A personal trainer, he first met Stork when Siano was the defensive coordinator at Vero Beach. He started to train the promising offensive lineman when he was a junior. The pair only grew closer when Stork's father passed away.

"I really kind of adopted him," Siano, who still trains Stork to this day, said. "That's kind of the truth. He was my red-headed stepchild."

Although Stork worked hard with Siano before his father's passing, the trainer saw a different side of this high-school athlete afterward.

"When his dad was sick, Bryan would go get him from the hospice, pick him up and bring him home," Siano said. "Carry him, literally, put him in his truck and take him home, hang out with him for a few hours and take him back. Bryan's a grown-ass man and he has been for a long time. That's part of what made him that way, having to go through that loss."

Stork was around 240 pounds when he started working with Siano. When he went to Florida State, he was up around 290. He got there through hard work and never backed down from a challenge.

"That's the kind of kid he was. He never took shortcuts," Coggin said. "A lot of kids, when they get a little bit of hype, they want to take the easy road and sit back on what they did in the past. Bryan never did that. I think that he knew what was going to get him there was that extra time. Every summer he and Tom were running on the beach, and running and lifting. I give Tom a lot of credit for preparing Bryan to get where he got."

STORK IS AS CONFIDENT as he is tough.

He's so confident, in fact, that all you have to do is look at the tattoo on his right shoulder to understand. It sits below a silhouette of a football player and above a tribal arm band. It's red and blue, faded throughout the years, but it's still easy to read those three small letters — NFL.

Stork had the NFL logo permanently inked on his arm, for everyone to see, before his freshman season in high school. It was the first thing Siano noticed when he met Stork. He poked it and told him the initials meant "not for long."

Coggin first saw Stork during a freshman team practice. The offensive lineman was the only one out there staying with his block, to the point where he would "drive and drive and drive, and pretty much bury his opponent."

When he met Stork after the game he was shocked to see this high school freshman with an NFL logo on his arm.

"There wasn't any doubt in my mind that I knew what that young man wanted to do when he grew up," Coggin said. "No telling how long he had it before I saw it. I've been lucky to coach several kids that have gone on and played in the NFL, but Bryan was special."

Bill Belichick didn't need to see a tattoo. The Patriots' coach saw all he needed to see after meeting and scouting the Florida State center prior to selecting him in the fourth round of the 2014 NFL Draft.

"He's into football. He's really a football guy; loves football, works really hard at football," Belichick said. "He wants to be a football player and he's dedicated himself to it; all those qualities that you love in any player, but especially an offensive lineman. ... I thought he was as good as any center that we saw this year, the last couple years."

STORK'S NOT ONE for talking, although he did acknowledge he steps back every now and then to enjoy where he's at. Coggin describes him as being "self-contained."

When asked about his father, Stork replied, "It happened in the past, when I was 17. I'm over it, and I'm just trying to be my own man and improve and make a living."

And the truth is, he'd rather be working out, reading his playbook or watching video than talking about himself.

"He doesn't like the limelight," Siano added. "He doesn't want people to put him on a pedestal. He wants to play football. That's all this dude wants to do — train and play football."



## Patriots football journey: Bryan Stork

By Lee Schechter  
December, 20, 2014

FOXBOROUGH, Mass -- New England Patriots rookie center Bryan Stork adopts an all-business, all-football approach. With his burly red beard and stoic facial expressions, he also has an intimidating look that makes him a nice fit on the team's offensive line.

But behind it all is a 24-year-old who has been through a lot in his life. Stork's father, who was also his best friend, passed away in 2008 after battling cancer.

"I always wanted to hang out with my dad," Stork said. "He was always working a lot. I knew he worked hard and I wanted to do the same."

Stork took his father's lessons of hard work and poured his passion into the game of football. And it has paid off so far.

Stork shares his "football journey" as part of our weekly feature:

When he first started playing football: "Organized [football] in fifth grade. But I had a pair of pads when I was 5 years old. So I was running around in them all the time. I slept in them. I'm not kidding [about that]."

**First position he played:** "Fullback for a day and then quarterback. And linebacker, defensive line and kicker."

**Role models:** "I definitely looked up to Brett Favre. I grew up a Packers fan. I would say my dad, too."

**Favorite players other than Brett Favre:** "I liked pretty much everyone on the Packers -- Robert Brooks, Reggie White."

**His dad's pizza parlor:** "We had a mom-and-pop Italian restaurant. I was working from the time I was 4 or 5. I could make a pizza by the time I was probably 5 years old. I could still make a pizza if I had to. It's like riding a bike, you don't forget it. They were always good."

**What he wanted to be when he grew up:** "I either wanted to be a pilot or a football player when I was a kid because [my dad] was a pilot as well."

**Plans to be a pilot still?** "I tried getting my license a couple of years ago back in Tallahassee, but I was too big to fit in the plane. The guy said it wasn't safe for me to learn how to fly. Bummer."

**When he became hooked on football:** "I think it was my brother that played high school and he brought home his helmet and there's also a picture of him holding me watching the Dallas Cowboys win a Super Bowl. I vaguely remember Deion Sanders standing up with the Lombardi above his head. That's probably the earliest memory of football that I have."

**Story behind his NFL tattoo:** "I was 15 years old and my dad wanted to get a tattoo as well. Me and my dad were like buddies because we lived together, just me and him down in Florida. He had cancer and so I don't know why, but he got a tattoo with a crab on it -- that stands for cancer, the zodiac sign. That's the first time he beat [cancer]. And he was like, 'Well, you can get a tattoo as well,' so he signed off on that. I didn't know what to get and said, 'I guess I will get an NFL tattoo and if I don't make it, I'm going to look really stupid. So I better make it.'"

**Making it in the NFL:** "You never make it. I'm [still] just trying to make it."

**Favorite football memory at Vero Beach High School:** "We were always 9-3, second round of playoffs. I really enjoyed my junior year of playing. It was fun. I played tight end, caught some passes. I dated a cheerleader. It was kind of like the perfect high school [year] ... but it really was not. It was football. It was fun. I enjoyed the guys. And I played a lot of defense that year, which I really enjoyed."

**Moving around to various positions:** “I was a strong-side tackle -- whatever way we ran the ball, I went to that side and then sophomore year I got thrown into the fire and had to play left tackle on varsity. During that following spring Coach [Gary] Coggin threw a football at me and said, 'Hey Stork, catch it.' And I caught it. And he said I was going to try tight end. I played mostly tight end my junior year and then senior year I had to go to tackle. I think I played right tackle.”

**Why he chose Florida State:** “In Vero Beach, everybody is a Florida fan and I couldn't stand those kids that went to Florida. A couple of my buddies were Florida State fans and I thought it would be so cool to go play there because we were always playing [NCAA Football video game]. And they came knocking. I always liked Coach [Bobby] Bowden.”

**Sporting a beard:** “I never knew I had a red beard until I was a junior in high school. I grew out a goatee and it was red and people thought I dyed it. I think it was 2012 and I just quit shaving after camp and just let it go and go and it just kept getting longer and then it just became a thing. It's easy not to shave [laughs]. The red beard ... It's the Irish.”

**On playing with Heisman Trophy winner Jameis Winston:** “It was a good time. Believe it or not, he's more grown-up than you think. As far as football, he knows his stuff pretty well. He's a very intelligent kid. Definitely had some good memories with him playing football.”

**On winning the Rimington Award for the nation's top center:** “It wasn't an individual award. They say they are individual awards, but I had good guys playing next to me that helped me out and I helped them out. That was just a whole team effort. Everybody got awards that year and it's just because we all played for each other and everybody got what they wanted.”

**On winning a national championship in his final year:** “I can always lay my head down at night knowing I gave it my all in college. I never have to look back or think back on something like that knowing that I went out the best the way I could possibly go. I've moved on now and trying to make the best of where I'm at now.”

**His nickname of 'Papa' or 'Grandpa' at FSU:** “It's because I was there forever. I did the whole five-year plan, so they called me 'Pops'. Yeah, I definitely [embraced it].”

**Pre-draft workout with Bill Belichick:** “I was so excited. I was up -- I don't think we had to be there until 8 in the morning -- but I was up at 5, getting my mind ready to go because I know how Coach Belichick is and I wanted to be a part of his team. And lo and behold, here I am.”

**His label as a Belichick type of guy:** “You can never be his guy. You have to keep working at it, and working at it, and working at it. I'll never be there, but I have to keep working at it. You know what I mean?”

**Going from national championship team to the Patriots:** “Now it's the NFL, anybody can win on any day. It wasn't like we could just walk out there and steamroll. It doesn't work like that. This is the National Football League and you have to be ready for anything.”

**If he ever thought he would be a starter with Tom Brady:** “I just took it day by day and I'm still taking it day by day. I could be the backup tomorrow. There's no telling.”

**On what it's like to play with Brady:** “It's definitely cool. It's just like any other quarterback -- you need a good snap to get it to the quarterback so the quarterback can make the play or throw or hand it off. So you just have to make sure you get it right. I'm a fiery guy, too. So [Brady's passion] works.”

**On Brady's comments about his sweatiness:** “I guess we are practicing for a rainy day [laughs].”

**Relationship with the offensive line:** “We're good. It's kind of weird because they are all older than I am, they all have families and kids and I'm single and young. I go home to nothing and they go home to wives and kids. But we will hear a song from the '90s and I will be like, 'Dan [Connolly] were you in high school when this song came out? He's like, 'I was in third grade.'”

**Summing up his football journey:** “It's been fun. It's been the longest, hardest, but most fun thing I've ever done and it's not over yet. So hopefully I still have a long way to go.”

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## OL Sebastian Vollmer

# The Boston Globe

### **Vollmer has been a great import for Patriots**

By John Powers  
January 11, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — Since the days of Gerhard Schwedes, Patriots rookies have performed skits that ranged from delightful to dreadful. But until Sebastian Vollmer took the stage four years ago, none of them had done it auf Deutsch.

“He was speaking in German and no one knew what the hell he was talking about,” quarterback Tom Brady remembered. “I don’t know what he was saying. I don’t know if it was insulting at some point. Maybe it was.”

The kid from Kaarst could have been reciting the Bundesspielordnung, the football rulebook, and the veterans wouldn’t have known. Since then, the man they call “Seabass” and his star-spangled teammates have come to be on the same page in a common language and Vollmer has added a leviathan presence to the right side of the offensive line, checking in at 6 feet 8 inches and 320 pounds.

“He has the kind of size which is rare,” said coach Bill Belichick. “Strength, quickness, athleticism for his size that’s pretty special.”

Since Vollmer made NFL history as the first European-developed player ever drafted, there has been a steady stream of Teutonic talent coming into American high schools and colleges. Markus Kuhn, who played at North Carolina State, was a rookie defensive tackle for the Giants this season. Five Germans played for the Wyoming varsity. Kasim Edebali started at defensive end for Boston College. And if Bjoern Werner, Florida State’s dynamic defensive end, decides to come out early, he’ll likely be one of the first 10 players taken in April.

‘It was not an easy decision for myself, because I was leaving everything behind at 20 years old.’

“The week after Vollmer was drafted, I got 10 or 12 e-mails from coaches around New England and the East,” said Peter Springwald, vice president of the American Football Association of Germany (AFVD), which has 45,000 members and 25,000 active players. “If Werner goes first round, I will get a new telephone number.”

It’s not that Walter Camp’s version of football was unknown in Germany before the Patriots plucked Vollmer out of the University of Houston in the second round in 2009. Five cities had teams in the now-defunct NFL Europe league, and the German Football League, which was founded in 1979, has 16 clubs ranging from the Schwabisch Hall Unicorns to the Marburg Mercenaries, plus a robust junior program.

“Now you see German kids who are 20 and have already played 10 years,” said Springwald, who picked Vollmer for the junior national team.

Vollmer got a comparatively late start. As virtually all of his countrymen do, he began as a fussball player (Fortuna Dusseldorf is his hometown club) before switching to swimming, where he was an exceptionally big fish in a small pool. When he began missing the team spirit, Vollmer wandered over to watch the Dusseldorf Panthers practice, and he was intrigued.

“I didn’t know much about it,” he recalled. “I remember going to the library and picking up a book to learn about terminology and what a tackle does. But I was really fascinated by it.”

So he suited up for the Panthers junior team, which went undefeated and won a couple of its 15 Junior Bowl titles during his tenure. By then he already was over 6 feet and 250 pounds, and the only question was where to use him.

### **Culture shock in Texas**

Vollmer was a tight end when he turned heads at the NFL's Global Junior Championships in San Diego in 2003, drawing interest from the likes of Indiana, Western Michigan, and Louisiana Tech. He chose Houston sight unseen.

"I talked to people who went to the university — well, one person," he said. "He was related to somebody I knew. I took a virtual tour online. I read about it, looked at pictures. But it's different when you get there."

The thermal and cultural shock was profound. Just coming to America was a tectonic shift for someone who'd grown up in a medieval town of 42,000 less than 20 miles from the Dutch border.

"It was not an easy decision for myself," he said, "because I was leaving everything behind at 20 years old."

Vollmer abruptly found himself dropped into a megalopolis of more than 620 square miles and 2 million people in the middle of a Texas summer.

"I remember stepping off the plane and it was like 100 degrees and 100 percent humidity," he recalled. "And I said, 'Oh my gosh!'"

Vollmer had taken English at the Quirinus Gymnasium school in Germany, which traces its roots to 1302, but he might as well have been speaking in Latin (which he'd also studied).

"There were rough days when you don't understand a word, but people at the school were so great to me," he said. "The first day, they were inviting me to a barbecue. They had no idea who I was but they were really nice. That made it obviously easier."

The English came quickly enough as Vollmer embarked on a course of study that would provide him with degrees in both economics and communications.

"I picked it up pretty fast, within the first semester I guess," he said. "Just talking to people, friends and my girlfriend, who would correct you when you said something wrong."

Vollmer began his football apprenticeship as a redshirt, which he concluded was normal.

"I don't think I was ever given a choice," he said. "I just assumed that's the way it was done. It was just that. I never really thought about it. Most guys did it."

After playing eight games as a backup tight end as a redshirt freshman, Vollmer missed the following season after back surgery. When he returned in 2007, he was a left tackle making his starting debut at Oregon in front of more than 57,000 Duck devotees, which were approximately 56,800 more spectators than the parents and girlfriends who'd watched his games in Dusseldorf.

Vollmer ended up starting every Saturday in his final two seasons, providing the big push for an offense that averaged more than 40 points and 560 yards when he was a senior.

### **Averting his eyes**

While Vollmer's sheer mass and might were attractive, it was unclear what kind of pro prospect he'd be.

"He was just, I would say, in general, behind," recalled Belichick.

The language issue, his back injury, his middling college films, his performance in the East-West Game, and the question of whether he was a left or right tackle all seemed to argue against Vollmer being picked early, which likely is why he wasn't invited to the February combine and wasn't glued to the set on draft day.

"It's not so much that I wasn't interested, but I told myself I was not going to freak myself out for 10 hours or however long it is," he said. "I watched some of it. I'd turn the TV on, but I knew beforehand I wasn't just going to sit there and watch it. People had me over for a barbecue — it was an unrelated event."

After New England got a closer look (offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia had run Houston's pro day), Vollmer began looking better.

"As we worked him out and got to know him, all those things cleared themselves up," said Belichick.

The Patriots didn't have a first-round pick, but after they used their first three second-round selections on defenders Patrick Chung, Ron Brace, and Darius Butler, they scooped up Vollmer as the 58th player overall and the 11th offensive lineman.

A franchise that had won three Super Bowls by mining overlooked gems had come up with another.

"They did their research, they did their homework, and they selected a player that certainly had a tremendous amount of upside and talent," said offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels, who was the Broncos head coach that year.

### **Adaptable and durable**

With Matt Light on the back end of his career, New England needed someone in the pipeline. Still, few observers on either side of the Atlantic figured that Vollmer would blossom as quickly as he did.

"When he was drafted, we said, 'Hmm, we will see,' " said Springwald. "We are a little surprised that he made it so fast."

So were the Patriots, who considered him a work in progress.

"I don't think any of us really thought that he would be able to contribute much as a rookie," said Belichick, who likens Vollmer's rapid evolution to that of Steve Neal, the former Olympic wrestler who played guard for New England. "We kind of saw him as a developmental player that might take a while but, of course, he played quite a bit his rookie year."

What Vollmer had going for him, besides his altitude and avoirdupois, was his uncommon intelligence and flexibility.

"He's very quick-witted and thinks quickly and adapts quickly and can really process information probably as well as anybody can," assessed Belichick, who had no problem starting Vollmer in last season's Super Bowl after he'd missed the previous seven games with foot and ankle injuries.

Moving from the left side of the line to the right, which Vollmer did after his rookie season, was no problem.

"Whatever they tell me, I do," he said.

If a tight end or two were to go down, Vollmer happily would step in.

"I don't know if you want to see me on a route," he said. "But you never know."

Until then, he'll be a fixture on the O-line, an established presence in a locker room that has only a half-dozen draftees with longer tenure.

"He's been durable, he's tough, he's athletic, he's strong — one of the strongest guys I've ever seen," testified Brady. "He's got a great attitude. It's always about the team. He's a great player."

Like Zoltan Mesko, the Romanian-born punter with whom he has shared growing-up-in-Europe memories, Vollmer fits comfortably among colleagues who learned their football in Florida, Texas, and California.

"I speak kein [no] Englisch," Mesko will joke when he sees him being interviewed. Vollmer spoke it fluently when he first turned up on Route 1 but he didn't mind sending confusing signals on skit night.

"Maybe we've got a tape of that," Brady mused. "I've got to refresh myself. It's been a long time."

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## RB James White



### **Patriots football journey: James White**

By Mike Reiss  
October, 18, 2014

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- New England Patriots rookie running back James White has had to be patient over parts of his football career, so the 2014 season isn't anything new for him.

White wasn't a full-time starter at Wisconsin until his senior year. At St. Thomas Aquina High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, White was teammates with several highly touted players who would later go on to the NFL, such as Bengals running back Giovani Bernard.

"It was great, playing the same position, competing with each other and making each other better. We'd hang out off the field, too," White said, adding that one game against Byrnes (S.C.) High School drew as many as 15,000 fans.

As a Patriots rookie, White has mostly been learning behind the scenes this season. He has played in one of the team's first seven games -- Sept. 29 at Kansas City, in a limited role.

The 22-year-old White shares his "football journey" as part of our weekly feature:

**When he first started playing football:** "When I was 7 or 8 years old. My dad and my brother played football. Pretty much all the men in my family played football, and I looked up to them. We'd play football in the yard and I was always running routes and active."

**Favorite teams and players growing up:** "I was always an Eagles fan. Brian Westbrook was my favorite running back. He could do it all out there -- a receiving back, a guy who could run inside, who could run outside, he'd block."

**Role models in his life:** "My dad [Tyrone White] and my grandfather [James Willis]. My dad is a hard-working guy who helps others, and at the same time he puts his family first. My grandfather is the same way; he's a guy that is heavily involved in the church and that definitely helped me. He's like a second father."

**More about his parents, Tyrone and Lisa:** "My dad is in law enforcement and my mom is a probation specialist, too. You heard plenty of stories and things of that nature, and I think that definitely helped me stay out of trouble."

**Favorite memories at St. Thomas Aquina High School:** "We won two state championships. I think that definitely got me prepared for college, which got me prepared for the NFL. It's a great atmosphere, when two good teams face off, especially two teams that have a history. It attracts a big crowd, people from everywhere. It's kind of like a small-college atmosphere."

**Well-known teammates in high school:** "Giovani Bernard [Bengals]. Brandon Linder [Jaguars]. LaMarcus Joyner [Rams]. Marcus Roberson [Rams]. Major Wright [Buccaneers]."

**Why he chose to attend Wisconsin:** "I wanted to branch off, see new things. They have a great history running the football, and I wanted to run in the I-formation more than the spread stuff."

**Favorite memories at Wisconsin:** "My freshman year, beating Ohio State. It was a great opportunity for me, with the chance to score a touchdown to help us seal the deal. Just being with my teammates -- Montee Ball, Melvin Gordon - - we were together all the time off the field. That was a great time in college."

**Memories of being drafted by the Patriots (fourth round, 130th overall):** "It was definitely exciting, a dream come true. I don't take it for granted. I'm blessed. It's hard work. To be the best, and compete with the best players, you have to work hard and put the time in."

**What he loves about football:** "The team aspect. It takes everybody on the field to win the game. You can't win a game with one person -- everyone has to do their job in order for the team to be successful. Bonding with these guys,

being with them every day, hanging out, having fun, sharing stories. Everybody comes from a different place and there are different stories for everyone in terms of how they got here, and I think that's great."

**What he's most proud of with his own story:** "Just sticking with it. I was never really the guy that got the most attention or the most carries, but always staying motivated no matter what the situation was."

**Summing up his football journey:** "In Little League football, you always say, 'I want to make it to the NFL.' Just to be here is a dream come true."

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## DB Tavon Wilson

# The Boston Globe

### **Patriots' Tavon Wilson used football as an escape**

By Shalise Manza Young  
October 14, 2012

FOXBOROUGH — Darlene Williams had just buried her daughter. Tavon Wilson was coming to grips with losing his mother.

That Saturday, just home from the funeral for Robin Williams, who had drowned at a pool party, Darlene went to her grandson's room to check on him.

His Pop Warner football team had a big game that afternoon. The boy, only 12, looked at his grandma and said he wanted to play. Going to the field was his way to cope.

"I said, 'Well, let's gear up and get going,' " Williams recalled Friday from her Washington, D.C., home. " 'Get your butt going, let's move. I'm ready to go with you, let's go.' "

So Wilson, his grandmother — who now would be raising him and his sister full-time — and his aunt and cousins went to the game, just as they had done on other Saturdays, supporting the boy and his decision.

'Football has always been something that got me away from my problems and my worries in my life.'

His coach, understandably, was shocked to see Wilson, but Williams said he wanted to play. He was going to play.

Really, more than anything, he needed to play.

That's how Wilson dealt with his mother's death. Williams tried to get him to see a psychologist, someone who could help, but he wouldn't go. Instead he went to the fields.

Now, his mother's name is on his arm, her face etched over his heart. She was never far from his thoughts as he journeyed from Pop Warner to H.D. Woodson High School to Illinois to second-round pick of the Patriots in April. She still is never far from his thoughts.

And he still uses the game as an escape.

"Football has always been something that got me away from my problems and my worries in my life, so that's what I used it for," Wilson said.

His means of getting away has become a job. A three-year starter at cornerback and safety for the Illini, he quickly has become a versatile contributor for the Patriots, part of the rebuilding of the defense into a younger, quicker unit.

When he was taken in the second round, 48th overall, some draft experts were shocked that the 6-foot, 210-pound defensive back had been selected so high; to them, Wilson was a fifth- or sixth-round pick at best.

But one man knew better.

Freddie Simmons introduced Wilson to football and was his first coach. He also was his grandfather, Williams's husband, and a father figure in his life, as his own father had been killed when he was a baby. Simmons wanted Wilson to know the game, the mental aspects as well as the physical.

If grandma tried to point out one or two mistakes in a game, Wilson didn't pay her much mind. But if grandpa called with advice . . .

" 'OK, OK, granddad, OK,' " Williams quotes her grandson's response, chuckling.

As a means of explaining why he listened to Simmons but not her, Wilson would tell his grandmother that his grandfather knew what he was talking about.

He listened to Williams for nearly everything else. If he wanted to play football, she required that his grades be kept up. She admits that perhaps she was overprotective — she had three biological children but raised Tavon and his sister and has cared for several others — but also let them discover things on their own.

She tells the story of when Wilson was 14 or 15 and he and his friends were headed to a popular go-go spot in D.C. She couldn't sleep, and heard him come running in the house. There had been an incident with shots fired, and while no one he was with was hurt, it was enough to scare Wilson.

He had never been a problem child, but after that night, Wilson vowed he would not make his grandmother worry about him being out late or with the wrong crowd.

The only issues, Williams jokes, involved girls who had their eyes on the star football player.

### **Joy on draft night**

At Illinois, which he chose over a few other schools, including Boston College, Wilson became a steady contributor, moving to safety for his junior season when the Illini needed someone at the position. In his final season, he started 12 games at cornerback and the other back at safety.

He harbored the dream of playing in the NFL, but he had been taught to put the best interests of the team ahead of his own. In doing so, he made himself into a player the Patriots wanted.

"I never really focused on it," he said. "You just go out there, try to help your teammates the best way you could in high school and college. That's something I always focused on was helping my team reach their goal."

When draft weekend came, Wilson told his grandfather to be home on Saturday, when the fourth through seventh rounds are held, since that is when he thought he'd be picked.

But on Friday night, Simmons retired to the basement, as was his custom, and began calling all of his friends. He was sure that his grandson would be drafted in the second round — he just knew it. His play, his diversity in the defensive backfield . . . Simmons believed that made Wilson an attractive prospect.

Upstairs, the grandson busied himself sending text messages as he sat with his grandmother, and then looked at her.

"Grandma, I just missed a phone call."

Before Williams could finish reminding him that he'd be able to answer the phone if he stopped sending so many texts, her phone began to ring. It was the Patriots.

His grandfather was right.

The family hollered to Simmons, and as he trudged up the stairs, all of the friends that he had called started showing up at the door, along with Wilson's former coaches and other friends and family members.

"He was happy," Williams said of her husband. "He was so, so happy."

### **Staying in school**

When Wilson returned from his initial trip to New England in the days right after the draft, he had a Patriots hat and T-shirt for Simmons.

On May 14, a little more than two weeks after his grandson became an NFL player, Simmons died. There was no football game that weekend for Wilson to find solace in.

Wilson is soft-spoken, the dreadlocks he wore in college gone in favor of a close-cut taper, a thin mustache and goatee neatly trimmed. Proving that on-field lessons aren't the only thing he has picked up quickly, he says he's taking things week-by-week, enjoying the challenges, and is excited for the rest of the season.

Williams reveals that her grandson considered leaving Illinois a year early for the draft, but she has insisted on two things for her children and grandchildren: that they put God first in their life and education second.

She wanted to try to persuade him to stay, but instead decided to take a harder stance after talking with her own grandmother, Eddy, Wilson's great-great-grandmother.

"She loved her 'Tay-Tay,'" Williams said. "She told me, 'There ain't no trying [to get Wilson to stay in school] — you're going to tell him. Because if it's for him, he'll get there.'"

Wilson stayed and was drafted, and Williams got the diploma she so desired for her first grandchild to earn.

Eddy Williams didn't hold her tongue for anyone, even her beloved Tay-Tay. Wilson said that helped him in recent years, as he went through high school and college.

When you live for as long as she did, there's a lot of wisdom to pass on. Eddy died less than a month ago, well past her 112th birthday. For some time, she was believed to be the oldest resident of Washington D.C.

She lived a good long life, Wilson said, so he tries not to be too upset.

He was going to the field for practice not long after the interview with a reporter, another day of football to soothe anything that troubles him.

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