

2020 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 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."

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."



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. Parcells instituted the basic philosophy, which he picked up during his 1980 stint with Patriots coach Ron Erhardt and coordinator Fritz Shurmur, but Belichick led the group.

“(Belichick) put his own ideas in it and refined it, and we kind of modernized some of the coverages a little bit as we went,” Parcells 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 Parcells 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,” Parcells said. “We were big underdogs in that game. Just managed to pull it out.”

First opportunity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Second chance

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

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

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

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

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

After a 5-11 season in 2000 and Drew Bledsoe's injury in Week 2 of 2001, Belichick rode Tom Brady the rest of the way. Belichick then sold the "one game at a time" mantra after a 30-10 Week 4 loss to the Dolphins by burying a football at practice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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' TM 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.

How Josh McDaniels and Brad Stevens became suburban dad buddies

By Ben Rohrbach
AUGUST 21, 2018

Tracy Stevens, the wife of Celtics head coach Brad Stevens, was driving home after a game when the sports commentators on the radio began dissecting Jumbotron appearances by two prominent fans in attendance at the TD Garden that night: New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick and his offensive coordinator, Josh McDaniels. The hosts joked that while Belichick sat courtside, McDaniels was stuck in the “cheap seats” with the rest of the commoners.

“Hey, those aren’t the cheap seats,” Tracy recalls protesting to the radio on that winter night in 2017. “He was sitting with me.”

The commentators — and sports fandom in general — could be forgiven for not knowing that two of New England’s star young coaches hang out quite a bit when the cameras aren’t trained on them. Stevens, 41, and McDaniels, 42, have six children between them (two and four, respectively) and live 15 minutes apart in Boston’s suburbs. Both families tend to congregate at the Garden, where their wives can chat and the kids can escape to the depths of the arena. McDaniels typically attends about eight Celtics games a year to support his friend.

“I love the team, I love the coach, and I love the game,” he says, “so as many times as my wife will let me go, I’ll go.” He catches the rest of the games on TV.

“It reminds me a lot of when he watches his brother’s games,” says McDaniels’s wife, Laura, referring to Ben McDaniels, an offensive analyst for the University of Michigan. “He’s talking to the TV, and then at times he’ll say, ‘What are you doing?’ My husband analyzes everything to death. There are very few things he is not working through his head all the time. He has a busy brain.”

The obsession is mutual. Though Stevens hails from the Indianapolis area, he’s a full-fledged New England fan.

“I guess my Indy friends don’t always love to hear this,” he says, “but yeah — I root for the Pats.”

So how do two of New England’s most famous coaches like to spend their free time in the offseason together? “Dad stuff” is how Stevens characterizes it. They’ve barbecued with their families, and this summer they managed to squeeze in a round of golf. Josh has visited Brad during summer league play in Las Vegas. Their adolescent sons — 14-year-old Jack McDaniels and 12-year-old Brady Stevens — have crossed paths in spring and summer basketball. Despite the fact that they’re originally from the Cleveland area, the McDaniels family now cheers for the Celtics. This past spring, they attended a couple of playoff games, including Game 7 against the Cleveland Cavaliers. After that defeat, McDaniels sent his friend a sympathetic message, just as Stevens had done for him following Super Bowl LII.

“You understand how much is invested in those things,” says Stevens. “Josh understood I probably wasn’t getting as many texts after Game 7 as I was after some of our wins, so it was good to hear from him early on. You appreciate that about somebody who’s been through it.”

Talk to Stevens and McDaniels for any length of time, and it’s easy to see that they share a similar coaching philosophy and a genuine interest in learning from each other. They maintain a steady stream of conversation through regular phone calls, and their chain of text messages is filled with ideas about how to face hard decisions. They are chasing the legacies of Red Auerbach and Bill Belichick — one memorialized with a bronze statue near Faneuil Hall, the other still carving out his body of work — both among the most legendary coaches in their sports. Now they’re helping each other navigate the sports landscape of New England, where they’re learning to carry the expectations of two dynasties on their shoulders.

Neither Stevens nor McDaniels remembers exactly how they first met, but their friendship was sparked by a sense of mutual admiration. Stevens joined the Celtics in 2013, when the Celtics made him the NBA’s youngest coach with a six-year contract that has since been extended. Like so many football fans, he was impressed with the Patriots’ winning culture. Meanwhile, McDaniels had watched closely as Stevens led NCAA underdog Butler University to

consecutive men's basketball title games. He reached out to the new coach in town, and a conversation that started over lunch is still going five years later.

"We can have a one-question phone call turn into 45 minutes," Stevens says. "That's pretty normal. Because then we get into the deeper conversation of trying to maximize this [coaching] experience, and as many differences as there are, there are a lot of similarities."

McDaniels assured Stevens early on that New England was a great place to coach and "a tremendous place to raise your family." That came as a relief to Brad and Tracy, who were concerned about how their children might adjust to growing up in the limelight.

If they weren't mainstays on local sports programming, McDaniels and Stevens might blend into suburbia. Though still boyish looking, both men give off a pleasant Midwestern-dad vibe. Stevens disguises a fiery competitiveness behind his mild manner on the sidelines and drops dry jokes in conversation, whereas McDaniels strikes a more serious tone, like his father, Thom, a legendary high school football coach. The elder McDaniels believes his son has learned the art of stoicism from Stevens and Belichick — and become a better coach for it.

Though Belichick kept his e-mail responses to inquiries about McDaniels characteristically short, he describes his protege as a dedicated and quick study "who got along with everybody and brought a great personality to the staff." Those who know Stevens describe him much the same way.

"I don't look at myself as giving a Knute Rockne speech every other day," says Stevens. "I want to make sure I know these guys as well as I can. I want to make sure they know that we have a real interest in them, on and off the court. I think maybe to me that's the part I enjoy the most."

McDaniels and Stevens have also bonded over their roots in Canton, Ohio, the town where Josh spent most of his childhood in the shadow of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, which is also where Brad's mother worked summers in the gift shop during college. Their wives both grew up in and around Cleveland. Stevens enjoyed a childhood in Zionsville, Indiana, seemingly plucked right out of Hoosiers, though he grew up in a subdivision instead of a farmhouse. After half-days of kindergarten, he rewatched VHS tapes of college basketball games — his first film sessions, as it were. When he got a little older, Stevens and his father would join friends at the local Steak 'n Shake to discuss games. Meanwhile, in Ohio, McDaniels started tagging along to practice with his father when he was about 5 years old.

"The reward for cleaning your plate at supper that night was that you got to go to two-a-day [practices] the next day," says Thom McDaniels, who was named the nation's top high school football coach by USA Today in 1997 in the midst of a decades-long career. "I don't know if it was football practice or stopping at the Kustard Korner on the way home that cinched the deal for him, but there reached a point when he was 7 or 8 that he had to have a practice plan in his hand. He wanted to have a script so that he knew what play we were running. He was adorned with wristbands, a ballcap, and a practice plan."

Those days turned to high school stardom and Division III careers in football and basketball for Josh and Brad at John Carroll and DePauw universities, respectively. Stevens majored in economics, McDaniels in mathematics. Both accepted entry-level positions at stable companies after college — Stevens as a pharmaceutical marketing associate in Indianapolis and McDaniels as a plastics sales representative in Cleveland. Neither lasted much more than a year before trading their business attire for shorts and a whistle.

"Obviously, he's a basketball coach, and that's what he was born to do," McDaniels says of Stevens.

Stevens arrives at Patriots practice with pen and paper at least once almost every season, including twice last year. He studies how Belichick runs drills, sits in on the team meeting, and follows McDaniels from film session to film session. Stevens leaves with a full notebook every time, juiced, like a man who might get an endorphin rush from running a mathematical Olympics.

"He came home with lots of notes and lots of thoughts and was fascinated by how they run their logistics," says Tracy Stevens. "He was really energized by it. That's the thing about them; they love learning."

If McDaniels and Stevens are young Jedis, Belichick, with his seven Super Bowl rings (five as Patriots head coach, two from his stint with the New York Giants), is their Yoda. Their quest to replicate his success leads every conversation between the two men back to coaching, as they exchange precious morsels of information that might help them take that next step toward the summit.

"You walk into Patriot Place," Stevens is fond of saying, "and you walk out feeling inadequate." Adds McDaniels: "Bill's taught me most everything I know about how to do things at this level, and I learn from him every single day."

In turn, McDaniels also shadowed his friend at Celtics practice before a game against the Indiana Pacers in March and was blown away by how efficient it was.

"One thing he's helped me with is: Don't overcomplicate it," says McDaniels of his friend. "As much as you want to tell them 50 things they've got to do to win, it's much better to boil it down to three or four."

In basketball, "you're coaching the basics of spacing, of action, of playing off penetration, but there's a lot of randomness to a lot of those plays," says Stevens. "In football . . . a lot of it is very, very, very scripted, and it's incredible to watch that thought process up close."

Because of the differences between the two sports, their exchanges tend to focus less on X's and O's and more on coaching as a craft — leadership, communication, structure, team building, culture setting. They treat every life experience as a learning opportunity they can apply on the field or on the court.

"Ultimately why you win in sports many times is the same reason," says McDaniels, launching into the clichés that are both the staples of their public personalities and tentpoles of their teams' successes. "Don't beat yourself, work hard, be a good fundamentally sound team, and go out there and play the game to its completion and put your best foot forward every night and see what happens."

Dressed in a cutoff hoodie and a Patriots hat after a February 4 Celtics win, Stevens held a press conference that lasted just three minutes. "Football game to watch," he told reporters before rushing home to catch the Super Bowl.

While McDaniels has helped Stevens see the game through a different lens, mostly the Celtics coach just enjoys following football as a fan. "And I think he'll tell you, sometimes it's harder to be a fan than to be a coach," his wife says, "because it's totally out of your control."

One of the topics they obsess over most is how to relate to and keep up with their players — many of whom are part of a younger generation that feels light-years different from their own.

McDaniels helped steward Tom Brady's evolution from Super Bowl-winning system quarterback to record-setting MVP and, arguably, the greatest player in history. The bond between Brady and McDaniels played a role in the Patriots' push to retain their offensive coordinator this past February, though McDaniels maintains it was ultimately a "family decision." It was a move to stabilize a dynasty that appeared to be in turmoil.

"Life is about the quality of your relationships," Brady, who has worked directly with McDaniels for 12 of his 19 seasons, says in an e-mail, "and Josh and I will be friends for the rest of our lives."

Stevens was the first to tell star player Gordon Hayward he had NBA potential when he lured him to play at Butler. Together, they reached the 2010 NCAA title game. The narrative that bound their careers, even as they parted ways, may have been overplayed, but Stevens "was always a phone call away," says Hayward. And when Hayward visited the Celtics in 2017 free agency, it felt like picking up where he left off with an old friend.

"He's always been so prepared, and I think that's what makes him so successful and so calm on the sidelines, too," says Hayward, who has similar appreciation for McDaniels after spending a day with him at Gillette Stadium last season, courtesy of Stevens. "He kind of knows the answers to the test before he takes it."

Both McDaniels and Stevens finished in the top 10 of their high school graduating classes, and that drive has carried over into their coaching careers. McDaniels was the architect of one of the most prolific offenses in NFL history at age 31, and Stevens was 33 when he shepherded Butler to within inches of an unthinkable NCAA upset. They have been labeled geniuses in some form or another by everyone from fans to their own players to historically great coaches like Tony Dungy and Gregg Popovich.

If fans understand anything about McDaniels and Stevens, they know the coaches deflect praise and are quick to credit their players for their teams' successes, which include 10 conference finals appearances between them as offensive coordinator and head coach, respectively.

Stevens says he's happy McDaniels will remain with the Patriots. "I'm glad he stayed, because it's easier to find a golf course to go play when you only live 15 minutes apart."

"When you go and watch Bill up close, Josh up close, some of the other great coaches who I've gotten to see, there are no stones unturned, and there are no steps skipped," Stevens says. "The work that they put in to be prepared for that day is enormous. There are certainly geniuses I'm sure out there, and I think that those guys are as smart as they come, but they're also as hard-working as they come. And that's what I try to emulate from those people — how much it takes to be good."

"None of us have cured cancer," says McDaniels. "We coach a game. Brad is really special in terms of his ability to get guys to do certain things well. Coaching takes on a lot of forms, man. It's not just strategy. It's motivation. It's leadership. It's inspiration. It's handling adversity. It's teaching. It's communicating. It's a lot of things. Don't ever put me in that category. Bill's special; Brad's special. Those guys are tremendous at what they do, and I think ultimately would say the same thing: We win because we've got good players and our players play well."

Their close proximity nearly came to an end in February. Less than 24 hours before McDaniels was about to be introduced as the Colts' next head coach, he made a dramatic about-face and decided to stay in New England. Stevens says he didn't talk to his friend very much during that time.

"You make yourself available, and if they want to call, they can. Otherwise, I know how crazy it gets, so I try to stay out of that unless people need to talk to me," Stevens says. "I was just like everybody else. I was curious to see what he ultimately decided to do, and I'm selfish — I'm glad he stayed, because it's easier to find a golf course to go play when you only live 15 minutes apart."

For Stevens, the NBA draft and summer league preceded a brief break that will allow him to explore New England and maybe another Patriots practice. For McDaniels, offseason workouts sandwiched an early June mini-camp, and then he traveled in search of more coaching lessons before training camp started in late July.

"If you ever stop learning at the levels that we're at, somebody's going to catch you and pass you by," McDaniels says. "I have so much more ahead of me, and I think he would feel the same way in terms of: What are we going to be 10 or 15 years from now? Hopefully we continue to grow and get better. I know I have through my relationship with him."

Stevens sometimes wishes he had stopped to smell the roses more often.

"To go from age 23 until now, I just feel like these 18 years have flown by, and there have been a lot of fun times and the relationships have been great, but it's a whirlwind right now," he says. "I think I'll probably reflect better on it when I'm done and rooting for whatever football team Josh is coaching at that time."

Maybe still in New England. "Hopefully," Stevens says. "Hopefully."

Secondary Coach Steve Belichick



Bill Belichick's son, new Patriots safeties coach, wants to be just like his dad

Mike Reiss

May 2, 2016

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- The oldest son of New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick settled into his chair Monday for his first official interview as the team's new safeties coach, and soon enough, there would be humor.

Steve Belichick, who paid his dues from 2012 to 2015 as an entry-level coach with the team, was asked about the challenges of sharing the same last name with one of the greatest coaches of all time. He laughed under his breath before looking up at the crowd of 15 to 20 reporters around him.

"This is one of them," he said of the intense media interest.

Elsewhere around the Patriots' media workroom, other assistants were engaged in interviews, but few, if any, had drawn the overflowing crowd that Belichick did.

He took it all in stride, perhaps a bit nervous for his first official media responsibility as a Patriots coach, yet striking the right mix between humility and humor that had some reporters buzzing afterward about the next generation of Belichicks in the coaching ranks.

What has it been like working for Bill Belichick?

"Obviously, I love my dad, he's my role model, my idol," the 29-year-old Belichick said. "I want to be just like him and I have since I knew what an idol was. It's rewarding for me to be able to see him more and learn from him more, because I've been away from him for high school and college."

Donning a gray Rutgers lacrosse sweatshirt to support his alma mater leading into next weekend's Big Ten tournament, Belichick playfully paid homage to the hoodie that his father has made famous.

"It's a good piece of clothing. I think everyone should have a hooded sweatshirt in their closet," he cracked.

That led to laughter among reporters, as did Belichick's response when asked if he has long-term goals to become a head coach one day: "I just hope to be here at the end of the day."

But if there was one thing that stood out more than anything from Belichick's 15 minutes answering questions from reporters, it was how seriously he takes his craft.

For example, when asked about what type of work he did the past four years as a low-level coach, he said simply, "My responsibilities were to help us win. If that was breaking down film, that was breaking down film; if that was throwing interceptions to defensive players to make them feel good, that's what I do. I'm here to win."

Sound familiar?

Belichick said he first remembers falling in love with football when he was 4. He had played at The Rivers School in Weston, Massachusetts, where he was a three-year starter at linebacker and fullback/tight end and also the team's long-snapper (a skill he learned from his late grandfather). Belichick ultimately went on to Rutgers, where he played lacrosse for four seasons before walking on to the football team as a long-snapper in preparation for a career in coaching.

He explained that he has always liked being part of a team, which means "having to put your personal success on the back burner for the betterment of the team, all to get to one goal."

Working 18 hours a day as an entry-level coaching assistant over the past four years certainly qualifies, and now that he's been elevated to a position coach, Belichick said, "It means everything to me."

That he's working under his father makes it even more special.

"I followed every single thing that he's done, and I've watched everything he's done, and he's the best that has ever done it -- he's my idol, he's my role model and he is my standard. So I just watch my dad," he said.

The Providence Journal

The education of Stephen Belichick

By Mark Daniels

Oct 3, 2015 at 11:36 PM

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

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

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

Related content Who can beat the Patriots? And who almost definitely won't?Donaldson: Fantasy football decision by NFL might not be a keeperNo Patriots game this week: Test your knowledge in our bye week quiz"We'd talk about some keys that the other team would have. Like formation or various other tendencies — stances and splits and things like that," Bill Belichick said.

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

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

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

As they say, like father like son.

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

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

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

THE GRIDIRON was his playground.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m not surprised he’s a coach, let’s put it that way,” Sullivan said.

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

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

ASK BILL BELICHICK about working with his son and he’ll smile and tell you it’s “awesome.”

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

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."

P Jake Bailey



Taking flight: Patriots' Bailey draws from family aviation tradition to elevate punting game

By Mac Cerullo
July 31, 2019

FOXBOROUGH — Jake Bailey has always been at home in the skies.

From a young age, the New England Patriots rookie punter developed a fascination with flight, fostered by a family tradition of aviation that stretches back generations.

"My great-grandfather was a private pilot, my grandpa flew for TWA Airlines for many years and was in the Air Force. My dad flew privately and during college it was something I was trying to pick up," Bailey said. "I got 40 hours in, 20 hours solo and it's something eventually down the road I'll try to finish up."

Through his flight experience, Bailey has developed a keen understanding of aerodynamics, and that has proven useful as he's put his pursuit of a pilot's license on hold to chase his NFL dream.

Bailey, who the Patriots traded up to draft in the fifth round this spring, is battling veteran Ryan Allen for the starting punter's job, and his unique understanding of how the ball moves through the air has given him a leg up compared to your typical rookie. While fans at training camp will immediately notice Bailey's booming leg, there is a lot more going on than simply booting the ball as high as possible.

"Lift with airplanes is the same as lift with punting," Bailey said. "You've got to make sure the plane cuts the wind and the ball cuts the wind. There's a lot of similarities."

Unlike Corey Bojorquez, who also boasted a huge leg but never mounted a serious challenge to Allen last summer, Bailey possesses both a scientific understanding of what makes the perfect punt and the ability to consistently execute on the field. He also has the ability to take kickoffs, and taken together, that combination has made him a serious threat to the veteran Allen's job.

"I think one of the things that should jump out is Jake does a great job of getting up through the ball, so his hang time-distance relationship is really good, and that's a ratio you look for to help your coverage unit," said Pete Alamar, who was Bailey's special teams coach at Stanford. "He's got exceptional leg speed and he combines that with exceptional flexibility. When you watch him punt it looks effortless."

During Bailey's time at Stanford, Alamar and his staff went to extraordinary lengths to try and help him perfect his mechanics. They teamed with Stanford's sports science department to track Bailey's leg speed in the same way a golfer might track their swing. They developed a proprietary statistic called the True Punter Index, which aimed to take into account everything that goes into a punt and produce a single, quantifiable number. Sort of like a punter's equivalent of QBR.

Using that statistic, Alamar graded Bailey's senior season and compared him to that fall's NFL punters. It wasn't a perfect comparison — they didn't have the directional figures for the NFL punters — but when taking everything into account, they found that Bailey's production would have already put him in the top five in the league.

That lined up with the eye-test as well. Among his highlights, Bailey recorded a school-record 84-yard punt against Cal, and on kickoffs he only surrendered four returns, sending the rest through the end zone for touchbacks.

Bailey will have a chance to make his NFL case in the coming weeks, starting next Thursday during the Patriots first preseason game against the Detroit Lions. The battle between him and Allen will be one of the most hotly contested of training camp, but whether it's in New England or somewhere else, Alamar believes Bailey has the tools to enjoy a successful career at the professional level.

"The three things you have to answer are is he physically capable of performing at that level, mentally capable and emotionally capable?" Alamar said. "And I think Jake checks all of those boxes."

If all goes well for Bailey, he may have to put his dream of becoming a pilot on hold for a bit longer.

DB Justin Bethel



Justin Bethel excited for his shot with Patriots

By Eric Rueb
Posted Oct 25, 2019

FOXBORO — After being released by the Baltimore Ravens, special-teams star Justin Bethel took a visit with the New England Patriots. A quick one.

"First, I wasn't sure it was going to be a signing now. I thought I was going to show up, see what happens and talk to them, but then it was like 'Yeah, OK, we're signing with them,'" Bethel said. "I was like 'oh, I don't have any clothes, but let's get to it.'"

When you think of weapons the Patriots acquired this week, Bethel probably wasn't a name that came to mind. As one of the NFL's top special-teams player, Bethel was more than happy to team up with Matt Slater, whose reputation on special teams is well known around the league.

"I was excited just to be in the AFC with him when I was with the Ravens. When I got here [during the visit] I was talking to him like 'what do you think the chances are of being on the same team with the man?' Bethel said. "It's exciting to finally get here and work with him hand-in-hand."

"He's been good. He's great. He's a great kid, he works hard, has a passion for his job. He understands what it is and understands his role," coach Bill Belichick said. "... He's embraced the positions we've put him in and like Sanu, trying to get up to speed as quickly as he can to be ready to go on Sunday."

Most don't dream of becoming a special teamer, but Bethel's been doing it for a while. He said he's been covering punts and kickoffs since high school and while at Presbyterian College. He was drafted in the sixth round of the 2012 NFL draft by the Arizona Cardinals and continued to work on special teams while spending some time at corner back. He was a Pro Bowl special teamer for the Cardinals in 2013-15.

"It just starts off with the want to. You have to want to do it," Bethel said. "... It's something where if you enjoy it and you're willing to actually put the effort in for it – no matter how tired you might be from defense – you can be a great special teams player."

Prior to this week, Bethel said he hasn't spent much time talking to Slater – "I met Matt at the first or second Pro Bowl when he was there, I mean one of the times they weren't in the Super Bowl" – but has already latched on to Slater and the rest of the group.

"He's definitely helping me. Him and Nate [Ebner], they're both doing good. They're making sure I'm coming along," Bethel said. "They're making sure I know what's going on."

Bethel should be on the field Sunday against Cleveland and against next week when the Patriots travel to face the team that just released him, the Baltimore Ravens.

"It's going to be interesting," Bethel said. "I was just there not too long ago and I'm sure those guys are ready to play against me. ... I'm sure they're dialing up whatever they can for me and Slater and everybody else we have. It'll be exciting. I know a lot of the guys because I was there for a while, so it'll be good to see them."

LB Ja'Whaun Bentley

The Boston Globe

Ja'Whaun Bentley, Carsen Edwards friendship just gets stronger

By Nicole Yang

November 15, 2019

FOXBOROUGH — Patriots linebacker Ja'Whaun Bentley sort of crinkles his nose when I say the word “friendship.”

“You keep saying ‘friendship,’” he points out.

It's not the preferred term to describe his relationship with Celtics rookie Carsen Edwards.

“That's my brother,” Bentley says. “We were never really friends. We were always brothers. Everybody else says ‘friends’. We say ‘brothers.’”

Bentley and Edwards met as student-athletes at Purdue in 2016. Bentley was a junior on the football team, while Edwards was a freshman on the basketball team. Neither can pinpoint the exact circumstances of their initial introduction, but Bentley was already friends with Vince Edwards (no relation to Carsen), a junior forward on the basketball team.

From there, the pair started hanging out more and more. They overlapped at Purdue for two years before Bentley graduated and was drafted 143rd overall in the fifth round of the 2018 NFL Draft. When Bentley left Purdue, however, his connection with Edwards didn't fizzle.

“We've literally talked ever since,” Edwards said. “Literally every single day.”

Bentley has continued to return to campus in West Lafayette, Ind., including a surprise visit for Edwards's 21st birthday this past March. A few months later, he also made a trip out to Texas to watch the NBA Draft with Edwards in his hometown.

Knowing Bentley, who played only three games last season before getting placed on season-ending injured reserve with torn biceps, had a busy recovery schedule ahead of training camp, Edwards cherishes the memory as one of his favorites.

“For him to make it out and be there for a moment like that, it meant a lot,” he said.

For Bentley, though, the gesture was a given.

“That was definitely a top priority for me to be down there,” he said. “It was nothing for me to come out there.”

Together, alongside family, they watched NBA deputy commissioner Mark Tatum call out the 33rd overall pick: the Philadelphia 76ers had chosen Edwards. Only the selection actually belonged to the Celtics, who acquired the pick in a trade earlier in the night.

“I definitely remember after they said I was going to the Celtics, we were just sitting there and I kind of looked at him,” Edwards recalled. “Ja'Whaun is so low-key. He's a dude where he wants the day to be about me. So, after it all happened, he didn't really say much.”

“Then, we were leaving, and he was like, ‘Bro, you know you're going to be right with me’ . . . I thought about it right then, but I didn't want to say anything.”

Now professional athletes in the same city, the two have only continued to strengthen their bond. They do what friends do: talk about the highs and lows, try new restaurants, shop, and chill at each other's apartments. (Bentley even spent the night at Edwards's place earlier this week.) Navigating his first year in the league, Edwards has also turned to Bentley for advice.

“His mind-set was something we always talked about, how he works hard and things like that,” Edwards said. “It's cool to follow somebody that has the same dreams in a way. He was like that at Purdue as well. He was low-key but worked real hard.”

They know more about each other than most. When Bentley flashed his impressive vocals at teammate Duron Harmon's karaoke charity event in September, for example, Edwards wasn't surprised.

"Ja'Whaun and I will be in the car, singing and stuff, messing around, and he'll sound really good," Edwards said. "I'll always be like, 'Bro, you understand you sound really good?' That's one thing he's real shy about, but he can really sing."

Despite their demanding schedules, they'll support each other at games whenever they can. Bentley attended the Celtics' season opener at TD Garden, and was in the house for Boston's game against the Knicks a week later.

Edwards went to both preseason games at Gillette Stadium as well as New England's Week 3 contest against the New York Jets. Although Edwards couldn't make the Week 8 matchup against the Cleveland Browns, his parents braved the rainy weather to support Bentley, who talks to Edwards's older brother, Jai, on a daily basis, too.

They'll still make cross-country trips for the right occasion — Bentley flew out to Las Vegas to watch Edwards ball out during Summer League in July — but having each other nearby goes a long way. Edwards's family still lives in Texas, while Bentley's resides in Maryland.

"It's helped me a lot, especially coming to a city by myself," Edwards said. "It helped my mom, too. She doesn't like that I moved out here by myself and things like that."

"There's nothing like having family that's closer," added Bentley. "It's a God thing. God knows who to put in your life."

DL Adam Butler



Plan A working out for Pats' Adam Butler

By RICH GARVEN

Sep 12, 2017 at 7:17 PM

FOXBORO — Adam Butler was a big, fast and strong youngster growing up in Northeast Texas, so, of course, he played football. And, of course, he dreamed of one day playing in the NFL.

Butler's dad, Clarence, who has since retired from the Air Force after putting in 25 years of service, and his mom, Kim, a group nursing and facility administrator, urged the largest of their three children to chase those dreams.

"They told me I could do it," Butler said Monday.

They also told him to have a Plan B. So Butler made sure he excelled in the classroom as well as on the field, making the honor roll and earning all-district academic recognition while attending Duncanville High outside of Dallas.

The decorated student-athlete earned a scholarship to Vanderbilt, where he graduated with a degree in environmental communication. It's a major he created by combining environmental science and communications studies.

Initially interested in working in the environmental field in some capacity, Butler has since drafted Plan C.

"Now I want to be a public speaker, especially to the African-American youth to let them know that their dreams can come true just like mine," he said.

You remember those dreams? Plan A?

They were realized when Butler made the Patriots' 53-man roster earlier this month as an undrafted rookie. The 6-foot-5, 300-pound defensive tackle made his NFL debut Thursday as the Patriots opened the season with a 42-27 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs.

"I always think about my childhood and I always think about telling my parents that I wanted to do this for a living," Butler said. "And to actually live it — I can't, I don't even know how to put it into words. It's kind of like hitting the lottery. You hope, you hope and then, boom, there it is."

Butler said he got chills from running out of the inflatable tunnel at Gillette Stadium for the first time in a game that meant something in the standings. His eyes lit up at the fireworks and his ears buzzed from the sound of nearly 66,000 fans roaring their approval.

The Chiefs threw a big bucket of cold water on the festivities by evening's end, but not before Butler accorded himself well. He made a solo tackle, twice forced quarterback Alex Smith into rushed throws and drew a holding penalty while playing 21 defensive snaps (30 percent), mainly in third-down, pass-rushing situations.

That capped a week that saw Butler join offensive lineman Cole Croston, tight end Jacob Hollister and linebacker Harvey Langi as undrafted rookies that survived the cut.

"It's been such a humbling experience," Butler said. "I love being around guys like Tom Brady and stuff like that. I'm just glad to be here."

The Patriots have a knack for unearthing unpolished and undrafted gems and they may have found another one in Butler, especially considering his lack of experience on defense.

Butler played left tackle for his final two years of high school and was shifted to guard-center as a freshman at Vanderbilt. After redshirting, he switched sides and moved to defensive tackle during spring workouts.

"At that point I was just willing to take any job that was available to me because in the past I didn't get those opportunities as a young guy," Butler said. "So at that point I was just like, 'Whatever you got for me, bring it on.' I just wanted to get on the field so I could at least have a shot at what I'm doing now and it just all worked out."

The Boston Globe

Patriots rookie Adam Butler has more to tackle than football

By Brad Almquist
OCTOBER 3, 2017

FOXBOROUGH — Chat with Patriots rookie Adam Butler long enough, and you'll receive an education beyond football.

Ask him about his college major, and he will lecture you on plate tectonics and global climate change. Ask him about his hobbies, and he will explain that his love for fishing stems from the thrill of catching something unknown. Ask him about his aspirations beyond football, and he will guide you through his plan to motivate America's youth.

After going undrafted out of Vanderbilt, Butler earned a spot on the Patriots' 53-man roster last month, then started at defensive tackle in his second game. He grew up with a dream to reach this point, but he always had a Plan B.

When Butler was 9 years old, his parents, Kim and Clarence, had him create a "vision board." On the cardboard template, Butler wrote down his goals and areas where he wanted to improve, from earning better grades to cleaning his room more frequently.

Pasted across the top was his ultimate goal: play in the NFL.

"You get a feel for where they are in life," Clarence said. "Wherever they need help or something needs tweaking, the vision board helped shape and molded the ideals in our children."

Despite Butler's young age, Clarence, a 21-year Air Force veteran, made sure his son worked toward the goal he outlined, regardless of the inevitable obstacles.

One of the first came during a football game in middle school. Butler grew so frustrated with sitting on the bench that he removed his pads and walked off the sidelines during the game. His parents were equally frustrated, but they wouldn't allow their son to quit. He was moved to the B team, an unfortunate consolation, but it meant his ultimate goal was still intact.

Once high school came around, he grew into his body and blossomed into a star, earning team MVP honors as a senior at Duncanville High School, a large suburban school in Dallas. He received roughly six college offers, Vanderbilt being the most prominent. After meeting with Vanderbilt coach James Franklin, and knowing what type of top-notch education he would receive, Butler committed.

Vanderbilt served as a springboard to the NFL, but it also introduced Butler to many of the ideas that now shape him.

During his freshman year, he took a seminar on volcanoes in human history that piqued his interest. The class meshed his compassion for others with an interest in the environment.

A self-proclaimed conspiracy theorist, he wanted to learn more about foreign subjects that may have been missed in his earlier curriculum. He created an interdisciplinary major called "environmental communication."

"As you get older, you start to learn more about the truth, and I guess that's why it is interesting," Butler said. "The most exciting thing about a volcano to me is that they explode in different styles. The ones that don't explode that big are called an infusive volcano, like Hawaiian-type volcanoes, where the lava just oozes out at a steady pace.

"But then you have, like, Mount Saint Helens, where it blows the top off the volcano. There is a big cloud of ash that comes down, and it will literally incinerate people."

Between playing football in the SEC and studying at one of America's top universities, most of his time was spent on the field or in the classroom. His rigorous class schedule occasionally forced Butler to miss parts of practice, and vice versa.

"He would take classes that are challenging but he would take them anyway," said Dan Morgan, an associate dean in Vanderbilt's College of Arts and Sciences. "Perhaps his story of making the Patriots is a good example of that. He wasn't drafted but he was willing to put in the work it takes."

Butler spent a summer in Nashville working as an environmental remediation, education, and outreach intern. He prepared for life without football while maintaining his goal of playing in the NFL.

A switch from center to defensive tackle after his redshirt season augmented the possibility. Butler molded himself into a force at his new position, recording four sacks and 28 hurries in his senior year.

He went undrafted but found a lifeline when Bill Belichick called. The Patriots coach relayed a simple message: It doesn't matter how you got here; it's what you do when you're here.

Butler impressed throughout training camp, clogging running lanes and creating push that developed into sacks. He was Pro Football Focus's highest-graded Patriot in two of the four preseason games. He didn't play in the fourth, signifying he would make the roster.

He did, then started in his second career game over veteran Alan Branch. Butler has played in 45.7 percent of snaps through four games, the most of any Patriots rookie.

He feels he has much more to prove.

"I don't want to get the big head," Butler said. "Me feeling backed up into a corner, me feeling underrated helps me push harder."

Despite attaining the original goal he outlined as a 9-year-old on a cardboard canvas, Butler has ambitions that extend beyond the field.

His environmental communication degree has inspired him to own a farm and grow crops someday. He also plans to earn a master's degree with the hope of becoming an athletic director.

Butler is socially conscious — he was one of 18 Patriots to kneel during the national anthem last week — and wants to use his platform to motivate African-American youth.

"If you look at me, I have flat feet, I am not just ripped," Butler said. "I have somewhat of an athletic body, but someone like me, they would probably say, 'You are flat-footed. You are clumsy.' I kind of received that coming up as a child. I want to share with other children that 'Yes, you can.' "

Back in Northeast Texas, Clarence is reminded of his son's journey every time he walks into his room.

Butler's parents had him update his vision board every four or five years. The ultimate goal never changed. His most recent board, made in high school, still stands on his desk across from the same Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan posters that have always adorned his bedroom walls.

Clarence recently placed Patriots memorabilia next to the vision board, a reminder of what Butler has achieved and who he is still becoming.

"It brings everything full circle from the time he started playing football to now," Clarence said. "Expect a great humanitarian to develop out of his football character.

"We have a lot to look forward to in the future with Adam, being able to give back and add positive motivation to society post-football. You will see a great, big-hearted person give back to the world."

S Kyle Dugger

COMING OF AGE: Kyle Dugger went from a Division II player to a second-round draft pick of the Patriots

By Mark Daniels

Sep 25, 2020

It didn't take long for any coach at Lenoir-Rhyne University to recognize Kyle Dugger as an NFL prospect. That was evident every time he stepped on the practice field. It was clear when a player of his size returned every punt. You're not supposed to move like that when you're 6-foot-2, 220 pounds.

The fact that a player of his caliber was playing at the Division II level was uncommon, but not rare for a late bloomer. Dugger was hiding in plain sight of the NFL until March of 2019.

That's when Seattle Seahawks scout Ryan Florence traveled to Hickory, N.C. In the NFL, most teams subscribe to one or two scouting services — BLESTO or National Football Scouting. It's up to the scouts to measure and time underclassmen a year before they are eligible for the draft and then upload the information to the website.

Florence measured Dugger's arms, height and weight for the NFS service. For a safety, Dugger's wingspan (78.5 inches) was extraordinary. Then he had him run the 40-yard dash. Then again. And again. Florence looked at the watch and back at Dugger. That was the moment he knew that this kid from Decatur, Georgia, was special.

This is also how Dugger got on the radar for the Senior Bowl and NFL Combine.

That spring, Jim Nagy, the executive director of the Senior Bowl, was in the process of identifying players for the next college All-Star game, which features prospects for the upcoming draft. Nagy scouted in the NFL for 18 seasons, including for the Patriots. He worked with Florence in Seattle and called to ask about Dugger after an agent tipped him off.

Florence told him he timed Dugger three times and the stopwatch read 4.41, 4.45 and 4.5.

"He really liked him," Nagy said. "And he had him as fast as 4.41. Well, now he goes from being a really good Division II player to being a legit pro prospect. When you're talking about a kid that's 6-2, 220 pounds, that's flying."

Dugger's life changed on that day. As soon as Florence uploaded his report, the Division II safety was on the NFL's radar. Soon, he'd be coveted by Bill Belichick and the Patriots.

Early impressions

When David Cole first laid eyes on Dugger, he saw the potential. It was in 2016 and the underclassman was still growing into his body. He did things on the practice field that were rare at the Division II level. The reason Dugger

wasn't in Division I was because he was a late bloomer. He was 5-foot-9 as a junior at Whitewater High School but grew to 6-feet as a senior. He added two more inches in college.

Cole was Lenoir-Rhyne's secondary and special-teams coach at the time. He had previously coached seven NFL players as an assistant at California (Pa.) University and did an internship with the Pittsburgh Steelers in 2013. He saw a future NFL player in Dugger. He set out a plan to make Dugger the first player drafted from Lenoir-Rhyne in 20 years.

First, Cole had to convince Dugger to switch from cornerback to safety — after he was named the conference Defensive Freshman of the Year.

"I had to talk him into being a safety because he fancied himself the next Jalen Ramsey," said Cole, who's now at Mercer. "We just talked about making that move that would be the best to get him to the next level. ... We really just talked about refining the skills, footwork, being more aggressive, being a better open-field tackler, and becoming more of a student of the game and loving it."

Two years later, Drew Cronic took over as Lenoir-Rhyne's head coach. He knew Dugger when he was a student at Whitewater. Cronic was an assistant at Reinhardt University and recruited Dugger to the NAIA school, but lost him to Lenoir-Rhyne. Those were the only offers Dugger had.

When Cronic took the new job in 2018, he heard the stories about Dugger. There were moments in the secondary that defied logic. There were times in practice he'd hit someone so hard, he'd knock a teammate out for the day. Then there were the punt returns. At his size, Dugger's returns were legendary.

"(When I recruited him), he was probably 6-foot, 185 pounds," said Cronic, who now coaches at Mercer. "When I saw him again, he was 218-220 (pounds) and he looked like he belonged at Clemson or Alabama. Then they start talking about him returning punts. I'm going, 'OK, whatever, a 218-pound guy returning punts.' Then I watched film on it. And I got to see it live and in color that fall ... and I was a believer."

The NFL soon was as well.

All the right things

Lenoir-Rhyne was a popular destination for NFL teams in the fall of 2019.

After Dugger's times were posted, NFL teams raced to Hickory to see him. There were an estimated 10 scouts a day at practice. Front office personnel came to games. The Carolina Panthers' general manager visited. The Buffalo Bills were there more than anyone.

"That fall was crazy. All NFL teams came to practice," said Cole. "That doesn't happen at a lot of smaller collegiate programs. It was just neat. It was a time to always remember, you know, but it was definitely crazy."

"It was the normal process of scouts checking in on us. We obviously were pretty high on Kyle and they'd get a little film," added Cronic. "Then one team comes a couple of times and it blows up. All the guys can share information. By that fall, every team in the National Football League came by."

Dugger was named the Division II defensive player of the year last season, but it was how he handled himself that fall that truly impressed those around him. Scouts were on him every day. He was bombarded with calls from NFL agents. It was stressful, but Dugger handled it like a professional.

When players were coming off the practice field, he stayed in the end zone to work on his technique. He was the first player in the meeting room and kept copious notes in a black notebook. He was the first person to raise his hand. He took coaching and didn't get down when a coach ripped into him.

There was no baggage here. He took care of his body, was careful in what he ate and when the weekends came, he usually stayed inside to watch movies.

"He just stayed away from the wrong things and he absorbed information well, very intelligent," Cronic said. "All the pieces kind of lined up. If you saw a kid like that at a Division II school, you would assume he was transfer that came from a big school because he has problems."

The final testing ground

The Patriots earmarked Dugger as a potential draft pick in the spring of 2019. That fall, they sent scouts on multiple occasions to Hickory to get a closer look. By the time January came, they saw Dugger play in several games.

Still, they needed more.

That's where the 2020 Senior Bowl came in. It wasn't just the game on Jan. 25, during which Dugger made a game-high seven tackles, but the week before in practice. That's where they saw the safety go up against top Division I players.

"I knew he would stack up physically with the guys here. And I knew he would stack up athletically," said Nagy. "What you never know with the small school guys is how they're going to step up against competition, just from a mindset standpoint. ... Some guys are wide-eyed. Some guys, they get down here and it's a little too big for them. They don't have that self-belief. They don't have that self-confidence and it shows and it shows on the practice field.

"With Kyle you saw it the first day, like this was not going to be too big for him at all. He's a confident guy. He came down here ready to compete."

Dugger put on a show in front of Belichick, Nick Caserio and other scouts. Even before the NFL Combine, where Dugger shined, the Patriots had enough information to put him high on their draft board. When they selected him with the 37th overall pick, Belichick and Caserio noted how important it was for them to see Dugger perform well at the Senior Bowl.

The moment wasn't too big then. It's not now.

Dugger is already playing meaningful snaps as a rookie for the Patriots. He's doing this after playing Division II football and having a shortened offseason with no preseason games.

"He never shied away from anything because this is what he wanted," said Cole. "From the day I met Kyle Dugger, we talked about this and trying to achieve it. He was really ready for this moment."

Kyle Dugger's time

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.

“He’s a small guy. Guys want to take his head off, and if he doesn’t jump up, get in their face, and act that way, then guys will just take shots at him. I love his demeanor, love what he brings to the game.”

Those car talks with Taylor to and from practice began when Edelman was nothing more than a seventh-round curiosity out of Kent State, a question mark trying to scratch his way onto the team.

That was 296 regular-season receptions ago, before 20 touchdowns (including four in 10 playoff games), before Edelman signed a \$17 million contract in 2014 that will keep him a Patriot through the 2017 season.

Unheralded when he arrived, Edelman has become invaluable. That must bring an enormous sense of satisfaction to the 29-year-old, no?

“I’m never really satisfied,” Edelman said. “It’ll make me proud when we go out and get the next one.”

Edelman might have been talking about the next Super Bowl ring. Or maybe his next reception. If he keeps this up, Edelman might not have to wait long for either.



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, 'Eeeeeedelman, 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 Superdigital. 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 ea

CB Stephon Gilmore



Ty Law: Stephon Gilmore is 'best cornerback in football'

By Karen Guregian
July 23, 2019

Stephon Gilmore quietly has taken the title as the NFL's top cornerback. According to many analytical websites covering football, he is the best at his position.

Of course, there are some pundits outside the world of analytics who might disagree with that assessment.

Buffalo's Tre'Davious White, Miami's Xavien Howard, Chicago's Kyle Fuller and Arizona's Patrick Peterson also are pretty good, just to throw out a few names who are in the conversation.

A certain Hall of Fame inductee who played the position, however, said there should be no debate.

Ty Law doesn't hedge. He believes everyone takes a backseat to Gilmore, who according to Pro Football Focus led all cornerbacks last season in forced incompleteness rate (27 percent) and was the highest-graded player at the position.

"He's the best cornerback in football right now," Law said when reached by the Herald. "I didn't see anybody out there playing any better (last season)."

The three-time Super Bowl-winning cornerback and one of the best players in Patriots history doesn't need Gilmore's statistics for verification. He knows just by watching.

"He's really confident, and he's taken his game to the next level. He's first-team All-Pro. I think he's going to continue to do that this year. He'll be ready to roll."

When told of Law's assessment Tuesday, Gilmore was flattered, even if there might be some bias involved.

"He's a guy who played at such a high level," said Gilmore, who just arrived in Foxboro from Charlotte, N.C. "He knows a lot about the game, so coming from someone like him, it's a great honor to be mentioned in that category. But you have to keep it up. One thing I know about him, he did it for a long time at a high level. That's one thing I want to do, keep playing at a high level and help the team get to where we want to go."

During the past two years, Law and Gilmore, who share the No. 24 jersey, have become good friends. Their relationship started not long after Gilmore signed his five-year, \$65 million free agent contract with the Pats in March 2017.

Gilmore and his predecessor met out on the practice field, exchanged numbers and have kept in touch ever since.

"We talk regularly during the season, get together when we can, and we're going to continue to do so," Law said. "Any way I can help him, I'll offer advice."

Gilmore appreciates having such a distinguished mentor in his corner.

"I'm a big history person. I like to know my history. I've watched the players who have played the game," Gilmore said. "I wouldn't be in the position I'm in now without those guys. But I met Ty at a practice and we've been good friends ever since. It's an honor, really."

Gilmore said even though they have different body types, they play the game similarly as far as technique.

"He's probably a little thicker than I am," Gilmore said. "But we play the game kind of similar. We talk about everything."

Like knowing how to study film, reading receivers and quarterbacks, out-thinking the opponent, knowing the route before it's run.

Given what finally transpired for the former Pats corner, Gilmore is now going to be wearing the number of a Pro Football Hall of Fame member, as Law will be enshrined in Canton on Aug. 3 along with seven others in the 2019 class.

Law is touched that it's been so important to Gilmore to make sure to serve the number well. Darrelle Revis wore it for a year and was part of a championship in 2014. Gilmore now has one ring in his Patriots collection and wants more.

His interception of Rams quarterback Jared Goff in the fourth quarter of Super Bowl LIII in February sealed the deal for championship No. 6. During the regular season, Gilmore had primary coverage on several of the NFL's top receivers namely Pittsburgh's Antonio Brown (four catches, 49 yards, touchdown), Minnesota's Stefan Diggs (five catches, 49 yards) and Green Bay's Devante Adams (six catches, 40 yards, TD) and locked them down.

The way Law sees it, Gilmore is building his own legacy for No. 24. It's his number now.

"For him to take that and want the number, and not being afraid of the comparisons, and to go out there and perform the way he has, it's tremendous," Law said of the 28-year-old corner. "But Stephon Gilmore is his own man. I told him the torch has passed. It's your world now. He's representing the number well. I'm happy for him. It's pretty awesome to see him out there playing well. It's like there's still a piece of me out on the field."

Gilmore, meanwhile, took on the number because growing up, a lot of his favorite players wore it. He had No. 24 in Buffalo, and when he arrived in New England, knowing who had it before him, it made sense to carry on the tradition of great corners.

"With the history of the number, with a lot of great players having worn it here, I try to represent it as well as I can," Gilmore said.

The bond between Law and Gilmore strengthened during a recent trip to Israel, as they were part of team owner Robert Kraft's annual pilgrimage last month.

"He's the real deal. And he still seeks advice and asks questions. He's still eager to learn," Law said of Gilmore. "If he keeps it up, he'll be around a long time. One day, you'll see him in the Patriots Hall of Fame and the NFL Hall of Fame, as well."

He'll be there, following Law's lead.

The Boston Globe

Stephon Gilmore Should Work Out Well With the Patriots

By: Ben Volin
March 25, 2017

ROCK HILL, S.C. — Talk to the people who know Stephon Gilmore best and two character traits quickly emerge:

First, Gilmore doesn't say a whole lot.

"He's always been a good listener," said his mother, Linda.

"He's not a Ray Lewis type, with the fiery speeches. You have to drag words out of him," said Ellis Johnson, Gilmore's defensive coordinator in college. "It's not shyness, that's just him. He's very self-assured, but he doesn't run his mouth."

Two, Gilmore takes coaching well.

"He wants to be told exactly what to do and how you want it done, and then he'll go out and he'll try to do it," said Dennis Thurman, Gilmore's defensive coordinator in Buffalo the past two seasons.

"He's a guy that's quiet, that's going to do exactly what's asked of him, and he's going to fit right in," said Ruvell Martin, Gilmore's former teammate in Buffalo.

Physically, Gilmore has all the tools — a 6-foot-1-inch frame, 4.4 speed, the strength to match up against the NFL's biggest receivers, and he doesn't turn 27 until September.

But those other two qualities help explain why the Patriots broke all of their supposed rules and made a huge investment in Gilmore.

Normally prudent in free agency, and with a well-documented history of playing hardball with their own stars, the Patriots opened their checkbook for Gilmore when free agency opened March 9.

They blew away the market, signing Gilmore to a five-year, \$65 million with \$31 million fully guaranteed. It's the largest total value and second-largest guarantee ever given out by the Patriots, behind only Tom Brady. It's the big contract that Jamie Collins and Chandler Jones couldn't get.

"I really feel like he will thrive in New England with the way they handle their business, because they're exact, and that's the way he likes to be coached," Thurman said. "I just think it's a match made in heaven. I really do. I couldn't be happier for him."

Belichick wants players who love football, and Gilmore fits that criteria. He grew up in Rock Hill, a town of about 70,000 situated 25 miles south of Charlotte. It is nicknamed "Football City, USA" due in part to the number of players it has sent to the NFL. Jadeveon Clowney, Johnathan Joseph, Cordarrelle Patterson, Chris Hope, and former Patriots tight end Benjamin Watson all hail from Rock Hill.

Gilmore's father, Stevie, spent hours tossing a football to young Stephon while the two watched games on TV. At age 7, Stephon was running cone drills in the family's driveway. The drills paid off, as Stephon clocked the sixth-fastest time in the three-cone drill at the 2012 NFL Combine, out of hundreds of participants.

"My dad pretty much put me in the game since I was 7, so I love the game," Gilmore said. "People say you think about it 24-7. It's probably close to that."

The oldest of six children, Gilmore was a quiet leader in his household.

"He wasn't trying to replace my dad, but he was like a father figure," said his sister, Scarlett Gilmore, 16. "When he tells us something, we know it's not just talk. We know we should actually listen."

Gilmore was a natural athlete, excelling in football, baseball, basketball, and track. South Pointe opened in 2005 when Gilmore enrolled as a freshman, and on the very first play in school history, Gilmore ran 70-odd yards for a touchdown on the freshman team. In his senior season of 2008, Gilmore was the quarterback in a spread-option attack and led South Pointe to a 15-0 record and a state championship.

He was a Parade All-American, South Carolina Mr. Football, and the MVP of the North Carolina-South Carolina all-star game. His No. 5 has unofficially been retired at South Pointe.

But Gilmore didn't simply rely on his natural athleticism. One year he asked then-South Pointe coach Bobby Carroll to open the weight room on Christmas Day. As a senior, he asked Carroll if he could come work out at the school on Sundays after church.

"I told him he couldn't work out by himself, so he brings somebody with him," Carroll said. "Not long after that there were eight to 10 of them lifting on Sundays, and he was the one that kind of started that."

South Pointe principal Dr. Al Leonard tabbed Gilmore as one of the school's ambassadors when it had visitors. Gilmore was not the best student, but he graduated from South Pointe in December of his senior year so he could enroll in college for spring practices.

"If he wasn't in the weight room, then he was probably getting tutoring, because he did whatever he had to do to stay on course with his goals," said Strait Herron, Gilmore's defensive coordinator and now the head coach at South Pointe.

The football team now hands out the Stephon Gilmore Award at the end of every season to the player who best exemplifies hard work and unselfishness.

"Just a great young man," Leonard said. "He really does show that hard work does pay off. You all are getting a good one."

Gilmore had offers from all the major schools. Alabama's Nick Saban, one of Belichick's close confidants, wanted him badly. But Gilmore chose South Carolina, about an hour south of Rock Hill, to be a part of a star-studded recruiting class that included current NFL receiver Alshon Jeffery.

Gamecocks coach Steve Spurrier wanted to use Gilmore on offense, but Gilmore knew his best chance of getting to the NFL was at cornerback.

Gilmore had barely played defense when arriving at South Carolina but was determined to make it work.

"I have never been associated with a student-athlete at that age that was mature as he was," said Johnson, a coach since 1975. "The kid is 17 years old and he's evaluating himself like a 35-year-old NFL scout. He wanted to be an NFL cornerback, so that's what he made himself into."

Gilmore's technique was raw, but he started as a true freshman and started all 40 games for the Gamecocks in three seasons.

Gilmore honed his technique battling Jeffery every day in practice. In SEC play, Gilmore covered A.J. Green, Julio Jones, and several other players who reached the NFL. Those battles brought out Gilmore's competitive side.

"Every now and then at practice, you'd look back and they'd be fighting like hell," Johnson said of Gilmore and Jeffery. "A lot of times it'd get heated up and they'd get wrestling over the ball, and then it would be over in five seconds."

And like at South Pointe, Gilmore's college coaches never worried about him getting into trouble. He began dating Gabrielle Glenn, a sprinter at South Carolina who was a 2010 All-American in the 4 x 400-meter relay. The two married in 2014.

"He was never on the academic report, missing too many classes or anything like that," Johnson said. "He just focused on the task at hand and got it done."

Gilmore declared for the NFL Draft after three seasons. His coaches thought he'd maybe be a second-round pick. After showing off a 4.38 in the 40, 36-inch vertical leap, and his stellar three-cone score, Gilmore became the 10th overall pick in the draft, the second cornerback off the board.

Gilmore's draft position, and newfound millions, didn't change his attitude.

"He was a kid that was always on time, always had his books, ready to pay attention, ready to listen," said Martin, who sat next to Gilmore in team meetings in 2012. "We would sit down in team meetings and go over fines for the week, and never once did you hear his name called."

Gilmore was still raw when the Bills drafted him, and the instability in Buffalo didn't help. He had five defensive coordinators in five seasons and didn't really start coming into his own until his third or fourth year.

There are two knocks on Gilmore — he's not the most physical tackler, and he's had an injury bug. He has played in 68 of a possible 80 games, and made it through all 16 games just once in five seasons, his rookie year.

Gilmore had major surgery to repair a torn labrum in December 2015 but responded by playing in 15 games last season, securing five interceptions and earning his first Pro Bowl selection.

Gilmore is best used as a physical, press-man corner, but his willingness to take coaching and do whatever is asked of him should help him thrive in New England, where Belichick wants things done precisely.

"The most important thing is he is going to go out there and do exactly what they ask him to do," said Thurman, the ex-Bills defensive coordinator. "He's a pro all the way around. He handles his business, he's on time. He's going to thrive with their coaching staff and the way they do business."

The new contract doesn't seem to have changed Gilmore, either. He has been working out in Charlotte four days a week since January, putting in eight-hour days with multiple workouts and massage work.

"My phrase for Steph is 'silent but violent,'" said Jeremy Boone, Gilmore's personal trainer in Charlotte. "As far as competitiveness, he won't say a word, but nobody hates losing more than him. We kind of have fun — how can I get him riled up in the moment? But he's kind of a straight-laced guy."

The Patriots were on Gilmore from the start of free agency after facing him eight times in five years, but several teams were hot on his trail — the Bears, Titans, Buccaneers, Cowboys, Jaguars, and others. The Patriots stepped up their offer at the last minute to land their cornerback, and Gilmore, who has never played in the postseason, is excited to play for a winning organization.

Gilmore has been texting with Devin McCourty, excited to get started with the Patriots' offseason workouts in April.

"It's surreal when you go in there and see [the Super Bowl trophies]," Gilmore said of Gillette Stadium. "They just brought me in to hopefully be a piece to go get another one."

DL Lawrence Guy



Patriots' Lawrence Guy tackled learning disabilities to thrive in NFL

By Mark Daniels

Posted Dec 10, 2017 at 11:56 AM

FOXBORO — Lawrence Guy, as a child, struggled with words and numbers. He had trouble reading and retaining information. He had trouble keeping up with his peers. To make it worse, he wasn't getting the help he needed.

Guy's early memories of school are full of angst. Growing up in Las Vegas, he was placed in special-education classes in elementary and middle school. The teachers didn't know how to help him there. They thought he was dealing with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), but without the proper testing, no one realized Guy had more hurdles to overcome.

"In middle school, they put you in a self-contained class because they didn't want to deal with it," Guy said. "Like every kid who has a learning disability, it was difficult. If we had the proper testing, we would've taken different measures. It was challenging through elementary and middle school."

At Western High School, Guy turned into a legitimate football recruit. But in order for him to qualify academically, he had to take the same classes as his peers. He struggled but got through it. He still didn't have a name for his disability.

That came a year later, in 2008, when he accepted a scholarship to Arizona State University. Because of the school's willingness to help students with disabilities, Guy picked the Sun Devils over several top-tier football programs. When he enrolled, they gave him the proper testing. For the first time, at age 18, he learned he had dyslexia, which caused him to read letters backwards, and dyscalculia, which caused him to confuse numbers.

"I wouldn't want someone else to have gone what I've gone through," Guy said.

Nine years later, the Patriots defensive lineman is a different person.

Stubborn first step

Growing up, Guy was bullied for being different and in special-education classes. In college, the thought of attending the school's Disability Resource Center gave him that same feeling of embarrassment.

Guy was unwilling to step foot in that building and that first semester was a disaster. In danger of failing and being ruled academically ineligible, his father was called and a meeting was held. Among the people there was Jean Boyd, the associate athletic director for student development.

"Athletes, elite athletes especially, because they gain so much positive feedback from people based on their athleticism, they feel like they're super heroes. He felt like he was Superman," Boyd said. "When you go over to a Disability Resource Center, there's not just people who have learning disabilities, you have folks who are maybe blind or they have physical disabilities and things like that. ... He was fighting it because he didn't necessarily look like other people there.

"Because he was struggling, we had to sit him down and communicate that, whatever goals you have yourself or whatever goals you have for your family, those things are being jeopardized because of your stubbornness or lack of willingness to evolve your thought process about what you were born with."

That meeting was an eye opener for Guy. Afterward, he went to the Disability Resource Center and received the proper help for the first time in his life. ASU paired him with a learning specialist, who communicated with his football coaches.

With the help of specialists, Guy discovered how to learn again. For example, he had trouble retaining information with assigned reading. He found out that he had the option to listen to books on tape, which helped him better retain information.

"Before, you're hesitant [because] of the name of [the center]," Guy said. "You're hesitant of being in there. When they said give it a shot, I said, 'I have nothing else to lose.' ... It was more guidance through the process. I could do everything, but it wouldn't be in the exact order it needed. So, it was, 'Hey, switch this around. Look at what you read.' That helped me out."

New outlook

Guy's transformation at ASU was dramatic. By his sophomore year, he was thriving academically and was enjoying classes for the first time in his life. He took advantage of every tutor offered and was allowed extra time to take his exams.

Before long, Guy was a dual major in education and sociology. After nearly failing, his grade-point average rose to 3.5. He was named a "Scholar Baller" for his efforts. By the time he was an upperclassman, he was an advocate for the Disability Resource Center.

"By the time he got to be an upperclassman, he was sitting with our athletes, even from other sports, who were reluctant to use the services," Boyd said. "Then he also got involved with the community and would talk to young kids about the importance of education."

"It was what I struggled with," Guy added. "I knew if I was able to go to it, why shouldn't other people go to it also? There shouldn't be a stigma about, 'Hey, don't show up to the building because of the name.' There's nothing wrong with the building. ... At the time, I was like, 'Well I'm going, you might as well join me. Don't let the resources sit there and waste. You're not going to get it back.'"

His coaches took note. ASU defensive line coach Grady Stretz remembers Guy's struggles early on. Often in meetings, he'd be goofing off or watching YouTube videos. A couple of years later, Guy was in that room 30 minutes early, studying film.

"Over the months and years at ASU, he really did mature," Stretz said. "When you evaluate him in high school football, he was a man among boys. Unfortunately, on the flip side of it, when it came to the classroom and academics, due to his disabilities, it was kind of the polar opposite. But as time went by and he got dialed in and dedicated himself, you could really see him grow as a man. He's one of those guys, you never forget about."

Lifelong learner

This year marks Guy's seventh in the NFL. The Patriots are his fifth NFL team. This season, he's started a career-high 11 games on the defensive line. With four games left, he's seven tackles away from setting a career-high.

When asked about how well Guy has learned the defense, Bill Belichick was quick to note that the defensive tackle "picks things up well."

"I think he was really in a good place in the spring," Belichick said. "He's really been great. He knows his job, works hard at it, communicates well, understands what the offense is doing, has a good awareness of blocking schemes and tendencies and so forth."

Now 27, Guy learns differently, but his ADHD, dyslexia, and dyscalculia haven't affected his ability to pick up the Patriots system. When the Patriots signed him to a four-year, \$20-million contract, he took his lessons from ASU and applied them to learning the fifth playbook of his NFL career. For Guy, it's about "studying and grouping."

When tasked with learning 200 plays, he places them in groups. That helped him learn the play's names and aspects of each call. With each play, he'll write it down multiple times, which helps him remember. When he's in a meeting room, Guy acknowledges he's usually one of the first people to ask a question.

"Football's easy. Football's a whole different [story]," Guy said. "Classroom is a lot different. Football is a whole lot of X's and O's. That's repetitive. You're going out there and moving through the stuff. You're not moving through anything in the classroom. You're reading. You're trying to retain."

"A playbook is easy to me. That's one of the easiest things. It's like, 'How can you pick this up and struggle [otherwise]?' Well, it's different. I can learn 200 plays. It's very simple to do. I'm going to go through it repetitively every single day."

Guy takes pride in telling his story. He's no longer embarrassed. He's no longer afraid to learn.

"The journey hasn't stopped it," Guy said. "I'm continuing to learn more and more every day I live. Going through what I went through, I look at it and I'm glad I went through it. It built me into who I am as a person."

RB Damien Harris



Damien Harris Became A Redshirt For The Patriots, But A Sophomore Year Approaches

By Oliver Thomas
Jan 22, 2020

The April night Damien Harris became a New England Patriot, the position he played became secondary.

"This guy has been a pretty consistently productive player," Patriots director of player personnel Nick Caserio said of the Alabama running back. "So this more, I would say, falls into the 'good football player' category relative to the other options that we were looking at on the board. That's where he kind of fell."

Arizona State wide receiver N'Keal Harry, Vanderbilt cornerback Joejuan Williams and Michigan defensive end Chase Winovich fell ahead of Harris on New England's list of draft cards.

But Harris amassed 3,477 yards and 25 touchdowns from scrimmage for the Crimson Tide. He had been the only back in school history to average 6.4 yards per carry while eclipsing 400 career carries. He'd been in for 56 games and a pair of national championship victories.

And to lead Alabama's ground game as a sophomore, junior and senior.

"I think I'm just a dependable player, somebody that whenever you ask me to do something, I'll do it," Harris told reporters on his introductory conference call. "I think I just show a lot of great attributes on the field, things that help me be a great running back and they can help the team be successful. There's a lot of things that I can do well, there's a lot of things I can still improve on, so I'm just ready to come in and be my best me and get to work Day 1."

It became a difficult position to sort. And not only because the Patriots had called Georgia running back Sony Michel's number in the first round the spring prior to reaching a \$3.631 million rookie pact with Harris.

But because of the "good football player" the war room turned to at a position not running short on them.

Harris went 63 spots after college running mate Josh Jacobs – the Pro Football Writers of America's eventual NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year – went to the Oakland Raiders. And as Jacobs went on to finish his regular season with Oakland's franchise record for rushing yards by a rookie, Harris went on to finish his among New England's inactives.

A hamstring issue left Harris listed on injury report ahead of two games. The second-team All-SEC selection by the conference's coaches appeared in as many.

Harris made his debut on special teams in September and made his debut on offense in October. Both were victories for New England over the New York Jets.

"He does a good job in practice and has continued to work hard in his roles – offensively on second and third down and the kicking game," Belichick said of Harris during a fall press conference. "It was good to see him get a little action against the Jets. We have pretty good depth at that position, so we'll have to see how that goes, but he's done a good job. I'm glad we have him."

James White was missing from the gameday roster for one Jets matchup, and Rex Burkhead was missing from the gameday roster for the other. But the aforementioned Michel and Brandon Bolden remained. The four would tally a combined 1,269 snaps on offense and 605 snaps on special teams by campaign's close. They'd tally 394 carries and 120 catches while accounting for a 2019 cap number of \$11.5 million altogether, according to OverTheCap.com.

In contrast, Harris saw five snaps in the kicking game and five snaps in the backfield.

The depth chart helped dictate the redshirt. Each of its members remains under contract through 2020. The contracts of White, Burkhead and Bolden then expire in the league year of 2021.

"We've been very healthy, and it's kind of hard to carry five backs to the games," Patriots running backs coach Ivan Fears told ESPN's Mike Reiss in December. "We've got some guys that do a lot of work on special teams. ... Damien's done a great job. He really has. Love to see him. I think he's got a great future. I really do. I think he's going to be a real good back in this league."

The trajectory isn't uncommon.

White was taken in the fourth round of the 2014 draft out of Wisconsin, and played in three games during his rookie campaign with the Patriots. Shane Vereen was taken in the second round of the 2011 draft out of California, and played in five during his.

As for Harris, he took one handoff from quarterback Tom Brady in 2019. It gained 13 yards on third-and-14. His next handoffs arrived via fellow rookie Jarrett Stidham. Those netted no gain, then a loss of four yards, then a pickup of three yards on consecutive plays to take the Patriots to the warning track of a 33-0 win.

The rest went on as those of a redshirt do.

THE ATHLETIC

Rookies Damien Harris, JoeJuan Williams looking to their elders to handle first-year blues

By Jeff Howe
Dec 28, 2019

FOXBORO – Patriots running back James White knows exactly what Damien Harris is going through.

At the same time, safety Devin McCourty can't necessarily relate to Joejuan Williams.

But however they've done it, two of the Patriots' most trusted leaders have found ways to guide a pair of rookies who have primarily spent their first season on the sidelines.

"It helps a lot," Harris said of the veteran reinforcement. "Everybody's path is different. Everybody comes from different backgrounds, and everybody road to get onto the field isn't the same. A lot of people have always talked about comparing my situation and James' situation. Seeing how successful he is now and how important he is to the team, seeing it firsthand, it's really encouraging. It's easy to get down on yourself when you're not on the field, not making plays, questioning yourself – why am I not playing, what am I doing wrong?"

As a rookie in 2014, White was a healthy scratch in a team-high 16 of 19 games, including all three in the playoffs. The fourth-round pick had a strong career at Wisconsin's running back factory but watched as a rookie while Jonas Gray, Shane Vereen, Stevan Ridley, LeGarrette Blount, Brandon Bolden and even Julian Edelman and Tom Brady racked up more rushing yards that season.

White leaned on Vereen throughout that process. Vereen was a healthy scratch 12 times as a rookie in 2011, so he also understood what his understudy was experiencing.

Now, White can pay it forward to Harris, a third-round pick who led Alabama in rushing for three consecutive seasons. But after a couple injuries in training camp, Harris has been stuck at the bottom of the depth chart, and he has been inactive 13 times, which is tied for the most on the team. That includes 10 healthy scratches and three due to a hamstring injury from practice, though he likely would have been scratched in those games as well.

"It's definitely not an easy position to be in," White said. "But just don't take the opportunity for granted, work hard on the practice field, in the weight room, watch the film but know it's not easy not seeing yourself out there on the practice field and stuff like that. But just compete in individual drills, and stay locked in at all times because you never know."

Harris was active for the first time in Week 3 against the Jets when White attended the birth of his child. The most frustrating moments for him were likely the three games when Harris was inactive despite an injury to another running back – twice when Rex Burkhead was out with a foot injury and once when Bolden was down with a hamstring ailment.

White didn't dismiss the difficulty of the situation but knows what Harris needs to hear.

"You practice and doing all that stuff, but not going out there on game days is tough week to week when you're not playing," White said. "But you're still in the NFL. You're still on the football team. There are a lot of guys who wish they could just be on a football team, so you can't take the opportunity for granted. And whenever you get the opportunity, you've got to make the most of it."

Harris did have a solid stretch during organized team activities and into the start of training camp before the injuries hit, so the foundation is in place for some optimism when he gets a shot, whether it's this year or next.

In his current situation, Harris said it's been more advantageous to lean on White, just because his advice is backed by experience. It's a challenge to sit and watch, and Harris' five offensive snaps this season are the fewest among anyone who has seen the field. But Harris comprehends the bigger picture.

"It's different," Harris said. "I think I wouldn't be a competitor if I just said, 'Well, I love not playing.' That's just not true. I love being part of this team, and I love trusting in the coaches and my teammates that whatever is best for the team is what's best for us. I love being part of this team no matter what the outcome is. But not playing, coming from (Alabama), starting for three years, leading the team in rushing three consecutive years, then coming here and you're back to square one, it takes a toll on you mentally."

"But the more you sit back and watch these guys, the more you learn from the coaches, the more you trust people and people start to trust you, the more you can mesh and jell with everybody," Harris continued. "Then you start to understand it's what's best for the team. All the coaches who are in position to make those decisions, they have to

put the team first – not one guy, not one person's best interest. It's about what is most important for the team. Once you understand that, it makes sense."

Williams has had a slightly bigger role than Harris. He has been a healthy scratch seven times this season, including six of the Patriots' first nine games when there weren't any injuries ahead of him on the depth chart. Williams has played 65 snaps on defense, including a career-high 29 Saturday against the Bills when Jon Jones and Jason McCourty were sidelined with groin injuries, as well as 69 on special teams.

The second-round pick was terrific in training camp and the preseason, and it sounds like that has carried into regular-season practices. He had an interception and seven pass breakups during team drills in training camp, getting his hands on more passes than anyone else.

Quarterbacks were 1 of 8 for 10 yards in the preseason when targeting Williams, who broke up two passes. The Vanderbilt product has been targeted in two games this season, with Sam Darnold and Josh Allen a combined 2 of 5 for 23 yards when throwing his way, and he has one breakup.

The 6-foot-3, 212-pounder has consistently looked the part, but it's been hard to find a role for the rookie when everyone else has played so well.

"It reminds me of my freshman year of college," Williams said. "I didn't play until the end of the season. This level, this is the pinnacle of your sport. No matter what happens, I'm always going to have the mindset of, I want to compete with these guys. I want to be better than these guys. I'm going to make sure I train so I'm better than these guys, but also soak in everything I can because these are some great guys, some great leaders to look up to. I'm very fortunate that I have these guys. Soak in as much as you can and be ready when your number is called."

Devin McCourty is one of the best leaders to ever play for Bill Belichick, and Williams' locker is sandwiched between McCourty and cornerback Stephon Gilmore. He doesn't have to look far for guidance.

But unlike White and Harris, McCourty didn't encounter the same challenges as a rookie in 2010. Far from it, actually, with McCourty earning a Pro Bowl honor during his fantastic first season at cornerback.

There are different ways to lead, though. McCourty preaches the importance of developing a routine, and that's something he learned from former running back Kevin Faulk when he tore his ACL in 2010.

McCourty has also instructed Williams to soak up experiences from the veteran corners around him, whether it's Gilmore, a first-round pick who signed a prized contract in free agency and has been an All-Pro. Or Jason McCourty, a sixth-rounder who has made nearly \$50 million in his career. Or undrafted free agents like Jones and J.C. Jackson.

"I always tell him to use those guys," Devin McCourty said, "because at some point in your career, you'll look around and you'll be that guy, and you'll be able to think of the stories of the things they told you."

There's one aspect McCourty can definitely relate to Williams' experience. He joined a defense that was captained by defensive lineman Vince Wilfork and linebacker Jerod Mayo, and Williams is also surrounded by plenty of star power.

"When you're a young guy, whether you're playing or you're not, I always feel like you're trying to earn the guys' trust around you," McCourty said. "When I played as a rookie, I told (Williams) when I first went out there, I'm looking at Vince, Mayo, all these guys, and I don't want to F up. I don't want to be the reason something goes wrong out here. That's pressure as a rookie that sometimes people don't understand."

Patriots veterans remain optimistic about each rookie's future because they see what the outside world can't during the middle of the week. There's often a rush to label a rookie as a draft bust due to a lack of playing time, but patience is important in many cases.

For instance, Jackson finished strongly last season as a rookie but was again supplanted over the summer by Jason McCourty. Jackson kept a cool head and has been solid in his role this season, particularly in McCourty's absence.

Williams could do something similar next year if McCourty doesn't return for any reason or if someone gets injured. And if Harris can stay healthier next offseason, he could cut into the starters' snaps, as he did for a time over the summer with Sony Michel.

The rookies have also appreciated the honesty in the coaches' communication. They know their roles on a week-by-week basis, and that's eased their burden as they've adapted to life at the bottom of the depth chart.

"I love that in this organization, they do speak up front," Williams said. "I'm coming in to compete. I'm coming in to get better. I'm coming in to be one of the best in the league. That's my goal. When I'm on scout team giving all these guys looks, from Julian (Edelman) to Tom (Brady), I'm going to give them my best look possible. Then when I'm on the defense, I'm making sure to play sound football and to do my job. That's pretty much it. Do your job, and you'll be fine."

Harris felt much the same. This is just the beginning for them.

"I do still think things are going well now, first and most importantly for the team, but for myself as well," Harris said. "I think I go out there and do a good job of trying to compete every day, trying to get better every day, trying to make the most of every rep I get. Regardless of that, mentally, I know I can play at a high level. I know I'm here for a reason."

THE ATHLETIC

As he transitions to pro ball, Damien Harris' Alabama glory days — and his helmet — are never far away

By Jeff Howe
Nov 6, 2019

Damien Harris only needs to look as far as his locker to see where he's been.

Inside his stall at Gillette Stadium, the Patriots rookie running back has his old Alabama helmet sitting prominently as a reminder of the glory days on campus. It's also a symbol, reassuring him he can get through any challenges in his transition to pro ball.

The crimson helmet with the white No. 34 hangs on a hook in the back amid the rest of his Patriots gear, the current equipment parted to the side to keep the old helmet in full view.

"It's kind of just a reminder every day to be thankful of where I came from," Harris said. "Sometimes, it's not about where you're going. It's how you get there. That was a big part of my life, so I like to keep it with me."

After the last game of Harris's college career — his fourth consecutive appearance in the national championship game — coach Nick Saban gave each graduating senior and draft-eligible junior a care package stuffed with gear to carry their Alabama pride into the NFL.

Harris, who led Alabama in rushing in each of his last three seasons, received his helmet and jerseys from the national championship and the 2018 Sugar Bowl, when he rushed for 77 yards in a victory against Clemson.

"Cool stuff that I can put up and pull it out in 10-15 years and think about all the good times that I had while I played there," Harris said. "College was just a special time for me. I was real appreciative of the four years I spent there — my coaches, my teammates, the fans, everyone who played a part in me ending up where I am now.

"I felt like I had a special relationship with the university, and it was more than just football. I was really close with the administration throughout the university, professors, the fans, students on campus. I tried to be really involved with anybody that I came into contact with, anybody I had the opportunity to speak with or run into on campus, walking across to class. I just tried to leave my mark on everything I did.

"I wanted to be a captain. I wanted to leave my footprint. I always wanted to be close to the administration. Those are the types of people that, if you need something, if you're kind to them, if you show them respect, they'll help you out

no matter what you need. It's a place you can always go back, and they'll welcome you with open arms. I tried to leave my mark on that university, and hopefully I did."

Harris, who was viewed as a second-round prospect, surprisingly fell to the third round of the draft. Director of player personnel Nick Caserio said the Patriots weren't necessarily drafting Harris for need as much as they had to pounce on the value of the player at that juncture of the draft.

Harris got off to a strong start for the Patriots in organized team activities and training camp, to the point where it looked like he might even challenge Sony Michel for carries. However, a couple of injuries in camp and the preseason derailed his progress, and he hasn't been able to dig out of the hole with seven healthy scratches in nine games.

It doesn't help that the running back depth chart is loaded with trusted veterans like James White, Rex Burkhead and special teams ace Brandon Bolden alongside Michel, the team's reigning rushing leader who dominated on the way to Super Bowl LIII.

For some additional perspective, the Patriots essentially redshirted Shane Vereen and James White during their rookie seasons before each blossomed.

Harris endured similar circumstances as a freshman when the Crimson Tide also had running backs Derrick Henry and Kenyan Drake, and he competed for carries with Josh Jacobs and Bo Scarbrough in other years. That, along with Saban's hard coaching, should help Harris overcome this hurdle.

"It wasn't an easy process by any means," Harris said of his time at Alabama. "Going through that program was really tough, really challenging, but it also prepared me for the challenges that are going on here. It just reminds me of so many different things. It's really special to me. I like to keep it everywhere I go.

"Coach Saban, first and foremost, was very tough. He had our best interests at heart, but he didn't make it easy for us. In order to play, you had to earn your way to that point. Practice was hard. Games were supposed to be easier because of how hard we prepared and how hard we trained. Things like that, the mental grind of it, the physical grind, there were a lot of different things. But all the players who come through there and make it to the next level, it's because of what we did while we were at Alabama."

The helmet can mean so much to Harris at any given moment – home, pride, the fun, the challenges and the lessons learned.

As for those lessons in Tuscaloosa, he was asked which one was most beneficial for his time in New England.

"Just developing the mentality that every single day, I'm going to go into work with the mindset that I'm going to get better," Harris said. "I felt like when I was in college there were times when I was worried about all the wrong things – why am I not doing this right, why is this happening? I feel like once I finally realized that nothing is going to get better until I just go in with the mindset that every day is a new day – there are going to be new challenges, new adversity. And I just have to take each day as a new opportunity to get better."

And of course, there's that Roll Tide pride.

Harris, a two-time national champion, has known Dont'a Hightower since he arrived at school. The Pats linebacker attended Alabama from 2008 to 2011 and regularly returns to campus, so the pair crossed paths a number of times before they became teammates.

"That's my guy," Harris said. "Obviously one of the all-time greats to ever play there. He kind of started that dynasty. I remember when I got drafted here, he texted me and was talking about how excited he was. We were able to carry that relationship, and it's just gotten stronger."

Second-ranked Alabama is again in the hunt for a national championship, winning each of its first eight games by at least three touchdowns and gearing up for Saturday's rivalry game at home against No. 1 LSU. The Crimson Tide have already taken down Stephon Gilmore's South Carolina Gamecocks, Bolden's Ole Miss Rebels, Jakob

Johnson's Tennessee Volunteers and Deatrich Wise's Arkansas Razorbacks. It's a safe bet Harris has also reminded Michel and David Andrews of Georgia's loss to South Carolina.

There's been a bit of disappointment Harris and Hightower don't have any teammates from LSU to jab at before the game. They'll just have to let out that pent-up frustration on Auburn's Jarrett Stidham and Jon Jones before the Iron Bowl.

"We don't have anybody here from LSU, so I don't really have anybody to talk smack to this week," Harris said. "I talk to Sony, David Andrews all the time. Me and Deatrich talk all the time about how bad Arkansas is. It's a friendly rivalry. It'll probably get more competitive once we start playing teams, when we play Georgia (potentially in the SEC title game). I know we played Tennessee. I gave Jak a little bit of trouble. Those bigger games, SEC Championship Games, games that really matter, I'm sure the rivalry will be a little more intense."

Kevin Faulk, at least, comes around often enough.

"We talked a little when he was here in training camp," Harris said of Faulk, the ex-Pats rusher and—— LSU legend who now works as the Tigers' director of player development. "He talks about how the days were when he was there. I'm like, 'Well, how about right now?' It's cool."

Harris might have to display that helmet more prominently when his school's stakes become even greater. But for now, the subtle self-reminder is all he needs.

WR N'Keal Harry



N'Keal Harry has new trainer aiming to better prepare him for rigors of NFL

By Jeff Howe
May 7, 2020

Former first-round draft pick N'Keal Harry has adjusted his workout routine this offseason with the goal of meeting the high expectations that come with that draft status.

The Patriots wide receiver dealt with a pair of injuries last summer in training camp that derailed his rookie season, and he is hoping the emphasis on his new workouts will remove undue stress on his lower body. Harry began training last week in Houston with Justin Allen, the younger brother of former Patriots tight end Dwayne Allen.

"Everybody knows he has a God-given body," Justin Allen said. "He's a physical freak, and he is a hard worker, very competitive. We've been working on fundamentals. I've been taking him back to what you were doing when you were first playing the sport as a kid — just those little details, basic fundamentals of getting in and out of your breaks, staying low, eliminating steps in and out of breaks, loosening up his hips, teaching him how to use his hips, be more fluid and move faster than he does. We're trying to get him to play a little bit faster so he can give a little different look next year."

Physically, the 6-foot-4, 225-pound Harry looked the part last offseason. He distinguished himself among the Patriots' receivers with his size and power, making an acrobatic catch or two nearly every practice, although his chemistry was spotty with quarterback Tom Brady.

Harry suffered an ankle sprain and another leg-related injury in Detroit that wiped away the remainder of his training camp and preseason, and the Patriots placed him on injured reserve for the first half of the regular season. The injuries weren't serious, but the Patriots weren't prepared to waste a roster spot for several weeks until he returned, recognizing the steep learning curve that was also in play.

By missing two and a half months of practice at a crucial stage of his development, Harry fell way behind and managed only 12 receptions for 105 yards and two touchdowns and five carries for 49 yards in seven games. He added two catches for 21 yards and a 7-yard run in the playoff loss to the Titans.

Allen, who owns Nike-sponsored All-En Sports Performance, said Harry is healthy and they're working to prevent those types of nagging injuries from reoccurring.

"Just teaching him how to control his body a little bit better, understanding his foot placement, where his foot should be," Allen said. "A lot of people step outside their frame, not understanding the foot comes through the hip. So if the foot comes outside of your frame, your hip is driving the leg down to generate that force and that power. It's going to cause you to reach and have you be a step slower than you should be. Just working on the little things with him, working on his steps, staying within his body frame."

Harry and Allen met in 2017. Allen, who previously played for New Mexico State, attended his alma mater's season opener at Arizona State. Harry caught his eye with six receptions for 69 yards, so Allen introduced himself after the Sun Devils' victory.

They remained in touch over the years and crossed paths again in 2019 at the combine in Indianapolis. Harry finally had enough free time this offseason due to the coronavirus restrictions on team workouts, so he set up a program with Allen, whose other notable clients include 2019 wide receiver draft picks Mecole Hardman and Deebo Samuel.

Harry flew to Houston last week, returned home to Arizona over the weekend and got back with Allen again this week. He arrives at 7 a.m. for a workout in the weight room before a late-morning break and hits the practice field in the early afternoon.

Harry plans to continue working out with Allen throughout the offseason, or at least until the Patriots can officially return to work at Gillette Stadium.

"He's a fast learner," Allen said. "You can see the corrections happening within his workouts. It takes repetition. The more we repped, the better he got. He is definitely learning fast."

DB J.C. Jackson

The Boston Globe

Undrafted rookie cornerback J.C. Jackson has been a real find for Patriots

By Nora Princiotti
JANUARY 19, 2019

FOXBOROUGH — It was May, and Stephon Gilmore was keeping an eye out for one of his new teammates at OTAs. He was helping out his agency, which was also representing a cornerback named J.C. Jackson, an undrafted rookie who'd just signed with the Patriots.

Gilmore was happy to play big brother, but he knew there were no guarantees Jackson would be his teammate for long. Everyone in football knows what undrafted free agent means. He took the praise he heard of Jackson with a grain of salt, until he saw him play.

"I'm like, 'Sheesh. How did this dude go undrafted?'" Gilmore said.

The answer to that question is simple: April 18, 2015.

That evening, Jackson and two companions entered the apartment of a marijuana dealer in Gainesville, Fla. According to the Gainesville Police Department, Jackson left quickly. After he did, one of the two remaining visitors pulled out a handgun and robbed the place, leaving with \$382, some drugs, and two video game consoles. All three were arrested and, though he was not part of the burglary itself, Jackson was charged with four first-degree felonies. Life in prison was on the table.

A jury found him not guilty of all charges that November, but Jackson's reputation had been tarnished. Before the arrest, Jackson was a freshman at the University of Florida who had been highly recruited, and penciled in to start the

following season. After it, he got kicked off the team and set off on a path unrecognizable from the one he'd imagined for himself, but one that's wound its way to the destination he always hoped for.

"I just believed," Jackson said. "I have to get to the NFL."

Talent stood out

Football was Jackson's way out of Immokalee, Fla. A handful of current and former NFL players, most notably running back Edgerrin James, once called the South Florida town home, so making the league felt attainable. Jackson's father, Chris, had his son running sprints on sand when J.C. was 5 years old, the beach sculpting calves capable of propelling his frame high in the air.

Jackson was a four-year starter on both sides of the ball at Immokalee High School. Those teams were loaded with Division 1 talent, but Jackson stood out, collecting more than 1,000 all-purpose yards, 15 touchdowns, 53 tackles, 2 interceptions, and 1 forced fumble as a senior.

Immokalee won the district championship that year but for Rich Dombroski, then Jackson's coach, it's a play from a Monday practice that stands out, a play when Jackson ran into trouble and still found a way to get where he was going.

"We had him beat on a hitch and go," Dombroski said. "He bit up on the hitch and our receiver blew by him. Well, J.C. stopped on a dime, caught up to the kid, and knocked the ball out of the air. It was one of those things where we looked around as coaches and were like, 'Did we just see what we saw?'"

Recruiters saw plenty from Jackson — fluid hips, long arms, a short memory, and ridiculous ball skills — to want him to play cornerback in college, even though he'd played more receiver to that point.

He was a four-star recruit and 247Sports' No. 136 overall prospect in the class of 2014. The Sunshine State's holy football trinity — Florida, Miami, and Florida State — all offered scholarships, and they weren't alone. One afternoon, Jackson opened his front door and found a line of cars waiting outside, college coaches sitting in each.

"It got crazy," Jackson said.

Jackson is exceptionally confident, but he's also a people pleaser. This made choosing a college difficult, because he couldn't please everyone. He'd ask Dombroski where he should go almost daily, until the coach sat him down in the weight room one day and said he needed to choose for himself.

He chose Florida, which was also the favorite of his mother, Lisa Dasher. He'd grown close with then-Gators coach Will Muschamp and got to Gainesville feeling like things were falling into place. On a team with seven other defensive backs currently in the NFL, including Patriots second-round pick Duke Dawson, Jackson was expected to play as a true freshman.

Then he hurt his shoulder in the first game of the season and needed surgery. Muschamp got fired. Jackson, 19 at the time, lost his mentors and gained too much free time. He didn't use it wisely.

"That's when everything went sideways," Jackson said.

Change of plans

For the first time, Jackson questioned himself and his plans. It was the only time in his life he ever considered quitting football. He might have, had the thought of letting his family down not stopped him.

His father played a year of college football, then left school, and he'd pushed his son hard so that the ending of J.C.'s story would be different from his.

And both his parents had supported him through his trial. They'd given up their home to keep up with legal fees.

Jackson didn't quit. He enrolled at Riverside City College in California. He'd played all of one college football game and had gone from sought-after recruit to sleeping on his friend's couch, playing junior college football, hoping another D1 opportunity would find him. He went to class and got good grades, but Jackson was sad, bored, and lonely.

"That was the last thing on my mind was to go away to Cali and go to JUCO," Jackson said, still incredulous. "When I was just at the University of Florida? It was hard. But I made that decision so I had to pay for it."

Where he saw a fall from grace, those back home saw Jackson putting up a fight.

"A lot of kids from Immokalee, if something happens, they end up coming home," said Dombroski. "And now you're working in the fields. I didn't want to see J.C. waste his talent."

The talent was still there, as was the network of college coaches keeping tabs on whether they could use it. D.J. Durkin, then the head coach at Maryland, had been the defensive coordinator at Florida during Jackson's time there. He sent his defensive backs coach, Aazaar Abdul-Rahim, to Riverside to meet Jackson. Abdul-Rahim had coached now-Lions cornerback Jalen Tabor, Jackson's roommate at Florida, in high school, and Tabor vouched for Jackson.

"They're kids. You're talking about 18- or 19-year-old kids," Abdul-Rahim said. "They're going to make mistakes, you know? And the reality of college football and the reality of student-athletes is that their mistakes are shown to millions."

Abdul-Rahim wound up bringing Jackson to College Park in August 2016. Jackson picked off three passes in his first practice.

Jackson started every game in 2016 and 2017 for the Terrapins. He made 80 tackles, intercepted four passes, and defended 13. He was close with his coaches and never got in trouble at Maryland. When he declared for the 2018 NFL Draft, he'd heard himself graded as high as the second round. He expected to hear his name called at some point.

It wasn't. Teams had character concerns. The Rams, Broncos, and two other teams had called Dombroski about Jackson before the draft, asking if he could be trusted to stay out of trouble. Dombroski swore up and down that he could, but they still stayed away. Jackson watched the draft at home, nerves giving way to sadness and anger with every round gone by.

Landing with the Patriots was a small consolation because Jackson knew the team's history of playing undrafted rookies. When he got to Foxborough, though, it became clear quickly that he wasn't a typical undrafted rookie. By training camp, he was getting time with the first-team defense, and it wasn't just Gilmore wondering how he'd fallen.

"I remember like a day or two into training camp, I went up to him and was like, 'How did you not get drafted?'" said veteran cornerback Jason McCourty.

Seizing opportunity

By the numbers, Jackson has been one of the best cornerbacks in the NFL this season. He's played in 13 games and has been starting since Week 13. According to Pro Football Focus, opposing quarterbacks have a 42.0 passer rating when targeting Jackson, the lowest for any corner in the NFL with more than 25 snaps in coverage. Jackson has yet to allow a touchdown, and he's intercepted three passes and broken up three more.

Yet as well as he's played, his draft status follows him like a shadow. Opposing quarterbacks keep throwing his way, long after he's shown that his is not a favorable matchup for their offenses. When the Patriots played the Steelers in Week 15, Jackson locked down JuJu Smith-Schuster all game long, but Ben Roethlisberger still targeted him deep on a critical third down near the end of the game. Jackson broke up the pass.

He'd given up just one catch to Smith-Schuster at that point. He was in tight coverage. Would Roethlisberger have thrown that pass if he hadn't looked at Jackson and thought "undrafted rookie"?

Meanwhile, Jackson looks at those matchups and sees battles he's supposed to win.

"He's fearless," said Abdul-Rahim. "He doesn't look at who he's going against, he looks at the opportunity to be a great player. I think that helped him with the Patriots. He walks in there and he's out there, he sees Tom Brady. You see so many people, so many wide receivers that have had storied careers that you have to shut down, but he has an important trait as a corner, and that's a short memory. He exudes confidence."

"I think now, every time I walk on the field I think, I'm here," Jackson said. "I think, I've been through so much and now I've got a chance to do big things."

Some of that confidence is God-given, but much of it is the swagger of a four-star recruit stepping out his door and finding a caravan of coaches waiting to court him. Jackson has been a great player for a long time. He expects success.

"He's not Malcolm Butler. He was an Under Armour All-American," said Abdul-Rahim. "But the whole deal isn't where you start, it's where you finish."

Football teams are big organizations. They need labels and hierarchies to make sense of it all. But when those labels mislead, they can be hard to shed. Consider all the times Jackson has been compared to Butler, the most famous success story for an undrafted Patriots corner, despite the fact that going undrafted is about all the major recruit and West Alabama product have in common.

Jackson wants a long career so he can support his family, which includes a young son. He doesn't have hobbies outside of football, or a Plan B if it doesn't work out. But it will work out, because he'll make it that way, because he's always made it that way. When he does, he won't be surprised, even if everyone else is. The surprising part, to him, is the winding path he took to get here, but where Jackson is now is where he always planned to be.

OL Shaq Mason



Shaq Mason's drive came from watching mom

By Mark Daniels

Updated Oct 20, 2018 at 8:23 PM

FOXBORO — Alicia McGuire always stressed the importance of academics to her son, even if it came at a cost.

Anytime her boy received good grades, she rewarded him. That usually meant a special meal at a restaurant of his choosing. Since Shaq Mason was a straight-A student, there were many dinners, usually at Ruby Tuesday.

There in Columbia, Tenn., Mason flipped through the menu. He usually settled on cheesy fries for an appetizer and then a nice entree. For a single mother, working up to three jobs to stay afloat, it wasn't easy to pay for these special nights. That's why McGuire only ordered an appetizer. On other occasions, she'd just sip on water.

When her son asked why she wasn't eating, she'd hide the truth.

"I'd just let him eat and I'd get some water and be like, I'm not hungry," McGuire recalled. "As a kid, all he knows is that I'm working and he's getting everything that he needs. He wouldn't have known that we were poor. He probably thought we were rich. He may have not known that I was working paycheck-to-paycheck sometimes. He just knew that mama took care of him. He didn't know what was going on behind the scenes."

When Mason was teenager, he asked his mom about those nights. She explained that she didn't eat because she couldn't afford to. It was always more important that he enjoyed those dinners, since her goal was to reward her son and shield him from her own struggles. When the truth hit him, it opened his eyes to just how strong his mother really was.

"There's things that, growing up, that you didn't know, that she hid from us," Mason said. "But once I got older, in high school, I was like, 'wow, this is really how we're living.' It was something I didn't know. I thought it was normal."

Little did McGuire know, her work ethic rubbed off on her oldest son, who's now living his dream with the Patriots.

'No alternative'

McGuire was a 21-year-old student at Martin Methodist College when her son was born on Aug. 28, 1993.

She briefly stopped her education to focus all her time and energy on her boy. She knew it wouldn't be easy and part of her was worried. McGuire saw firsthand what could happen when a male strayed down the wrong path in life. So, with no financial help from her son's biological father, McGuire began working two, and sometimes three, jobs to pay the bills. Her main source of income was factory work, but that wasn't enough, so she did side jobs like cleaning houses.

"It's just one of those situations in which once becoming pregnant, knowing that now that I have a child to take care of, you have to hit the ground running and it's all about him at that point," McGuire said. "That was my focus — take care of my son. I looked at it as not having an alternative, but to work and work and work and work."

She preached education and hard work to her boy. When times were tough, she taught him that things could get better. When the factory closed, the company offered employees a chance to go back to school. She did that and eventually got into the corporate world.

Growing up in that environment wasn't easy, but Mason soon realized how his mother's work ethic influenced him.

"The hardest working person I ever met is my mom. I never met anyone who worked harder than her," Mason said. "She provided for me and my [younger] brother. All those years with no help. I just learned from her to always, she told me at a young age, 'it always can get better.' We know what the bottom feels like, so it can only go up from here. That's something that always stuck with me."

Learned from mistakes

When Mason was a boy, he was involved in nearly every sport offered each season. He played football in the fall, basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring. If that wasn't enough, he even took karate lessons.

McGuire was always a sports fan — that's why she named her son Shaquille Olajuwon Mason, after her two favorite basketball players. However, turning him into an athlete was never the goal. She wanted to keep him safe, and needed to keep him busy.

"Growing up, the way we grew up, my most important goal was to not let him be a statistic," McGuire said. "I've always been a sports person. I love sports. But I couldn't care less if he played a down of football or shot a hoop in regards to his education. So I always pushed his education first but I always wanted to occupy his time because I felt like I didn't want the streets to get a hold of him."

McGuire saw what could happen. Two of her brothers went down the wrong path and ended up in and out of prison. She knew if he got into the wrong hands, he could've easily been interacting with drug dealers instead of football coaches.

As Mason grew up, he witnessed several events that turned out to be teaching moments. That's why every day his mom told him the same thing — and still does — "make good choices."

"I was exposed to a lot. You get the picture. I was exposed to a lot of things at an early age," Mason said. "Thankfully, thankful to god, I didn't fall victim to those things. Likewise, my uncles had been in prison, but one thing I can say, they always thought me — 'don't do this. This is not the route you want to take.' They were role models to me as far as showing me the route not to take. They told me, 'you want to be better than us.' Things like that. I could've easily felt victim to it, but thankfully I didn't."

Mason never strayed. He was a great student and excelled in sports. His focus is what set him apart among his peers. Before you knew it, Mason approached academics and football like his mom approached her work — he hit the ground running and never turned back.

He beat the odds

When he was 5, Mason would tell anyone who asked, he wanted to be a football player, but no one really thought it was possible. That story usually doesn't happen in Columbia. It was a pipe dream.

"That was always a goal of mine," Mason said. "That's every kid growing up, but coming from where I come from, that's not realistic."

Even after he earned a scholarship to Georgia Tech, it didn't hit him or his mother that he was actually going to the NFL until his senior year.

The truth is Mason's an outlier. When you combine an elite work ethic in an elite athlete, you usually get positive results. Like his mother, this offensive guard never stop working. When the Patriots drafted him in the fourth round in 2015, he was considered raw. Sure, he was already a solid run blocker, but he was far from being a complete offensive linemen. Before you knew it, Mason was just that and a full-time starter by his second season.

That didn't happen by mistake.

Mason always put the effort in. McGuire saw him putting in the extra work — before practice, after practice. He even ran on the weekends and made sure he ate right. Of course, it's easy to see where that comes from.

"A lot of my drive comes from her," Mason said. "Just from seeing what she did. She motivated me to want to take an extra mile — like she did."

Last year, Mason bought his mother a new house in Columbia. This year, he was rewarded for his hard work with a five-year, \$45-million contract from the Patriots. On the field, he continues to get better. Mason's arguably the most talented offensive linemen on the team and one of the best guards in the NFL.

"Hard work pays off. He worked so hard. He always just strives so hard to do better and better," McGuire said. "He's always just push, push, push. I think it's because he always wanted to be better."

Like mother, like son.

DB Devin McCourty & DB Jason McCourty



Guregian: Devin McCourty has become Mr. Patriot

Karen Guregian

Wednesday, January 11, 2017

FOXBORO — Devin McCourty didn't play with Tedy Bruschi, Willie McGinest or any of the Patriots greats from those early championship teams.

Yet he'd certainly fit right in at the head of the table.

Now in his seventh season, McCourty has all the i's dotted and t's crossed in that Patriots kind of way. The Pro Bowl safety has evolved into a similar kind of leader. On the field, off the field, he shows up at the most important times. He's also pretty good at taking care of all the mundane but necessary tasks needed to keep the locker room functioning at a peak level.

"To me, in my mind, Devin is Mr. Patriot," fellow captain Matthew Slater said. "He just does everything the right way, whether it's on the field, off the field, the type of man he is, what he does in the community. I can't think of a better example of what this organization hopes to stand for than Devin McCourty."

McCourty has been thrust to the forefront in dealing with the media, in part a responsibility of being a captain, but also because he handles the job so well. He's well-spoken, but in true Patriots fashion gives nothing away, a trait Bill Belichick appreciates in his captains.

McCourty just shows everyone the way. It's like he's taken the baton from Bruschi and McGinest and has become the face of the Patriots defense.

"He definitely is exactly what the Patriots embody and embellish — team players. And it's very natural for him," cornerback Logan Ryan said. "He's a unanimous captain every year. He does everything for the team and has a lot of

fun doing it. He's a good Mr. Patriot. If a play needs to be made, he makes it. If something needs to be done in the room, he does it."

Former Patriots safety Rodney Harrison said the tipoff to how Belichick and the organization felt about McCourty, and where he stood, came during free agency two years ago when they extended him to a five-year, \$47.5 million deal at the 11th hour. Belichick personally called McCourty to seal the deal.

"If he didn't fit in that (Patriots) mold, they would have never paid him the type of money they gave him," Harrison said. "Bill has let other guys leave in free agency. I think they understood he was a very, very important piece, even if they had to overspend on him."

McCourty certainly made some huge plays down the stretch this season, helping the team to a 14-2 record, home-field advantage and a date Saturday night in the divisional playoffs against the Houston Texans.

Perhaps his biggest play thus far, one that's considered the signature moment and defining play of the regular season, happened in Denver in Week 15. In the fourth quarter, McCourty delivered a jarring hit to Demaryius Thomas at the sideline to break up a fourth-down pass. It essentially sealed the game.

"That's big-time," Harrison said. "Nobody (cares) about the Pro Bowl and racking up a bunch of big numbers, that's fine. If you ask me, it's all about making key plays in big moments of games. That's what people remember."

People definitely mention that play. Or they mention McCourty's ongoing charitable work. Or they mention listening to him at the podium, speaking the word of the Patriots every week.

"I've always been taught it's what you do, not what you say. That's what my mom preached," McCourty said. "That's me in a nutshell. I'm not a guy who says a ton. I'm not a yeller or a screamer. But I think guys learn the most from your actions and what you do on a daily basis. That's what they see most."

McCourty learned the Patriots Way mostly from former teammates Jerod Mayo, Vince Wilfork (who will be in town Saturday with the Texans) and Logan Mankins.

"Everyone talked about how Logan never missed practice during his career. I'd hear things like that, then playing defense with Vince and Mayo, I was just trying to follow the things they did and what they represented," McCourty said. "Vince obviously played with a lot of those guys, and Mayo caught the back end (from the early championship guys). It might be just from them and what they learned."

Well, he learned his lessons well. He was voted a captain his second year on the team. That was a bit daunting for McCourty, but he's grown into the role and now embraces it.

"The plays on the field, I don't have much control. Sometimes they just happen, but I think when you talk around the locker room or have meetings with the guys, you just get a feel for it, when you need to say something," said McCourty, a captain for six seasons. "When something needs to change, anything you feel you need to do, that just hits you, and you feel comfortable doing it."

Slater believes McCourty is timeless.

"You put him in any era, you plug him in the early 2000s or plug him in now, I think he'd fit in, and you'd say the same thing about him," Slater said. "I think we're very fortunate to have a man like him in our locker room on our team. He's true in his convictions, and obviously we know him for his performance on the field."

"He is Mr. Patriot, no question about it."



Meet the McCourty twins' mighty mom: How Patriots Devin, Jason got to Super Bowl LIII

Ian O'Connor
Jan 29, 2019

RIVER VALE, N.J. -- To this day, nearly three decades after the tragedy, Devin and Jason McCourty will suddenly do something, or say something, or express a strong opinion that will stop their mother cold and remind her of their late father.

"Isn't that funny?" Phyllis Harrell says.

She was sitting in her northern New Jersey home, her corner of lakeside suburbia, preparing for a road trip to Atlanta to see her twin 31-year-old sons try to help the New England Patriots beat the Los Angeles Rams in Super Bowl LIII. Harrell said she just smiles when that happens, when one of the twins makes a remark and it feels like the words came right out of Calvin McCourty's mouth. Harrell keeps those thoughts and the sweetest memories of her longtime companion to herself because, she said, "it wouldn't do me good to say anything to Devin and Jason."

The boys were 3 years old when their father, an Army veteran, reported to work at Lederle Laboratories in Pearl River, New York, on Oct. 16, 1990. A former basketball star at Nyack High School, Calvin McCourty was a 36-year-old supervisor in the Lederle computer department and an asthmatic who had been recently hospitalized. Calvin and Phyllis, a former cheerleader, didn't start dating until after high school. They loved each other and loved their life with Devin and Jason in their home inside the low-income community known as Nyack Plaza.

Phyllis was working as a nurse at the time, and she doesn't want to recall too much about that day. She remembers doing laundry in the evening when the phone rang with news that Calvin had gone into cardiac arrest after suffering an asthma attack. He died before Phyllis could get to the hospital, before she had a chance to say goodbye.

Her oldest son, Larry White, was overseas fighting in the Gulf War, leaving Harrell all alone with Devin and Jason. She repeatedly asked herself, "What am I going to do?" Harrell took a week off to grieve and accepted an offer from Calvin's parents to help with the kids whenever they could. "And then I went back to work," she said, "and life rolled on."

Sunday evening in Atlanta, it's quite possible Tom Brady will win his fifth Super Bowl MVP award at the expense of an opponent he defeated in his first MVP performance 17 years ago, back when the Rams were representing St. Louis. But in the lead-up to New England-L.A., another MVP -- Most Valuable Parent -- will be conspicuous for her infectious laugh and the navy and white half-Devin, half-Jason jersey she stitched together for the 2018 NFL season, the first that found her sons on the same team like they had been at Rutgers, at St. Joseph Regional High School in Montvale, New Jersey, and at the Pop Warner level in Valley Cottage, New York.

On willpower, Harrell drove Devin and Jason to this moment. It started with her method of parenting. "Iron fist," she said. While she worked as a nurse at Rockland Psychiatric Center, Harrell ordered a taxi every day to take the boys from elementary school directly to their grandmother's home in Nyack Plaza. The community looked after its own. Sometimes the Irish-born woman who lived downstairs, Mary Brady, would babysit Devin and Jason and, as they grew older, would report back to their mother if she saw them doing things they shouldn't be doing.

"I was very strict, and I kind of chose their friends," said Harrell, who would load neighborhood kids into her station wagon to drive them to practices and games. "I've never had to go to a police station to pick my kids up, because I just think they'd say, 'Oh no, leave me here. I don't want to go home with her.'"

Harrell didn't allow her sons to spend time at the wrong hang-out places, and they didn't dare cross her. She was -- and is -- a tough woman, a fighter. Harrell was once a passenger in a car returning a couple of residents to the psychiatric center when the car was involved in a crash, causing the driver to accidentally hit the gas instead of the brakes and compelling Harrell to struggle for control of the steering wheel as they crossed two lanes of traffic. She suffered a knee injury that would lead to surgeries and a knee replacement and long-term disability.

When the boys were young, Harrell also weathered a serious health scare -- doctors grew concerned over her white-blood-cell count and mistakenly thought she might have leukemia. "If something happens to me," she kept thinking, "who is going to raise my kids?"

As the twins entered their Catholic high school, Harrell fretted over tuition and the possibility that her illness would compromise her ability to pay for college. Devin told his mother that she shouldn't worry, that if they attended a football powerhouse like St. Joe's, "we're going to get scholarships, so you won't have to worry about college." Harrell responded, "Yeah, OK, Dev." Four years later, Jason was the more heavily recruited McCourty. Rutgers coach Greg Schiano really wanted him, and when asked whether she leaned on Schiano to offer a full ride to Devin, Harrell broke into a mischievous smile. "Yeah, kind of," she said. "I was telling him, 'If Devin gets his opportunity, he's going to be fantastic. When you see J, you see Dev.'"

Realizing he was on the less desirable end of a package deal, Devin told his mother he wasn't sure about accepting Rutgers' offer. "Stop the B.S.," Harrell shot back. "This is your opportunity to play Division I football." And that was that. Jason played four years for the Scarlet Knights and got drafted by Tennessee in the sixth round in 2009. Devin redshirted, played the next four years for the Scarlet Knights and got drafted by New England in the first round in 2010, making his mother a prophet by getting picked 176 slots earlier than his brother.

"I didn't tell my sons this, but I did tell their wives: If they win the Super Bowl together, I'm going to grab some of the confetti and lay out on the field and do an angel."

Phyllis Harrell, whose sons Devin and Jason McCourty are NFL teammates for the first time

Devin's career in Foxborough became a blur of Super Bowls and AFC Championship Games, while Jason's in Nashville became a maddening exercise in missing the playoffs and tagging along (in street clothes) as his older brother (by 27 minutes) chased championship rings. Devin had appeared in 19 postseason games, including four Super Bowls, before Jason recovered from an 0-16 season in Cleveland, joined him in New England and landed in the tournament for the first time.

Harrell was cooking in her kitchen when Devin FaceTimed her the news that his brother was traded to the Patriots; she didn't believe it until Jason texted the confirmation. "I prayed all this time," Harrell said, "and I never thought it would happen."

Having missed the trip to the AFC Championship Game in Kansas City to attend funeral services for her aunt, Harrell grew emotional when she watched on TV as her sons celebrated their first Super Bowl appearance as teammates. "This is what I came here for!" Jason shouted into his brother's ear as Devin was being interviewed on the Arrowhead Stadium field.

Their 48-year-old brother, Larry White, also choked up as he took in the scene from afar. Larry played football at Nyack High, though he said he wasn't as talented or as focused as Devin and Jason would be at St. Joe's and beyond. White joined the Army out of high school, fought for his country in Desert Storm and returned home a changed man. He doesn't like to revisit his combat experience, other than to say he was blessed by being part of a team of soldiers defined by its good chemistry and its ability to successfully carry out dangerous missions. Now employed by a car dealership, White undergoes counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder, something he said he will likely face for the rest of his life.

Larry said Devin and Jason have always provided him unwavering support. "I look up to them," said White, who wanted it known he sees the twins more as great husbands, fathers and brothers than he does as great athletes.

White also wanted it known that he finds Harrell chiefly responsible for the fact that Devin and Jason were worthy of being nominees for the Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year Award given annually to a player who serves his community.

Devin and Jason McCourty were 3 years old when their father, Calvin, died. Ian O'Connor/ESPN

"My mother is the strongest person I've ever known," White said. "She gave us everything, taught us everything. We're not the men we are without our mom."

Along with five siblings, Harrell was raised on the values of an honest day's work. Her father kept two jobs most of his life, working for a piping company and doing landscaping work on the side. Her mother was a cook in a children's home, and then a nurse's aide.

In later years, Harrell adored her time as a nurse at the psychiatric center, where she tended to mentally ill geriatric residents and savored the moments she connected with them in conversation. But her primary job revolved around the clear mandate to raise her sons to be better people than they were defensive backs, and she needed to take a forceful approach to that job.

"If you are raising boys who want to play sports," Harrell said, "you have to be tough."

Now 66 with seven grandchildren, Harrell is touched by the twins' fundraising commitment to finding a cure for sickle cell anemia, the disease that recently claimed the life of their dear aunt Winifred. Harrell is also overwhelmed by the sight of her sons playing for the same NFL team, and by the flashbacks to where it all began on that Valley Cottage Pop Warner team.

"I'm so grateful because I get to see them live out their dream," Harrell said. "I didn't tell my sons this, but I did tell their wives: If they win the Super Bowl together, I'm going to grab some of the confetti and lay out on the field and do an angel."

Devin and Jason were stars at Rutgers before being drafted to the NFL. Ian O'Connor/ESPN

Win or lose, it will be a hell of a family reunion for the first set of twins to play in the same Super Bowl, and the best sibling story in the big game since John Harbaugh beat Jim six years ago. The McCourty brothers will be missing only their father, Calvin, the high school basketball star who had them dribbling a ball at age 3. The man who died at 36 and whose newspaper obituary was surrounded by those that memorialized locals who lived into their 70s, 80s, and 90s.

"A hard worker and a nice, kind person," Harrell said. "Really reminds me a lot of my sons."

So on Super Bowl Sunday, the McCourty twins will stand as living tributes to their late father, and to the woman in the crowd whose resilience and love drove them across the goal line a long time ago.

RB Sony Michel



Lead from the Back: The Sony Michel story

By Erik Scalavino
October 4, 2019

A running back scores a touchdown and is glorified. His name, and his alone, appears on the game's official stat sheet. His name the fans scream with joy when he crosses the goal line. His, the one selected by fantasy football owners to help them win championships.

But what of his offensive line? There is no formal accounting for them, the massive men up front who so often do the bulk of the grunt work that allows the runner to find his way into the end zone.

In this, the 100th season of NFL football, you can reach back as many as 10 decades and still not find a single moment in this game's history when the O-line was a glamorous position. Particularly not nowadays, in our look-at-me society, where celebrity too often supersedes substance.

Is it any surprise, then, that Sony Michel once nearly quit football altogether. He was 8, and not having any fun whatsoever playing offensive line for his youth team in Florida.

"I just thought I wanted to score touchdowns," he recollects today, grinning at his then-shortsightedness. "At a young age, offensive line wasn't the 'cool' position. Now it is, from my perspective. It is. But back then, I didn't understand."

If that statement beggars belief, consider this even bolder declaration. While at the University of Georgia, Michel granted an interview to a writer for the school's website, in which he told her, "Really, I play football just to be able to help others... I feel like football is the closest way I'd be able to change the world."

That may sound wonderfully idealistic, especially for a college student who's not yet being paid millions as a first-round draft pick of the Patriots. Money has a way of changing, and not always for the better, the people who acquire large sums of it in a short period of time.

Asked recently if he still harbors the same sentiments, Michel doubles down.

"Initially, football kind of helped me be able to help my family financially," he concedes. "From a different aspect, it's able to give me a platform that just inspires people in any way possible. Some people would see a person like me

who plays football and be star-struck. From my perspective, I'm just a person, but I'm able to inspire and kind of serve and have a greater impact by playing football. That's really the reason I play this game."

For so many children and young adults today, the volume of "Likes" and "Retweets" from abstract "followers" whom they'll likely never meet in person means more to them than having an actual face-to-face discussion with a family member, friend, or even some pleasant stranger sitting next to them somewhere.

Others might find it rather satisfying, refreshing – encouraging? – to hear someone of Michel's status express such selfless viewpoints.

By the same token, it causes one to wonder from where such uncommon conviction stems. In Michel's case, he traces it back to two particular people and a Caribbean island nation some 700 miles from his Florida hometown, on which, to date, he has neither laid eyes nor set foot.

GREENER GRASS

With approximately 11 million inhabitants, Haiti, according to the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook, is among the Western Hemisphere's most densely populated, yet least developed countries, not to mention one of the poorest this side of the globe. Eighty percent of Haitians are believed to live in poverty, a staggering figure that Jean and Marie Michel sought to flee more than a quarter century ago.

Hoping to provide better for what was then their only child, 6-year-old daughter Lamise, the couple emigrated from Haiti to settle in South Florida. Life in the U.S. initially proved good enough that in 1993, the Michel's welcomed their second child, a son they called Marken, and less than two years later, a third: Sony.

When Sony eventually uttered his first words, they came in Haitian Creole, the preferred language in the Michel household. In their native tongue, Jean and Marie filled their children's imaginations with stories of the land and the loved ones left behind: its food, its traditions, its music, its natural beauty, its people – all Haiti's wonders, for certain, but no doubt its woes as well.

"I grew up in the Haitian culture. Everything we did was from the Haitian culture," Michel fondly recalls. "Hearing the stories, I have that picture in my head of what it's like... And by growing up in that atmosphere, it formed me. It helped me understand certain lessons and helped me get to where I am.

"I believe some of the morals I was taught, the work ethic – to see my parents work so hard, they gave me that same drive. My parents have no excuses. Why should I?"

Jean and Marie left Haiti with virtually nothing in terms of material wealth or possessions. They supported their burgeoning family here in the States with little more. Their reaction should therefore not have surprised him when he came home from a youth football practice and announced his intentions to give up the sport.

They forbade him. "You already started it," they explained. "You have to finish it." Realizing the futility of resistance, Michel instead made the best of his circumstances.

"I just made up my mind that, if I don't like the position I'm in, I'm going to change it. Do whatever I've got to do to change the position on the field, which translates to life," he observes. "If you don't like the position you're in, change it. It's a choice. Some people may feel they don't have a choice, but there's always a choice."

During a hitting drill at a subsequent practice session, young Sony steamrolled the team's then-starting running back. That gave his coach the idea to try him at running back, inspiring a momentous change in both the young player's outlook and prospects.

In a case of coincidental foreshadowing, Sony later enrolled at the American Heritage School in his hometown of Plantation, whose mascot is the Patriots. A naturally gifted athlete as a 14-year-old eighth grader, he not only started for his high school's varsity team, but also led all prep players in Broward County by rushing for more than 1,800 yards that season.

A still-astonished Mike Smith, Michel's former strength and conditioning coach at American Heritage, remarked in an interview with CBS Sports just before the New England Patriots selected Michel in the 2018 NFL Draft, "He dominated from the beginning."

At that early age, young Sony Michel first began dreaming about himself in the National Football League.

Plantation, an inland community immediately west of littoral Fort Lauderdale, markets itself with the registered trademark motto “The Grass is Greener.” Blessed with a happy, if humble home life and promising gridiron future, Michel must have felt like nothing but lush green grass lay ahead of him. Soon, however, seismic shifts both literal and figurative would shake the earth beneath his feet.

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

Although the Dominican Republic dominates the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, it escaped most of the destruction wrought by a Jan. 12, 2010 earthquake which registered a staggering 7.0 (out of 10) on the Richter scale. Undersized Haiti, representing the remaining western third, suffered the disproportionate brunt of the disaster.

Estimates of the death toll vary to this day, but there seems to be consensus that the number resides in the hundreds of thousands. An almost equal number of victims sustained injuries, while 1.5 million people were displaced, according to CNN.

Back in Plantation, what could a teenage Sony Michel do? For the people of Haiti, virtually nothing at that point. His sphere of influence did not yet extend as far or impact as consequentially as the shockwaves that leveled his family’s ancestral homeland.

Meanwhile, around this same time, both Jean and Marie found themselves out of work. Putting food on the table on a consistent basis proved challenging. Here, perhaps, their youngest child might have some leverage.

It must have crossed Sony’s mind that his notoriety as a high school football star held at least some regional sway, and that he might use that notoriety for the good of others – in this case, his own family.

Michel sought guidance from Smith, his trainer, who informed him that, in fact, a couple of positions needed filling at American Heritage. Michel’s parents interviewed and within a couple of weeks were hired. Both were content to work hard and unassumingly behind the scenes, thankful for the opportunity and whatever rewards might come of it. None of this escaped their son’s notice.

Michel certainly enjoyed playing football, and as a high school senior, he again eclipsed 1,800 yards rushing, drawing considerable attention from major college programs. Yet, he came to comprehend that the game could be a means to an end, not the end itself.

The University of Georgia further reinforced this notion, offering him more than a scholarship, but also a supportive, nurturing campus environment. Surrounded by likeminded classmates in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, a nationwide, non-denominational ministry group, Michel began to mature in his thinking toward and approach to being a responsible member of a community.

“Football gave me the opportunity to go to college for free. Once I saw that,” he explains, “I was like, ‘Football can provide so many things that we as football players don’t understand at times.’”

“It’s really my respect to the game. Such a small [object as a] football gives so much opportunity in all aspects of life, whether it’s beneficial to me or me being beneficial to others. It’s kind of amazing – if you can understand it, it’s a beautiful thing. I had people and groups that helped me get to a certain point; I thought it was appropriate for me to do the same thing.”

DRAWING A FLAG

A true Georgia freshman in 2014, Michel started one of the eight games in which he appeared, posting a respectable 410 yards and five TDs on 64 carries. The next season, Georgia players voted the sophomore tailback their offensive MVP following a 1,161-yard, eight-touchdown performance over the course of 13 games.

In Michel’s junior and senior seasons, his teammates elected him one of their co-captains. By the time he left Athens last calendar year, Michel had climbed to third on the University of Georgia’s all-time rushing list. Noteworthy Bulldog alums such as Garrison Hearst and eventual Super Bowl LIII opponent Todd Gurley found themselves looking up at him in that category.

Michel’s final college game – the National Championship. Georgia’s dream season fell achingly short in an overtime defeat to Alabama. The Bulldogs wouldn’t have gotten there at all, however, had it not been for Michel’s Offensive MVP performance against Oklahoma in the College Football Playoff on New Year’s Day 2018. That day, he rushed 11 times for 181 yards and three scores.

While he flourished at Georgia, Haiti continued to flounder.

The country had barely picked itself up and dusted itself off from the earthquake when a Saffir-Simpson scale Category 5 Hurricane named Matthew dealt Haiti a cruel and merciless blow in 2016. Then in October 2018, nearly eight years after the 2010 quake and just two following Matthew, estimates of tens of thousands of people remained displaced as a second earthquake (5.9 magnitude) struck.

Michel recognized these crises as an opportunity to put his altruistic thoughts into action.

On Dec. 2 of last year, Michel carried the football 17 times in a game at Gillette Stadium versus the Minnesota Vikings. Though he gained a modest 63 yards, caught just one pass for seven more, and failed to find the end zone, the cleats that propelled him that day bore the artistic design of the Haitian flag, whose blue, red, and white color scheme perfectly complemented New England's uniforms. A quiet gesture that elicited a thunderous response.

"Man, I got so many messages and comments from social media," the normally taciturn Michel beams. "They were excited to see a Haitian doing great things and being able to inspire, really. It brought a lot of hope to the Haitian community."

Many who contacted Michel said they were previously unaware of his Haitian background and came away believing that if he could make his dreams come true, so could they.

"The purpose of the cleats," Michel adds, "was to shed light on what was going on in Haiti. It was crazy to see the impact it had on Haitians in the States... It doesn't necessarily have to be football, just whatever it is that you want to do. Wearing the cleats on a big stage, that gave them some type of hope – like, maybe, Haitians CAN do more in the States."

END GOAL

When a running back meets resistance at the line of scrimmage, goal line, or first-down marker, he is coached to keep his feet moving. The metaphor can easily translate to real life as well.

As a 2018 Patriots rookie, Michel fought through adversity, surviving a number of injury scares. Despite missing much of training camp and three regular season games, he came tantalizingly close to a milestone 1,000-yard campaign. During the playoffs, New England leaned heavily on him.

Michel ran for more than a hundred yards in each of the first two playoff contests, and only six yards short of the mark in Super Bowl LIII. He also scored six postseason touchdowns, most by a rookie in NFL history and equaling his regular season scoring output. The lone TD in Super Bowl LIII, Michel's 2-yard plunge.

The young Florida boy who "just wanted to score touchdowns" is now doing just that for one of the most prolific teams in football history. Today he owns a glittering Super Bowl ring and the cloak of celebrity, albeit uncomfortably.

He's also come to appreciate the offensive line – his own here in New England, and the position in general. Like them, he prefers to lead by clearing a path for others, eschewing recognition, remaining in the background. Perhaps it reminds him of Jean and Marie, two people who risked and sacrificed much for the sake of their children.

"That's where I get the inspiration. I get it from them. Everything is coming from my parents," Michel admits.

"Something like the [Haiti flag] cleats is using my platform to bring attention to the cause. I want to shed light on the cause, but not me... if that makes sense. I want to bring attention to Haiti, but once I get people on board, 'All right, let's get the mission done without any distractions.'"

Michel's parents do their part, traveling back to Haiti on occasion. His mother returned as recently as this past summer. He brings attention to his cause, though Michel has yet to bring himself to the country. Plans to visit this past offseason, following the Super Bowl, fell through due to a scheduling conflict.

But Michel remains eager to see Haiti with his own eyes, to help the country and its people with his own hands and by his inspiring example. He longs for the day when all those abstract images and ideas marinating in his mind finally become tangible reality. Maybe he'll even attempt his rusty Creole. At age 24, he has a more profound objective, which he keeps tucked close to his heart like a football.

"This is bigger than myself. When tough times come – and tough times are going to come – you fall back on your purpose, your 'Why.' That's what keeps me moving forward."

With eyes fixed on the horizon and a distant, foreign shore. The end zone? Far from his end goal.

THE ATHLETIC

'Everybody loves him': Sony Michel bringing passion for family and hard work to the Patriots

By Jeff Howe

May 4, 2018

There was the fourth touchdown of the evening, a 27-yard, Rose Bowl-winning score that sent Georgia to the national championship game in January.

But that's not Sony Michel's brand of football.

There was the three-touchdown performance against Clay High School to propel American Heritage to Florida's state championship in 2013.

But that's not Sony Michel's brand of football.

Pick a highlight, any of Sony's PlayStation high-steps or YouTube dedications, and stare in awe at the stat sheets.

Not Sony Michel's brand of football.

"You know this kid is not just doing it for show," former Heritage coach Mike Rumph said of the Patriots' first-round pick.

When running back Sony Michel carries a game, his team, his ball, he is carrying his parents, his sister, his brother. They are Sony Michel's brand of football.

"He is doing it to make something better for him and his family," Rumph finished.

'A Sony thing'

Michel was an unwilling, 7-year-old offensive lineman at the dawn of his football career. The position was the product of his size, and his big brother, Marken, was up front alongside him. But Michel hated it, to the point where he wanted to quit to do something, or literally anything, that was more exciting.

Thing was, Michel's parents weren't having it. Quitting flew in the face of their belief system. About six years after Michel's older sister, Lamise, was born, Jean and Marie Michel immigrated from Haiti to Florida with Lamise in search of something better for their family. So on a far greater scale, they recognized the importance of seeing something through, so Michel wasn't about to get the green light to quit football after a day.

Good thing, because it didn't take long for his coaches to have something of a Sony sense when they switched him to running back, and that's where he found his soul and the purpose behind his presence on the football field.

The Michels lived in a first-floor apartment in a working-class neighborhood in Hollywood, Fla., and Sony had a motor that wouldn't stall. He'd wake up in the morning, do his chores, cut the grass, go play a baseball game and then return home to change and head back out for football. By junior high, Michel flourished as an athlete who was a lot more physically imposing than anyone his age, so much so that Byron Walker will never forget his lucky introduction to the seventh grader.

Walker, who at the time was the American Heritage head coach in nearby Plantation, was hosting a meeting with the Florida state coaches association when he happened upon two people in search of directions in the school lobby.

"It was Sony and his youth coach," Walker said. "I asked the coach where he coached, and he told me. And Sony really looked like a grown man. I said, 'Where do you coach?' He says, 'I'm a player. I'm in seventh grade.' I said, 'Man, you need to come to American Heritage.' He said, 'Well, I'd like to,' and lo and behold without any further contact, he and his brother Marken enrolled in January, which was my extreme good fortune."

It worked in Michel's favor, too. American Heritage is one of the most prestigious academic schools in Florida with a tuition that can approach \$25,000 without scholarships or forms of financial aid, which the Michels qualified to receive.

Michel became an instant sensation on the field. And because, in Florida, junior high students can play varsity sports if the schools share a campus, Michel joined the football team as an eighth grader. Walker dispatched Michel to the junior varsity squad on the first day of practice but that thought, however sensible it seemed on the surface, didn't last the day. The outcome probably should have been predictable.

"He was a man among boys," Walker said of the eighth grader. "He lived in the weight room. I used to tell people, 'Hey, look at this kid. He can lift the building.'"

Michel soared up the depth chart and seized control of the starting job for the varsity team, and he had 10 carries for 109 yards and one touchdown in his first game. He finished that season with 1,825 rushing yards and 20 total touchdowns against a schedule that included Florida powerhouses like Glades Central and Bolles.

"From the eighth grade, everybody believed that he would play in the NFL," said Mark Richt, Michel's former coach at Georgia who is now at Miami. "He became bigger than life as a young kid in the world of high school ball and recruiting."

The celebrity status then followed the humble Hollywood kid whose character remained on course.

"Sony is such a quiet guy," Walker said. "The way you see him walking down the hall and people are thronging after him as an eighth grader, he became a local legend almost overnight. Sony was everybody's hero as an eighth grader. He was very mature. He had an aura about him."

Football and life intersected during Michel's freshman year. His parents both lost their jobs around the same time, and the Michels struggled financially, sometimes wondering if they'd have to ration their meals. Michel was noticeably bothered when he told Walker about their strife, so Walker took their issue to the top of the food chain at American Heritage. Shortly thereafter, the school hired Jean as a custodian, and Marie and Lamise took cooking jobs that they still hold to this day.

There at school, Michel learned his gift could yield new levels of wealth for his family. To tie it all together, his parents and sister acquired jobs that kept him and his brother at a private school where they'd earn a top-rate education. Michel even turned his grades around and became a quality student.

"They're what the American dream is all about," Walker said.

"THEY'RE JUST GOOD, SOLID PEOPLE, AND THEY DID A GREAT JOB OF BRINGING HIM UP. THEY DIDN'T HAVE MUCH. HE DIDN'T COME FROM A WHOLE LOT, BUT HE HAD A BUNCH OF SUPPORT FROM THE SCHOOL, FROM HIS FAMILY. THEY'RE HARD-WORKING PEOPLE." — BRYAN MCCLENDON ON SONY MICHEL'S FAMILY

Michel's loyalty shined through after his freshman season when another school in the district tried to pry him away, which is commonplace in big-time high school football. Due to the publicized nature of the situation, Michel's father walked into Walker's office, unprompted, to tell him Sony would never transfer due to the family's appreciation for the American Heritage community.

Michel tormented his division for two seasons before unwittingly lighting up his own squad during their first week of practices of his sophomore year. That's when Mike Rumph took over, first as the defensive coordinator before a promotion to head coach.

Rumph, a former star for Miami's 2001 national championship team and a first-round pick of the 49ers in 2002, was briefed on Michel's ability before he started his new job on the sidelines, but he shrugged off the hype until it bowled him over.

"He was already here as a YouTube phenom," said Rumph, who is now the Miami cornerbacks coach. "Everybody was like, 'Go online and watch Sony Michel.' I remember thinking, 'This eighth-grade kid is online and tearing it up. I'm not going to watch it on YouTube. I want to see him in person.' So I never watched him on YouTube, but then I get to practice and am going against this kid every day."

"I was so frustrated my first week because I felt like I wasn't coaching the defense well enough because we couldn't stop him. Then later I learned, OK, this kid is just special. He had that stop-and-start speed. He had the vision to see the cutback lanes. He could get through the cracks and crevices. I stopped coming home so upset because I just had to chalk it up as a Sony thing. That was my introduction to him. My first week, he sent me home pretty upset, and then I learned to just deal with it."

Aside from maybe getting bitten at the bottom of a pile as an eighth grader, the first time Michel endured true on-field adversity occurred when his sophomore season was wiped away with a torn ACL, but his coaches admired his resiliency. Michel's success, before and after the injury, can partly be traced to his commitment to his physique. Walker said Michel was at the door of the weight room every morning it opened. And when teammates took a break to joke around, Rumph said Michel would do some curls or squats to pass the time. And when American Heritage hired Mike Smith to train the football team, Michel made him earn his money with long sessions.

Rumph even recalled a Sunday morning when he stopped by the school to pick up something in his office when he heard the weights clanging around. He checked just to make sure, but Rumph knew there was only one person it could've been. Walker even mentioned a recent trip back to American Heritage when he decided to pop his head into the weight room because he hoped to bump into Michel. Where else would he be, right? Surprisingly, Michel must've been working out somewhere else that day.

Michel isn't just a workout machine, though. Later in his high school career, he got the football team together to make a trip to a local children's hospital. And as American Heritage stomped Clay, 66-8, to win the state title to cap his senior year, Rumph pulled Michel to the sideline so he could be appropriately honored with a standing ovation by the school's fans who made the trip. Michel responded by asking the assistant athletic director to grab an extra pair of gloves from the locker room, and he gave his pair to a younger kid who closely followed the team and loved giving Michel high-fives.

"That child was like in tears," American Heritage athletic director Karen Stearns recalled. "It was such a big thing. That's who Sony is. Kids love him. Everybody loves him. He is just a great young man, and he touches everybody he talks to."

'Just a special guy'

Bryan McClendon fell in love with the Michels, too. How could he not? McClendon wasn't even assigned to the south Florida recruiting circuit when he worked on Georgia's staff under Richt, but he wouldn't walk away from Michel. It also didn't hurt that Marie Michel was eager to cook up a healthy batch of chicken and rice with her Haitian flair every time McClendon was at their apartment.

With the Michels, when you're in, you're in for life. Sony Michel appreciated the loyalty and honesty he received from McClendon and Georgia, which was why he chose the Bulldogs over a myriad of programs that wanted him. McClendon told Michel how hard he'd coach him and work him, and Michel appreciated that because it had been all he knew.

"They're not a good family. They're a great family, really supportive," said McClendon, who is now the offensive coordinator at South Carolina. "Everybody in his family genuinely wants the best for him and nothing in return. They're just good, solid people, and they did a great job of bringing him up. They didn't have much. He didn't come from a whole lot, but he had a bunch of support from the school, from his family. They're hard-working people. He saw people work hard and knew that's what you're supposed to do."

As a freshman at Georgia, Michel worked his way to second on the depth chart behind Todd Gurley, and Richt said he was "wowed" by his new back on his very first day in pads. But Michel's first year on campus was marred by a twice-broken shoulder blade and a sprained knee. He responded with 1,406 yards from scrimmage and 11 touchdowns as a sophomore and wrapped up his career in Athens with 4,234 yards from scrimmage and 39 trips to the end zone.

One final time, Michel recovered from a nightmare scenario in front of 26.8 million people who watched the Rose Bowl against Baker Mayfield's Oklahoma team. Michel almost singlehandedly kept Georgia alive despite falling behind by 17 points, but his fourth-quarter fumble was returned for a touchdown that gave the Sooners a 45-38 lead. On the sideline, running back Nick Chubb pleaded for the coaches to give the ball right back to Michel, who had 21 yards from scrimmage on the game-tying drive and took a wildcat snap for the winner in double overtime.

"That's the guy he is, just a special guy," McClendon said.

Early morning April 26, Michel got in his workout at American Heritage. He had nobody left to impress in the hours before the NFL draft as teams' evaluations were complete and Michel had the makings of a prospect who could sneak into the first round.

Then again, maybe that's also why he never strayed from his roots. Michel didn't need the pomp and circumstance of the cameras or anything else. That night, the Patriots selected him with the 31st pick, and he made a quick trip to Foxboro a day later to meet with Robert Kraft and Bill Belichick and share the stage in an introductory news conference with Georgia offensive lineman Isaiah Wynn, just the way both would like it.

And since? Michel has spent every day at his high school, where his mom was right down the hall, sometimes working out in the morning, meeting with the football team to share some guidance in the afternoon and working out again in the evening.

"He basically spent the majority of their practice out there talking to kids," said Stearns, who noted American Heritage will be honoring Michel at their new athletic facility sometime in the not-so-distant future. "It's a special thing because they all look up to him."

Michel has always been a high-class athlete who wanted his vivacity on the field to create a better life for his family. And if he has provided joy to anyone with his performance, he wants to show that he can do the same for them with his spirit.

Those stadium lights, they don't stay on forever. But if Michel can shine beneath them, he knows his family can comfortably do the same.

That's the Sony Michel brand of football.

QB Cam Newton

The Providence Journal

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP: Cam Newton has taken them to heart in his football journey

By Mark Daniels

Posted Sep 19, 2020

"Leadership is an Art" was written by Max DePree and published in 1987. It explores how business managers can develop into leaders to help their organizations grow more profitable. The book teaches the importance of building relationships, communication and integrity. It has nothing to do with football.

That's one reason why Brad Franchione gave the book to Cam Newton in 2009.

Newton was a 20-year-old transfer looking for a fresh start at Blinn College after a disappointing two-year stint at the University of Florida. He made his intentions clear to Franchione, his new head coach. The young quarterback wanted another shot to play high-level college football and also wanted to become a better leader.

That's why Franchione gave him the book. After each chapter, the two met and talked about how the lessons related to football.

"I've always felt it was one of my favorite books, especially teaching leadership, because it doesn't say one thing about football in it. But every chapter is something that can relate to a football team or football program," Franchione said. "And he was intent on becoming a better leader. A book like that can fill up with quite a few days of leadership lessons."

With Newton, people chose what they want to see in him. Maybe they focused on his brightly colored suits, fancy hats or the eccentric on-field nature. Franchione learned there's more than meets the eye with him. It's why players follow him wherever he goes, including now with the Patriots.

"He taught me a lot of things," Franchione said. "He broke the mold for what I thought leadership had to look like. As coaches, we tend to have a stereotype or a real defined box of what a good leader looks like. And he expanded my box."

CHAPTER 2: What Is Leadership?

DePree defines leadership not as a measure of the individual in charge, but as the overall result of the organization. He asks, "Are the followers reaching their potential? Do they achieve the required results?"

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Leaders should leave behind a legacy, DePree writes. That's what Newton did. Blinn College lost just one game in 2009 en route to the NJCAA national championship. The next year, Newton led Auburn to the 2010 BCS national championship.

Then-Auburn coach Gene Chizik saw Newton put in an insurmountable amount of work behind the scenes. He was obsessed with winning and improving. When he was named the starter, he went out of his way to be a leader. That meant eating lunch with his offensive linemen every Friday before the games. That meant, when it was the fourth quarter and Auburn was down, Newton didn't just want the ball. He needed it.

"That's the main event," Chizik said. "The main event is that everybody understands that it's really important to Cam to win. And no matter what his style and flair and all that is, he's one of the most competitive humans on the planet. Everybody in every locker room knows that it's extremely important for him to win and so they follow him."

Newton played at Blinn and Auburn fueled by doubt. He sat behind Tim Tebow for two years at Florida. He had to go to the junior college route to get back. Chizik told every NFL team after that season that Newton was the full package. He was studious, hard working and a general on the field.

That year, Newton scored a game-winner against LSU. In the Iron Bowl, Auburn was down, 24-0, to Alabama and the quarterback scored four touchdowns to lead the Tigers to a 28-27 victory. In the national championship game, he drove the Tigers down the field to set up the game-winning field goal.

"I think he definitely wanted to prove that he was worthy of the hype, and that he could carry a team on his shoulders," Chizik said. "That all goes back to the importance of winning to him. And it's very important for him to be the best player on the field. ... When the game is on the line to win it or lose it, he's one of those guys that wants the ball in his hands."

CHAPTER 15: To Make One Vice President

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"Leaders are also responsible for future leadership."

DePree writes that it's a leader's job "to identify, develop and nurture future leaders."

Unbeknownst to Chizik or any of the Auburn coaches, Newton was going out of his way to help children in 2010. That season, the team's off day fell on Monday. Every week, Newton traveled to local elementary schools to read and talk with kids. Newton didn't tell anyone.

"In one of my very first conversations with him, I asked him, 'If football doesn't work out for you or when your playing days are over, what would you like to do?' " said Chizik. "And his answer was, 'I'd like to own a daycare.' That was one of the first things he ever said to me. He loves kids."

After every Blinn College game, Newton went to Franchione's house to break down film. The only problem was that Newton spent a lot of time playing with his coach's three children. One day, Wyatt, Franchione's 6-year-old son, asked if he could take Newton to kindergarten for show and tell. Newton obliged. That energy was also seen every Friday when the Buccaneers held a pep rally at a local elementary school. Every time, Newton put on a show for the children.

"He went out of his way to be a role model," Franchione said. "It's fun to be around. He was always smiling, always laughing, bringing all kinds of energy to the room. It's not common, but when you see it, you really gravitate towards it."

That is still the case today. Every offseason, Newton organizes a 7-on-7 tournament where he mentors standout high school players. One of his pupils was Houston quarterback Deshaun Watson. In Carolina, every time he scored, he'd hand the ball to a kid in the stands.

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"As soon as he barrels through four or five D lineman, he's making a beeline out of the end zone asking, 'Whose day can I brighten up?' " said Newton's former quarterback coach George Whitfield. "I just think people kind of miss read it a little bit because of the front. ... But if you just try to take in the man for what he is, you'd want him in any part of anything you're doing."

CHAPTER 17: The Marks of Elegance

"Opportunity must always be connected to accountability."

DePree writes that without true opportunity and risk, there is no chance to become accountable. He adds that we all have gifts, but it's up to us to seize accountability in order to accomplish goals.

The Panthers released Newton on March 17. He remained unsigned until July 8 when he inked a one-year deal with the Patriots. It even got to a point that Whitfield, who worked with Newton prior to the 2011 NFL Draft, was calling NFL contacts to try to help his friend. He was blown away when team after team passed.

"People get lost a lot in what he's wearing, how he's expressing himself, etc, etc.," Whitefield said. "The guy, outside of his family, has one singular love and that's football. And every time he comes off the field, it was in a winning effort. ... I mean, he's still a Ford F-250, but people just get lost in the music coming out of the windows. But it's still a worker truck, you know what I mean? Still tough, still dependable. He holds himself such a high regard."

Newton put it on himself to prove people wrong. He worked hard this offseason. He meditated. He confided in friends and sought counsel. When training camp began, he was in great shape. It didn't take him long to win the quarterback competition or become a leader. Within his first month on the Patriots, he was voted a captain by his teammates. Even Bill Belichick routinely gushes over him.

This week, when asked about what being a leader meant to him, he gave a 132-word response explaining it was "just holding yourself accountable." He said it's about not being selfish but always putting the team first.

"Whether it's leading by example or just giving a pep talk, we all can lead," Newton explains. "But in order to be a great leader, you also have to be a great follower."

Newton sounds like he could write his own book about leadership. As DePree writes, "At the heart of being accountable is the matter of caring."

Cam Newton does. He always has.

OL Michael Onwenu

The Providence Journal

LARGE-SCALE SUCCESS: At 6-foot-3 and 350 pounds, rookie Michael Onwenu is quickly earning a place on the Patriots offensive line

By Mark Daniels

Oct 17, 2020

Michael Onwenu stepped on the scale and immediately Thomas Wilcher was surprised.

Onwenu was a 15-year-old freshman at Cass Technical High School in Detroit at the time. The teenager looked like a man already with legs like oak trees to go with a wingspan of 82 inches. When the scale read just over 330 pounds, however, his high school coach realized how big he truly was.

"That's how he got the name 'Big Mike,' " Wilcher said. "We couldn't believe that he weighed that much."

That kicked off a central theme in Onwenu's life. He holds his weight well, but his weight was a blessing and a curse. Throughout high school, he was ridiculously strong. He was able to bench press well over 200 pounds as a freshman. As he continued to grow, he developed into a legitimate Division I prospect. That scale read 370 pounds by the time he was a senior.

People always asked the same questions.

Is he too big? Is he unhealthy? Is he working hard enough?

That bothered Onwenu. That's why Wilcher, who ran track and played football for Michigan, tried to get his pupil not only comfortable in his own body, but also focused on ways he could improve his eating habits. Once he did those things, Wilcher knew the sky was the limit.

"He's created a better outlook towards life," Wilcher said, adding that Onwenu got past people focusing on his weight. "He's come to identify that's who he is and he knows how to look good, how to look healthy, and how to be supportive of himself. And that's the most important thing right there. He's a very strong character now because of who he is and what he has learned about himself."

A big part of Onwenu's journey involves that scale. Instead of the number holding him back, Onwenu has consistently used it to prove people wrong. That's what's happening in New England with the Patriots.

Family values

Stephen and Roseline Onwenu were born in Nigeria and came to the United States to make a better life. Roseline is a business owner, operating Detroit's Sterose International Boutique, a clothing store that specializes in head geles (a piece of fabric wrapped by hand around the head to form an often flamboyant head wrap.) Stephen is a hard-working corrections officer in the city.

They raised their son Michael to be a hard-working and a serious student. That's what Tim Drevno noticed when he started to recruit Onwenu for Michigan. The teenager's size was obvious, but the Wolverines offensive line coach saw more than just that.

"They're a really tight knit family that loved each other. It's one of those things — you can see why he blossomed," Drevno said. "(On the field), he moved really well. He had really good initial quickness in terms of foot speed and agility for a big guy for 370-plus pounds. Some people make his weight a big issue like, 'Oh, gosh, he's too heavy.' If he's able to move and move with functional movement things, it was good enough for me."

When Onwenu entered Michigan in 2016, no one wanted him to play at 370 pounds. At first, the goal was to get him under 365. Coaches saw unbelievable strength and athleticism for a guy this size, but trainers wanted him to be at a healthier weight.

Drevno explained that the trainers would never ask Onwenu to be 330 pounds and added that "would be strictly impossible." It was more about getting him to an ideal size to take advantage of his strength without losing any of it.

"He's a big guy. He's got really good lower body girth. Hard to move. And the D lineman at Michigan used to tell me he used to have a death grip," Drevno said. "If he got his hands on you, you're done.... He's that strong. He could probably just condition and be just fine because he's got that brute strength."

Fine-tuning his body

Ed Warinner became the Michigan offensive line coach when Onwenu was a junior. When he looked over the roster and saw Big Mike's height and weight, he thought the same thing many people did.

Was this healthy? Is he working hard enough?

Those worries went away thanks to a DEXA scan machine that measures body composition. At Michigan, along with body fat percentage, they also measure bone density.

"The assumption is that being that big, you have to be carrying a lot of fat ... and his (readings) were as good as anybody on the O-line," Warinner said. "It's his bone density, his thickness, his muscle mass, that's what's incredible on him. It's not that he weighs 360 or whatever because he has 30 pounds extra fat that he could lose."

"He's just a big, thick human being. People presume things, I being one of them. 'Oh, God, you can't play at that weight.' But we have some really science-oriented people on our nutrition and weight staff and so they did a lot of studies on him and we got him down."

Onwenu had natural talent, but Warinner wanted to see him attack practice as hard as he attacked the games. The staff also wanted him to get his weight below 360 pounds. Following his junior year, Onwenu put it upon himself to

make dietary changes. When he returned to Michigan as a senior, he hit 350 pounds — dropping 20 pounds from his high school senior year.

In that 2019 season Warinner saw a player that could take on any defensive lineman one-on-one. He saw an NFL offensive lineman.

“For him, he became a really good player here when he started to practice at a high level, when he took practice really seriously and worked his [butt] off,” Warinner said. “And when he started doing that, then it manifests itself in the games with better play. He took his diet and weight and conditioning to a new level.”

Getting noticed

People tend to forget about the scale when Onwenu steps on the field.

A sixth-round pick, Onwenu has turned into the biggest surprise for the Patriots. He’s started all four games and even more impressive, he’s played four different positions — right tackle, left guard, right guard and jumbo tight end. This is after he played only guard in college.

In his last start, at right guard, Onwenu didn’t allow a single pressure on the quarterback. Following that game against the Super Bowl-champion Chiefs, Pro Football Focus had Onwenu as the highest-graded rookie in the NFL. His 92.2 mark is also the highest ever given to a rookie through the first four weeks of the regular season, dating back to 2006.

How did the NFL miss on Michael Onwenu? How did he last until the sixth round, pick 182?

It turns out the rookie couldn’t escape questions about his weight. Add in COVID-19 and most teams didn’t get to see him in person. It hurt his draft stock.

“He probably slipped because of the measurable and maybe some people got scared of his weight,” Drevno said. “But I think that the Patriots did a heck of a job. ... They started to figure out what the kid’s wiring is. ‘Does he process quick on his feet? Does he panic? Can he stay with the focus on the task at hand? Is he mature? Can he retain information? Can he not be a repeat offender?’ Those are the things that you see in him. I knew he was an NFL guy when I got him out of high school and when I coached him.”

At the NFL Combine, Onwenu weighed 344 pounds, which was remarkable considering he entered college at 370. Despite the drop in weight, he was the heaviest interior offensive lineman at the combine. For the workouts, he opted to participate only in the bench press. He didn’t know he wouldn’t get a chance to participate in Michigan’s Pro Day due to the pandemic. He was able to visit the Patriots and Miami before the pandemic canceled the rest of his visits.

“No one ever got to put their hands on him,” Warinner said. “So there was really no data and as you know, the NFL is big on all these numbers. ... All I know is he’s a really good player. And sometimes, certain places and people use those numbers more than the film. If people would have worked him out, they would have [seen] what I saw every day for two years.”

That number on a scale might have followed him to the NFL, but his results speak louder. Michael Onwenu is a big man. He always has been. He’s also a talented football player.

That’s the focus now.

DB Adrian Phillips

The Boston Globe

For three Patriots, having wives who are doctors raises the levels of COVID discussions

By Nicole Yang

October 17, 2020

When Camille Phillips first learned that quarterback Cam Newton had tested positive for coronavirus, she didn't know what was going to happen next.

"My heart just dropped," she recalled in a phone conversation earlier this week. "I didn't want it to be a big outbreak like we've seen in Tennessee."

She felt for her husband Adrian, an All-Pro safety who signed a two-year contract with the Patriots in March, along with his teammates and coaches. How many more would also test positive? Would the team shut down? Would the league postpone New England's game?

As they waited for answers, Adrian told Camille the Patriots were going to rally without Newton. He had embraced the team's motto, "Do Your Job." But Camille was skeptical.

"That was one of those times when I was like the doctor," she said. "I was really hesitant, like, 'Oh, I don't know.' He's like, 'We're going to do our jobs. Everything's going to be fine.' I was just like, 'I don't know.'"

Camille, a second-year pediatric resident at Texas Tech, is one of three Patriots wives with a background in medicine. Shahrzad Slater, wife of special teams captain Matthew Slater, and Michelle Powell, wife of fellow captain Devin McCourty, are doctors, too.

The couples' professions have never been more intertwined, as the Patriots and NFL navigate a season amid the coronavirus pandemic. For McCourty, that means he hears a lot of "Told you so" and "You should be doing this" or "You should be doing that."

"Anyone who is married knows if your wife tells you something and you don't listen, it doesn't go well," McCourty said. "I just try to tell her what I hear from the doctors in the building. If she agrees, she agrees. If she doesn't, I just try to exit the conversation the best way possible."

For Adrian, Camille has been a sounding board.

"Honestly, since February, March, I've been leaning on her because she's been on the front lines," Adrian said. "She's been on me hard because that was one of her concerns when the season started — just how everything would play out."

Camille will often give Adrian reminders that align with the recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Wash your hands properly, social distance as much as possible, and wear your mask over your nose.

Adrian has also made a few adjustments to his personal routine. Instead of going to the mall to pick out an outfit for game day, he'll online shop with Camille. And instead of picking up food at his favorite Patriot Place restaurant, Skipjack's, he'll place an order for contactless delivery.

"She's just been on me hard in making sure I isolate myself, stay on the Germ-X and Purell, and have a mask," Adrian said. "Look out for yourself as much as you can."

Including Newton, the Patriots have placed eight players on the COVID-19 list since the start of the regular season. With each positive test, Camille can't help but feel a little nervous because she's witnessed the effects of the virus firsthand.

"I know he's a super healthy athlete and if he gets it, it most likely won't hit him hard," Camille said. "But I still have seen the worst of it. I do have a sense of anxiety every time I hear there's a positive. I'm just praying he doesn't get it, too."

A typical week on Camille's current rotation, pediatric ICU, consists of a 24-hour shift, an 18-hour overnight shift, and two 12-hour daytime shifts at the hospital. She is required to wear a surgical mask for the entirety of her shift. If she's treating a patient with coronavirus symptoms, then she must wear a mask plus a face shield. If she's treating a patient who has tested positive, then she wears a portable respirator.

Because Camille works in Texas, the distance adds an element of stress. Last season, when Adrian suffered a broken arm in Week 2 as a member of the Los Angeles Chargers, Camille flew out immediately to be with him for his surgery as well as the following week. She's not sure if the same response would be possible if Adrian were to test positive.

"It's difficult being away," she said. "If he does test positive, can I get to him? Can I take care of him? Or would that be a risk for me and my patients? I also want to be there for my husband."

Overall, Camille has been pleased with how the Patriots have responded to their positive tests, particularly the speed at which they've closed their facilities.

She was also happy to see that the team didn't rush Newton's return. Prior to the second postponement of the Patriots-Broncos game, it was unclear if Newton was going to be available even though he was eligible to be cleared.

"Cam is like the heart and soul of the team," she said. "He's our quarterback. You need him. Even with that being the case, them not rushing him back even though he's asymptomatic is really commendable."

Camille approves of many aspects of the league's protocol — daily testing, for example, she says is key — but she expressed disappointment with the decision to have the Patriots travel to Kansas City so soon after Newton's positive test, a sentiment shared by several players.

"I personally don't think the game should have been played, but that's me," she said. "When there's a positive test, I would like to see a quicker delay of games."

Moving forward, Camille's advice to Adrian remains the same: Wash your hands, social distance, and wear your mask. She'll also add in more specific reminders, such as encouraging him to limit his interactions with the opposing team after games.

"Try not to go in for the hugs, the handshakes," she said. "When you see your friend, you want to hug them and talk to them, but just try and maintain that distance. Maybe FaceTime them from the locker room instead."

Since Adrian left for training camp, Camille's been able to see him in New England twice, and she plans to again in two weeks. In order for her to visit, she must produce a negative test before she leaves. Once she arrives, she has to go to the team's facility and produce another negative test.

"I feel like the Patriots overall are doing a good job and taking it really seriously, which I appreciate," she said.

Camille has yet to meet Shahrzad and Michelle, but she's hopeful the three can eventually connect and discuss their unique perspectives.

"As a wife and as a fan of football, I love the game, I love the sport," Camille said. "As a doctor, I see things that make me hesitate. I think there's a fine line."



Why Adrian Phillips could be a free agent steal at safety for Patriots

By Tom E. Curran
June 18, 2020

Almost every one of the low-profile, high-character free agents the Patriots signed this offseason can be described with this phrase: "You might not have heard of him, but you're going to love him."

Earlier this week, we profiled fleet little wideout Damiere Byrd. Now let's look at a guy with a little thicker resume: safety Adrian Phillips.

A two-year, \$6 million deal was all New England needed to secure Phillips. He could end up being a massive bargain.

He's 5-foot-11, 210 pounds, was named All-Pro and a Pro Bowler in 2018 for his special teams work, has a stack of testimonials about his massive football brain and is the hybrid box safety the Patriots have been trying but failing to secure through the draft.

Why didn't the Chargers keep the 28-year-old if he's so damn good? Safety surplus out there in Los Angeles. The Chargers took Derwin James and Nassir Adderley in the first and second rounds respectively in 2018 and 2019, which paved the way for them to move on from Phillips.

Why would the Patriots want him? Because Devin McCourty and Patrick Chung both turn 33 in August, Duron Harmon got dealt to the Lions, rookie second-rounder Kyle Dugger will need seasoning and on special teams, Nate Ebner is now a Giant.

I'm not going to get into it here, but the fleet of brilliant special teams guys this team has with Matt Slater, Justin Bethel and now Phillips (among others) is impressive. Especially if they have to punt a lot.

Jeff Miller, who covers the Chargers for the Los Angeles Times, raved this week when I asked about Phillips.

"He was tremendous in 2018 (94 tackles, league-leading 19 special teams tackles) and then got hurt last year unfortunately," said Miller. "He would have had a big role last year because of some injuries. When Derwin James went down they went immediately to Adrian, and he was gonna have a very vital role in their defense but (Phillips) got hurt early on against the Lions and that derailed his season."

The injury to James was bad enough, said Miller, but the injury to Phillips was one that hurt the team tremendously because Phillips did so many things for them.

What kind of player did the Patriots get?

"He's a guy (Chargers head coach) Anthony Lynn called one of his core guys," said Miller. "Real good player, real smart. He would call defenses and put other guys in position and know where they were supposed to be."

"He's impactful. The Chargers really loved him but they had a surplus at that spot."

The projected replacement for Phillips in the Chargers defense is Desmond King, another Pro Bowl-level defensive back.

Over the past half-decade, the complementary strengths of the McCourty-Chung-Harmon troika became clear. All were excellent tacklers. McCourty was the sheriff, getting people where they were supposed to be and helping over the top when the Patriots are seeing guys who are tough for corners to handle 1-on-1.

Chung has been the enforcer playing run-support in the box and being one of the league's best at covering tight ends, slots and running backs in the passing game. Harmon was a third safety with a knack for big plays that came from his understanding what the entire defense was doing and when to take a risk.

According to Miller, Phillips is most like Chung.

"He's that more in-the-box safety, more of an enforcer," said Miller. "He's a good tackler, he can hit but he's not in that vein of a centerfield/cover-ground kind of safety. He's a closer-to-the-line-of-scrimmage guy. You'd probably want him more on a tight end or a back out of the back field. He's got decent speed – he's not a burner – but he's certainly capable in the pass game of covering those kinds of guys."

If you're wondering whether Phillips' backstory makes him easy to root for, it does.

"All you need to know is he was cut eight times by the Chargers," said Miller. "Brought him back, cut him, brought him back, cut him - literally eight times before he stuck. He never gave up. Then, in 2018 he just blew up. He got a chance to play and had a great season and was recognized at the end of the year. He's going to be missed by teammates and the media."

And here's Phillips' defensive coordinator, Gus Bradley:

"He can play strong safety, free safety, dime [linebacker] and nickel [linebacker] for us, and we'd feel extremely comfortable if he was in any of those positions," Bradley said in 2018.

"So that intelligence, he's got a football IQ that is ... he's just one of the most elite guys in that area that I've ever been around."

WR Mohamed Sanu

The Boston Globe

Patriots receiver Mohamed Sanu 'attacked the offseason' with training and diet

By Nicole Yang
August 17, 2020

While driving through Boston one July afternoon, Patriots wide receiver Mohamed Sanu listened to an audiobook he had started earlier in the summer.

"Have the confidence to say when you've screwed up," read the narrator through Sanu's car speakers. "People will respect you for it. If you did it, own it. If you said it, stand by it. Not just the mistakes, but all your decisions and choices. That's your reputation. Make it count."

The motivational lines are from Chapter 8 of "Relentless: From Good to Great to Unstoppable," a self-help guide by Tim Grover, who has trained Michael Jordan, Hakeem Olajuwon, the late Kobe Bryant, Dwyane Wade, and other NBA greats.

Two weeks later, on his morning ride to Gillette Stadium during the first week of training camp, Sanu was still listening to the book, but he had returned to the beginning.

"If you're relentless, there is no halfway," read the narrator. "Or could or should or maybe. Don't tell me the glass is half-full or half-empty. You either have something in that glass or you don't."

The purpose of "Relentless" is to teach competitors how to train their minds not only to reach their goals but to achieve even more. Grover breaks down the importance of various mental tactics, such as becoming comfortable, being uncomfortable, and channeling energy instead of emotions. His words resonated with Sanu, who turns 31 Saturday.

"It changed my entire mind-set and really sparked the way I attacked this offseason," Sanu said.

So, how did he find out about Grover's book? Sanu's trainer, Drew Lieberman, recommended he check it out.

Lieberman, a 2013 Wesleyan graduate with nine years of coaching experience, is living with Sanu in his Boston apartment. They met a couple of years ago via mutual connections from Rutgers, where Sanu played three seasons of football and Lieberman was later on the coaching staff for two years.

After training together a dozen or so times last summer, the pair stayed in close touch. Lieberman would text Sanu throughout the season, sending him feedback on film. Their bond strengthened when Sanu was traded to the Patriots in October because Lieberman, who was working in New Jersey, was able to attend one of his games in Foxborough.

He then attended the next home game and the next game and the one after that.

A few months later, Sanu tapped Lieberman to become his full-time trainer.

"I really wanted to get better and invest more in myself and in my game," Sanu said. "Drew and I built a great relationship over the last few years, and I really came to trust his knowledge of the details of wide receiver play and football overall.

"But mostly, I chose Drew because I can trust him and I know that he will always tell me what I need to hear and not what I want to hear."

Prior to training camp, Sanu's typical workday consisted of stretching, running routes, ball drills, pushing through a speed workout, and analyzing film. Mixed in were massages and physical therapy appointments to continue his rehab following offseason surgery to repair a high ankle sprain.

Lieberman also tried to integrate other daily outdoor activities, depending on their location. In Atlanta, they power-walked up Stone Mountain four times a week, sometimes with Sanu's former Falcons teammate, Julio Jones. In Los Angeles, they climbed Runyon Canyon. In Wellfleet, Sanu ran routes while at the beach.

Back in Boston, they've kept mainly to city walks and bike rides, though Blue Hills Reservation is on their radar.

"Coming back from an ankle injury, something we focused on a lot was making him work out on different surfaces, whether it be an intense hike or doing a workout in the sand or doing some barefoot stuff on the grass," Lieberman said. "Just finding different ways to challenge his ankle to react and respond and cut off of different surfaces."

Lieberman rewatched the 15 games Sanu played last season and created a checklist of focus areas for the offseason. One of the improvements, he says, is the effectiveness of Sanu's releases at the line of scrimmage, with his movements becoming more intentional.

When watching Sanu run routes, Lieberman pays close attention to details, whether that's telling him to keep his inside foot more firm or to tighten down certain steps. They record every workout in order to review the footage and coaching points later in the evening, too.

"The fixes are very, very, very small," Lieberman said. "When you really get into the details, we're really trying to perfect every little aspect of it. There's always plenty that can be fixed."

Perhaps the most noticeable change Sanu has made? Toning his body and increasing his muscle definition, thanks to a combination of work from Lieberman, Sanu's speed coach Kyle Meadows, and his chef, Arentious Baker.

"From an explosive standpoint, from an athletic standpoint, he just has completely reinvented his body," Lieberman said. "He's definitely leaned out. We felt as though he had some extra fat that was not doing anything for him other than adding more weight to his height and weight profile. It was not making him a better player."

Often, Sanu is the subject of videos posted on Lieberman's instructional channel, The Sideline Hustle. Lieberman showcases some of their ball drills, from juggling two tennis balls and a football to playing catch with two tennis balls and a football, as well as Sanu in action.

"He's constantly finding new ways to challenge me and push me past my limits," Sanu said. "We were able to take our work to a totally different level. Film study, field work, ball drills, mental work every single day."

In their downtime, the pair like to spend time reflecting and talking through insecurities, doubts, or whatever may be going on in each other's heads. With training camp picking up steam, Lieberman expects his role will revolve less around Sanu's physical condition and more around his mind-set.

Despite their busy schedules, the two certainly find time to relax, usually watching TV — Sanu enjoys the Japanese series *Baki* on Netflix — or exploring Boston. Recently they went whale watching with Sanu's 4-year-old son.

As for what to expect once the season gets underway?

Entering his ninth year in the league, Sanu is looking to bounce back from a season in which he acknowledges he underperformed. While battling an ankle injury, he posted 26 catches for 207 yards in eight games with the Patriots; his worst production since 2015.

But Lieberman emphasizes that it's not all about the numbers. Instead, he preaches that production will take care of itself if Sanu minimizes the number of reps he wishes he could have back.

"I can't control what people think about me or how they choose to remember me," added Sanu. "I know what I think of myself and the standard I hold myself to. I play because I love the game. I love the process, I love the work, I love playing football."

The Boston Globe

Mohamed Sanu was a high school quarterback, and other things to know about the new Patriots receiver

By Andrew Mahoney
October 22, 2019.

The Patriots bolstered their receiving corps by trading for veteran wide receiver Mohamed Sanu on Tuesday.

Now in his eighth season, Sanu has started 86 of 110 games playing for the Cincinnati Bengals and the Atlanta Falcons, hauling in 377 passes for 4,300 yards and 25 touchdowns. Here's a closer look at quarterback Tom Brady's newest weapon.

A Jersey guy

Sanu is originally from Sayreville, N.J., but also lived in his parents' native Sierra Leone as a child. The family made its way back to New Jersey to live in Dayton, where Sanu starred at South Brunswick High, playing safety, wide receiver, and quarterback. He passed for 900 yards and rushed for 700 on offense, and had 90 tackles with five interceptions on defense to draw the attention of Rutgers.

A perfect fit?

Sanu has two trademarks that will endear him to Patriots coach Bill Belichick: He is versatile, and he went to Rutgers, where he was a teammate of Patriots defensive backs Devin McCourty and Duron Harmon, as well as assistant coach Steve Belichick.

He declared for the NFL Draft after his junior year at Rutgers, where he was first-team All-Big East in 2011. He was considered by some to be one of the top five receivers in the draft and finished his college career with 210 receptions for 2,263 yards receiving and 12 touchdowns. He also returned kicks and played under center when Rutgers would employ the wildcat formation, throwing four touchdowns en route to winning the Paul Hornung Award, presented to the most versatile player in major college football. He can also punt.

His versatility continued in the NFL, where he has carried the ball 40 times for 215 yards and a pair of touchdowns, and he also has completed seven of eight passes for 233 yards and four touchdowns.

Not so funny joke

He was the victim of a draft day prank, receiving a phone call at the end of the first round in 2012 from someone claiming to be with the Cincinnati Bengals and saying the organization would select him with the 27th pick. It turned out to be a hoax though, as Sanu remained on the board until the Bengals actually did select him the next day in the third round with the 83rd pick.

James Urban was Cincinnati's receivers coach at the time, and made the call.

"I said, 'Hey Mo, it's James Urban. You want to be a Bengal — this time, for real?' " Urban said.

He gives back

Sanu started Sanu's Crew Football Camp in partnership with the Embrace Kids Foundation, an organization that helps children with serious health issues. He has held the camp at South Brunswick High. He wrote about his struggles growing up in an article for The Players' Tribune.

Washington Redskins rookie quarterback Dwayne Haskins considers Sanu a mentor. Haskins's best friend is Sanu's nephew, Mohamed Jabbie, a wide receiver for Rutgers. Haskins called Sanu's mentorship a great tool for him as he prepared for the NFL.

"He means everything. . . As far as him playing quarterback in high school (for South Brunswick) to him making that jump to receiver and him playing really well for Atlanta. He's given me all the tools to be able to learn how to work out as a pro. Being able to hang out with him in the offseason, he's been a great tool for me."

You want a piece of him?

In 2014, a company called Fantex offered shares of Sanu for \$10. The company paid a dividend of \$0.20 per share for its Fantex Series Mohamed Sanu Convertible Tracking Stock (OTC: SANUL) on July 30, 2015.

WR Matthew Slater



Patriots' Matthew Slater savoring the touchdown moment he'd stopped believing would ever come

By Matt Vautour
September 30, 2019

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. - Playing almost exclusively special teams for as long as he has, Matthew Slater gave up daydreaming about an NFL touchdown a long time ago.

He's 34 years old and while he's listed as a wide receiver, he rarely ever lines up there and when he does, he's almost never targeted. He's not a kick-returner either. The chance of him ever getting the ball, let alone getting it in the end zone was minuscule. Slater's most noticeable moments are downing Patriots punts deep in opponent territories.

"I stopped thinking about getting one a while ago," Slater said Sunday after the Patriots' 16-10 win over the Buffalo Bills. He last scored in 2007 as a senior at UCLA when he returned a kick for a touchdown against Arizona State.

That's O.K. by him. The son of Los Angeles Rams standout offensive lineman, Jackie Slater, who played 20 seasons in the NFL, sacrificing for the betterment of the team is his DNA, a staple of his upbringing.

But Slater didn't look like a guy who is unfamiliar with handling the football. When J.C. Jackson raced around the right side and got his hand on Corey Bojorquez's punt. The ball bounced almost straight up and Slater fielded it off an uncertain carom like it was second nature.

He scooped the ball at the 11-yard line and raced into the end zone. He first thrust his arms out then slid on his knees leaning back and looking skyward Brandi Chastain style.

"J.C. did a great job timing it up. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time," Slater said.

Slater was modest, but when a guy, who has so few chances for adulation, actually scores, as long as it happens in a win, the celebration spreads far beyond just him. Slater scoring a touchdown seemed to give his teammates as much joy as it did him. He was swarmed by teammates right away.

"It was awesome," said James White smiling at the memory.

"That was great," Tom Brady said. "I was hoping to throw him one at some point. ... It was great seeing him get in the end zone. He'll get to keep that ball."

Even Bill Belichick seemed to appreciate the moment.

"Nobody works harder than Matt as his craft," Belichick said. "Great play by our specials teams. ... J.C. made a great play and Slater turned it into points."

Slater made sure to save the ball knowing there was no guarantee, this would ever happen again.

"I'm just real thankful for that. I thank God for putting me in position," he said grinning widely. "I guess you play long enough and you get a bone."



Is Pats lifer Matthew Slater the last great gunner?

By Kevin Van Valkenburg

August 8, 2019

THE BOYS HATED the hill. It loomed over every teenage workout like an appointment with an outdoor torture chamber. They could feel it in their lungs and in their legs well before they arrived at the park near their house in Orange, California.

The hill was almost 80 yards long, rows of houses on each side. Its incline increased gradually, until it was almost too much to bear at a full sprint. But every week, the Slater brothers -- Matthew and David -- would slog their way to the top, again and again. Their father, Hall of Famer Jackie, would stand, stoic and stern, at the base, a stopwatch in his hand. He'd give the two boys 18 seconds to reach the summit of the hill. If they didn't make it, the rep did not count. When they came back down, legs wobbling like newborn colts, they had 45 seconds to rest. Then it was time to sprint again.

"Running up that hill was no joke," Jackie says now. "If you go up it 10 times, it takes everything out of you."

This was a test of faith, and of commitment. The father did not want his sons playing football. He had endured thousands of collisions during his 19-year NFL career; he'd torn ligaments and mangled joints blocking giants of the game like Reggie White and Joe Greene, and he didn't want that for his boys. He tried to steer them toward other sports, like track, but they kept begging to play football, Matthew in particular. Keeping them away from pads only intensified the longing. "Matthew had asthma, so I always wondered if he'd have the cardiovascular strength to even play," Jackie says. "But he said he wanted to be a pro football player, and I had to find out if he could hold up to the rigors of the game."

As a deeply religious man, the father felt a test of faith brought out the best in people. Here was the chance for his boys to prove that they were up for this. Slater had played with Walter Payton in college, and each offseason Payton famously molded his body into iron by sprinting up the dusty hills near his Mississippi home.

Most of the hills in California were concrete, but this one was grass. Jackie had run it often during his career with the Rams, his boys watching quietly at the base of the hill. When the time came, he decided to reverse their roles.

"He didn't say a lot, but I remember him looking at us like: 'Hey, you wanted this, didn't you?'" Matthew says.

If you want to understand the origin story of the most unlikely NFL career of this era, that California hill is probably the best place to begin. Matthew Slater willed himself to climb the steep grass-covered incline hundreds of times. It became a metaphor for his entire career. He might have been born into NFL royalty, but that meant nothing standing at the bottom of the hill.

THERE SEEMS NO logical reason that Slater should be entering his 12th year with the Patriots, or that the least sentimental franchise in professional sports considers Slater -- an undersized wide receiver who has caught just one pass in his NFL career -- such an important part of its team culture that it has kept him around longer than anyone besides its kicker, Stephen Gostkowski, and a quarterback named Tom Brady, a guy you might be familiar with.

Each year, Patriots come and go, many traded away or outright released the minute Bill Belichick believes their salaries (or attitudes) are outweighing their impact. But Slater, improbably, has remained.

There is a real case to be made that Slater is as good at his job -- playing special teams -- as anyone in football. He's been voted to the Pro Bowl seven times, the same number as Aaron Rodgers, Von Miller and Antonio Brown. (It's also the same number, coincidentally, as his father.) For a decade, he's been a headache for opposing special-teams coaches, consistently beating double-teams and blowing up punt returns. But just as important, he might be the best marriage of selflessness and specialization of this NFL era.

Case in point: Do Slater's skills have as much impact as, say, Rodgers' ability to throw a football or Khalil Mack's devastating pass-rushing talents? It's hard to make a leap that generous. Slater, in fact, belly-laughs at the

suggestion during an interview at his home the week before Patriots training camp. But if you study the film of the Patriots' 13-3 Super Bowl win last season, you can argue he was as important as anyone (including Brady and MVP Julian Edelman) to New England's win.

The Patriots punted five times against the Rams. Slater downed a punt on the 2-yard line, knocked another out of bounds at the 6, and tackled returner JoJo Natson for a loss on a third. The Rams' offense, which came into the game as the NFL's most prolific unit, could not escape the shadow of its own end zone, and the Patriots' special teams were a big reason for that.

"I know it wasn't everyone's favorite Super Bowl, but it was definitely mine," Slater says. "It was just so rewarding to see all the years of work that we'd put in coming to fruition. ... To put our defense in a position where they could play one of the best Super Bowls in history was so rewarding."

The reality of Slater's existence, however, is that he is beginning to look like the last of his kind. With each passing year, special-teams play seems to engender greater scrutiny. For several seasons, there have been discussions -- driven by the league's desire to reduce the number of vicious, dangerous collisions -- about eliminating kickoffs. Troy Vincent, the NFL's executive vice president of football operations, admitted in an interview with Dan Patrick last year that the idea of eliminating punt returns has come up for discussion. As the NFL tries to figure out how to balance its violent traditions with the reality of the game's uncertain future, it's easy to imagine that a career like Slater's won't be feasible a decade from now.

Whether that's a worthwhile trade-off is a different debate, but the truth is evident: Slater is carrying a torch that represents a certain kind of invaluable role player (Hank Bauer, Bill Bates, Albert Lewis, Steve Tasker, Larry Izzo, Brendon Ayanbadejo) who has been a part of the league since its inception. And the torch appears to be flickering.

"If you start messing with special teams, I think you start messing with the fabric of football, and that's a little sad in a way," Slater says. "I understand the desire to make the game safer, and if you take away an area that has some of the biggest collisions, you feel like you'll be taking some of the violence out of it. But the goal line iso is a pretty violent play, right? Do we get rid of that too? I don't think anyone would argue for that. Obviously, I'm biased, and I'm not blind to that. I just think it's important to understand that for a long time, the kicking game was the whole game."

One name in particular comes to mind for Slater when he thinks about the impact of special teams: Tasker, who made seven Pro Bowl appearances with the Bills and who is arguably the greatest gunner ever on punt coverage. "To me, you can't tell the history of the 100 years of the NFL without saying the name Steve Tasker," Slater says. "If he hadn't done his role at such a high level, I'm not sure guys like me would have a job."

Tasker, who has worked in TV and radio since he retired in 1997, shares Slater's concerns about how eliminating special teams would alter the sport's DNA. "Teams have been de-emphasizing it," Tasker says. "But the simple fact of the matter is, it's changed a lot over the years with the rule changes. The wedge isn't there; you can't hit the long snapper. If you're a kickoff cover guy, you might only have to cover one kick a game. There is only so much a great special-teams player can do for you. What are you getting out of him if you're hanging on to him for 10 years? You have to ask that question."

Which makes Slater's longevity, particularly in this era, especially with one team, even more remarkable in Tasker's eyes. He also can't help but feel a bit of a kinship with Slater that links one generation to the next. Ask them both what qualities they think make a great special-teams player and they come up with eerily similar answers: selflessness, toughness, fearlessness, adaptability and a willingness to be physical. Tasker (at 5-9, 185) and Slater (at 6-0, 205) might have had physical limitations as receivers, but both possess an intuitive ability to juke defenders at the line and then track a ball they can't see, based primarily on the ability to read the eyes of the man trying to catch it-all while running at top speed in a sea of chaos.

"I have so much respect for Matthew. ... I hope he dwarfs whatever I ever did," Tasker says. "Somebody asked me about him early in his career, and I said it was obvious he knew what he was doing when he was covering kicks. He has a real gift for it."

GETTING BILL BELICHICK to gush about any of his players, including Brady, often feels like you're engaging in a contentious deposition. But over the past 10 years, Slater has been the rare exception. In 2013, when he was voted to his second straight Pro Bowl, Belichick let fly what is arguably the most effusive string of compliments of his entire coaching career.

"Matt's really ... he's tremendous," Belichick said. "His attitude, his work ethic, the example that he sets, the way he interacts with his teammates in a really good way. I don't know that a player could do any more than what he's done

for us in that role for the last several years. He's embraced his role on the team, he's been very good at it and he makes other players around him better. I think that's a great compliment to him and the job he does. He's smart, he's well prepared, he works hard, he has good skill, good talent, he's tough, he's a good playmaker for us. I could go on about him all day."

When Slater's contract was up last year, he took a free agent visit to the Steelers -- only to re-sign with the Patriots a few days later when they offered him a 75 percent raise over what they had paid him the previous season. The Patriots told Slater's agent that he was as important as anyone to their locker room culture -- Brady included -- and that they wanted him back.

This came after he missed seven games in 2017 with injuries, months before his 33rd birthday -- and in the era of the latest CBA, in which GMs looking to save a penny almost always choose cost-controlled young players over seasoned vets.

Such is the degree to which the most revered franchise in football reveres Slater -- yet the most fascinating aspect of his career is how close it came to never happening in the first place.

Sure, he had the pedigree and natural football instincts, plus a thirst for contact. "Our very first parent-teacher conference, in kindergarten, was about trying to get him to stop tackling any little boy or girl with a ball," Jackie Slater says. "I know it was serious, but I couldn't help but feel a little proud."

But much of his childhood was spent anticipating the growth spurt that would enable him to match his dad's 6-foot-4, 227-pound frame -- a growth spurt that never came. Every annual trip to the pediatrician was a source of frustration.

He was 5-6 and 150 pounds when he got to high school, so the only logical position for him was wide receiver. But he didn't catch a lot of passes even after, eventually, he grew 6 inches. His team ran the ball almost exclusively, so he did a lot of blocking. Opposing players who knew who his father was would often come looking for him, eager to prove something about themselves. He didn't mind. "I was definitely aware of it," he says. "But I learned to love the competition."

A dedicated student, he got into Brown and Dartmouth and took trips to both. But when Slater, who was also a track standout, finished second in the state in the 100-meter dash as a senior, UCLA suddenly took an interest. It was impossible to resist the draw of big-time football.

Then, over the course of four years, half his career with the Bruins seemed to get swallowed up by injuries. The coaches moved him from wide receiver to corner, but he rarely played.

It wasn't until his senior year that he asked if he could return kicks. Overnight, he became one of the best in the country, ranking first in the Pac-10 in kickoff return average and setting a UCLA record with 986 yards in 13 games.

But he still wasn't optimistic about his football future. "I was really starting to think about going into the ministry," says Slater, whose faith has been an important aspect of his life since childhood. "I was looking at the next step in my life beyond football."

Then one day during his final season at UCLA, a scout from the Patriots pulled Slater aside after practice. "The conversation lasted maybe 10 or 15 seconds," Slater says. He doesn't even remember who the scout was. But it changed everything. "He told me the Patriots had been watching film on me and that I had a future in the NFL doing something. That gave me just enough motivation to finish the year strong."

He didn't get invited to the NFL combine and went on only seven predraft visits with teams. The Patriots, who eventually picked him in the fifth round, weren't one of them. "When they drafted me, it kind of felt like it came out of nowhere," Slater says.

The first several months were a blur. He felt like an impostor. Physically he could compete, but intellectually he was lost. The Patriots-unsure what position he might play-had him working with the wide receivers and safeties, and in the kicking game. Every day, he thought someone would tell him it was over. "We called the guys who would tap you on the shoulder the Grim Reapers," Slater says. "You'd sit at your locker every day after practice and just wait for an intern to find you and say, 'Hey, Coach wants to see you. Can you bring your playbook?'"

He earned a spot returning kicks, but for most of his rookie season, every week felt like it might be his last. He went back to imagining his future in ministry -- daydreaming about using his time with the Patriots as part of a future sermon, watching people's eyes grow wide when he brought up what he learned from the few months he spent in the

NFL. He and his father spoke often about the Bible verse Romans 8:28 -- the idea that whatever his fate was, the journey was more important. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

His anxiety came to a head in a late-November game against the Steelers when he muffed a kickoff in sloppy conditions, the ball bouncing comically off his face mask inside the 10-yard line, igniting a blowout loss. "It was the lowest point of my career," Slater says. "I felt like I'd cost us the game, and that was just the cherry on top of a rookie year where I felt totally lost. I figured I was done, and so did the other rookies. I know a lot of New England fans wanted me out of here, and a lot of them probably still remember me for that play."

The reaper never appeared. Slater refocused on the coverage game that saw him record 25 tackles as a senior at UCLA -- he had 12 for the Pats in that rookie season -- and served as the gunner on punt coverage. For Belichick, whose coaching career began with special teams, grooming a promising special teamer into a no-nonsense blocking threat came easily: Linebacker Larry Izzo served the same role for Belichick for eight seasons as special-teams captain in the early 2000s (making three Pro Bowls himself). "To play for [Belichick] has been incredible, but that isn't to say it's been easy," Slater says. "It's been hard. His standard is high, and there is no gray area. It's all black-and-white, but I think you learn to appreciate that. No coach or player is bigger than the team."

In time, Slater blossomed in his new role. In his third season in New England, he led the team in special-teams tackles with 21. And by 2011, he was the unit's captain (a designation he's held ever since). He again led the team in special-teams tackles but added kickoff returns back to his résumé. That winter, Slater was voted to his first Pro Bowl.

These days, Slater also serves as an unofficial team therapist in the New England locker room -- including on those days when the Patriots' ruthless approach to roster turnover dispatches a popular veteran, sending shock waves through the teammates left behind.

"He keeps the locker room together," Patriots running back James White says. "He makes sure it's a family-like atmosphere in this building. There can be some tough days, there can be some easy days, but he's the guy that kind of keeps everybody locked in and keeps that great camaraderie throughout this team."

One season, Patriots linebacker Gary Guyton pulled Slater aside and asked if he'd be up for a blind date with a friend of a friend, a doctor working in Rhode Island. Guyton thought they'd be into each other. Slater was skeptical, and so was the doctor, Shahrzad Ehdaivand. Now, nine years later, they're married and have a son, Jeramiah, and a daughter, Hannah. As Slater sits in his living room before this year's camp opens, they are expecting their third child any day now.

It's hard for him to put into words how different, how much less fulfilling, his life might be if football and faith hadn't been working in tandem to steer him to where he is now.

"Again, it comes back to Romans 8:28," Slater says. "Sometimes there is going to be pain, and sometimes it's going to be tough. But there is a purpose to it all."

EVERY OFFSEASON, MATTHEW Slater tries to get back home to California, and when he's there, he tries to sprint to the top of that hill. It's as hard at 33 as it was at 13. No one outruns the football reaper forever. But the hill is the best way to try.

He doesn't know how much longer he wants to play, but he knows the day will come, eventually, when he does get a tap on the shoulder. It's going to hurt a little, even if he understands the logic behind it. The league is changing. The way teams put together their rosters is changing. Metrics don't measure locker room leadership. Even at 33, he's still one of the fastest Patriots. But for how long?

"I'm not going to lie, it will sting a bit," Slater says. "I'm human."

But when that day does arrive, he plans to devote himself fully to supporting his wife, who put her medical career on pause to stay at home with their kids while he chases punt returners. The next step, he believes, will also feel like part of God's plan.

Someday he'd like his son to run the hill with him, whether he has a future in football or not. "That hill has a lot of meaning to my family," Slater says.

It's a rite of passage, a baton passed from one generation of Slater to the next. Every trip to the top has to be earned, then earned all over again.



The 'heartbeat' of the Patriots plays special teams

By Mark Cannizzaro

January 25, 2015 | 10:46pm

When the Patriots make their anticipated Arizona arrival for Super Bowl XLIX on Monday, most eyes will be on their Deflategate-embattled coach and quarterback, Bill Belichick and Tom Brady.

The rest of the Patriots players will deplane, exit the team buses and disappear into the team hotel in relative anonymity by comparison — none more so than Matthew Slater.

Slater, with his unassuming, bookish, bespectacled look, easily can be mistaken as someone from the team's non-football support staff — a media relations or community relations official or an IT intern — not the four-year team captain he is.

On Sunday at University of Phoenix Stadium, Slater will be one of the integral forces attempting to lead the Patriots to their fourth Super Bowl title since 2001 and first since 2004. He is a glue that bonds the Patriots.

There is not a player on the Patriots roster who better embodies what his demanding coach seeks in a player. Slater is the quintessential Belichick player: ego-less, versatile and smart.

"There are zero words to properly describe Matt Slater's impact on this team," running back Shane Vereen said. "He's the heartbeat. He is who everyone looks to — other than Tom [Brady]."

Belichick has a phrase he uses with his players, a saying he probably gleaned from his father, Steve, also a lifer football coach: "The more you can do ..."

There isn't a lot Slater doesn't do for the Patriots in his role as their special-teams captain.

Yet if you surf the Internet and look at his statistics you might be led to believe he doesn't do much at all and wonder how it's possible he has been on the Patriots roster for seven years.

Slater was selected in the fifth round of the 2008 NFL Draft as a receiver. Yet he has one career catch for 46 yards. That took place in 2011. He has one career carry for 6 yards. That took place in 2009.

How has an offensive player who has one reception and one carry lasted seven years under Belichick?

"He's like our quarterback on special teams, the player-coach of special teams," running back Brandon Bolden said. "He works harder than anyone — and I'm not talking about just on this team, I'm talking about the whole league," Vereen said. "He's a hard-nosed, doesn't-back-down type of player. He's what this team needs. You can ask any guy in this locker room and they will tell you the same thing I'm telling you about Matthew Slater. I can't say enough about the guy."

Matthew is the 29-year-old son of Jackie Slater, who carved out a Hall of Fame career as an offensive tackle for the Los Angeles Rams and taught his son a thing or two about how to survive in a league that is constantly trying to get younger and cheaper with its revolving personnel grind.

"I always told Matthew that if he was going to play the game of football he has to respect it enough to do the hard things, to do the things that nobody else was going to be willing to do so that you and your role can be part of the overall team success," Jackie Slater said.

"My father taught me that in the NFL, nothing is owed to you, that everything that you get in this league you have to work hard to get it, you have to sacrifice; there's a price to be paid," Matthew said. "His work ethic over the course of his career stands out more to me than anything, because I remember him training in the offseason more than I remember the games."

Matthew made note of the fact his father didn't start until his fourth NFL season. Matthew never has started a game in seven years in New England, yet he's one of the most important players on the team.

"When I came here, we had [receivers] Wes Welker, Randy Moss, Jabar Gaffney — players that were very accomplished in this league," Matthew said. "My mentality was to do whatever I can to make the team, whether that's running down on kicks, giving looks on scout teams, whatever that was. I understood that everybody couldn't be a star player. But there was a need for role players. In order to have a good football team you've got to have good role players."

Those last words: music to any coach's ears.

When I suggested to Jackie Slater his son was the model Belichick player because of his ego-less manner, he said, "Well, that's Matthew. There's never been any other way with him. He was always a guy that worked real hard and wanted to do his part to help the team."

Matthew, with four Pro Bowls, is catching up to Jackie, who was voted into seven. Only the Manning family, with 19 (Archie's two, Peyton's 14 and Eli's three) has combined for more Pro Bowls than the Slaters' 11.

Jackie Slater called his son's four consecutive Pro Bowls "an amazing feat in my opinion, because it's not like they're taking three offensive tackles to the Pro Bowl; they're taking one special-teams guy."

One special, unique player.

"I never would have thought I'd be here seven years, but it's definitely been a fun ride," Matthew said. "I'm thankful for the experiences, the relationships and everything I've been able to do here."

Asked if he feels appreciation from Belichick, Slater said: "I know he appreciates me because he's still got me around here. That's good enough for me. He says everything he needs to say by allowing me to be on this team every year and I'm thankful for it."

The Boston Globe

Patriots' Matthew Slater got work ethic from his father

By Shalise Manza Young
January 6, 2013

FOXBOROUGH — The game is violent, made for large men like him, and carrying his name onto a football field would be a burden.

Or so the father thought.

As Jackie and Annie Slater raised their two sons in the Anaheim, Calif., area, they tried their best to steer them away from football. Jackie coached their older son, Matthew, at the YMCA, introducing him to soccer, baseball, and basketball.

But when they weren't at the Y, young Matthew went with his father to work, at the Los Angeles Rams practice facility. After his father ran, Matthew ran. When his father was in the weight room, Matthew watched, his wrists taped so he looked the part.

While his father was putting in all the hours necessary to stay on the field, to rehab from injuries, to honor the game he loved, Matthew had a front-row seat.

Jackie Slater, a 6-foot-4-inch offensive lineman, was with the Rams for 20 seasons. A third-round pick out of Jackson State in his native Mississippi in 1976, he didn't become the starting right tackle until his fourth season. Once he took over the job, however, it was a long time before he surrendered it.

Matthew was born at the start of the 1985 season, midway through what was a Hall of Fame career for his father.

Jackie never intended that the time Matthew spent with him at the Rams facility would be on-the-job training.

"It was a really hard way for me to go, and it was very physical and very demanding, and I was a big guy, I was always a big guy, and I have always felt football is a big man's game," Jackie said.

"I saw that he was going to be a little man and there was very little I was going to be able to help him with as a smaller player. I didn't know enough about the skill positions to teach him and help him and so I just kind of discouraged him away from it.

"To be perfectly honest with you, I just didn't think that he was going to be cut out to play the sport."

Matthew was smaller than his father — though, of course, most men are. But he was fast. And he loved the game his father played, in spite of Jackie's reluctance. He begged his parents to let him take up football.

"My dad did everything in his power when I was young for me not to play," Matthew said. "I think part of that was he didn't want me to feel the pressure of living up to being 'Jackie Slater's son' and secondly he didn't want me to get injured because he understands this is a dangerous game and he wanted his son to be healthy.

"But what he didn't know is he was the reason I wanted to play. Because even talking to my dad now, you hear him tell the stories of when he played, he still loves the game so much. You can see it in his eyes, and that was kind of contagious for my brother and I — what is this game that's bringing so much joy and passion in my dad?"

Eventually, the Slaters relented.

From Bruin to Patriot

Annie Slater isn't sure when Matthew started excelling at football. He was a stellar student at Servite High, the top-notch all-boys Catholic school he attended, and his college choice came down to two schools: UCLA, not far from home, or Dartmouth, an Ivy League college in the East.

He was a standout track athlete, tying for second in the 100 meters at the California Interscholastic Federation state meet in 10.67 seconds, and was part of a state-champion 4 x 100-meter relay team.

On the football field, though, he had modest numbers: 39 receptions for 707 yards as a senior. But he had enough tools that he was appealing to college programs. He settled on UCLA.

Slater was a versatile performer with the Bruins, playing at receiver, in the secondary, and on special teams. He had the most impact as a kickoff returner, obliterating the school's season record for kickoff-return yards in 2007 with 986 yards on 34 returns (a school-record 29.0 yards per return), with three of those going for touchdowns.

What former UCLA coach Karl Dorrell most remembers, however, is Slater's work ethic.

"His effort and how he did things, it stuck out like a sore thumb, so to speak," said Dorrell, now quarterbacks coach for the Houston Texans. "If you go through practice and scan everybody that was practicing, there was always one guy that was just going so much harder and so much faster than everyone else, and that was Matthew Slater.

"He just kind of stuck out that way."

When his career with the Bruins was over and the draft process began, Slater had no sense of what would happen for him. He had established himself as a special teams player, but he didn't know whether that would be enough to earn him a shot with an NFL team as a free agent, let alone receive a phone call telling him he'd been drafted.

If Dorrell had gotten his way, Slater would have been a Dolphin. After a 6-6 season in 2007, he was fired by his alma mater and wound up in Miami as receivers coach.

"He can do so many different things, and his effort and how he did things was really unmatched compared to what most people would do," Dorrell said. "I was trying to get [the Dolphins] to draft him because I felt that strongly about his ability."

But Miami didn't draft Slater. A surprise team, one that he'd had little to no contact with in the previous weeks, chose him in the fifth round: the New England Patriots.

"When you look back on it, it was a perfect fit because they appreciated guys like me around here and they still do," Slater said. "They view things a little bit differently in regards to special teams. So it was a perfect fit with the way my college career went for me to end up here."

His rookie season of 2008 is not one Slater remembers fondly. He struggled on the field, averaging just 14.1 yards on 11 kickoff returns, and off the field, the transition from college student to professional — far from his family and his familiar Southern California surroundings — was difficult as well.

And then came Scott O'Brien, the mustachioed, frenetic special teams coach the Patriots hired after Slater's rookie year, the yin to Slater's quiet yang.

O'Brien rebuilt Slater's confidence, believing in the young speedster, making him believe he could be a great player.

Appreciating the grind

Jackie Slater believed that his son liked the grandeur of the game, that he enjoyed sitting in the stands with his mother and brother and seeing the Rams welcome different teams to Anaheim Stadium.

That was not the case.

"What I much later found out, the thing that had the biggest impact on him was, he'd watch me go through the grind, and I think the biggest thing that happened out of all that to him was he just learned to appreciate the underside of it, the mundane side of it, when nobody's watching and you just have to go to work and get yourself ready," said Jackie Slater.

"Those are some unique times, when we actually spent quite a bit of time together, when I was trying to retard the aging process and he saw that. He got up close and personal with the grind of the game, the hard work and everything that goes into it, the respect that you have to pay the game on a daily basis, the practices — that's the thing that he seemed to have remembered the most."

Matthew believes "95 percent of what I've learned as far as being a professional and how to work as a pro, and how to respect the game of football" came from his father.

"If there's one thing I remember about my dad, it was his work ethic," said Matthew. "As a little kid, going to Rams Park with him and watching him work out, and I didn't understand why he was doing so much and why he put so much time into it, but as I got older, I began to realize why he was doing that and he always — even now — is talking to me about being a professional, what it means to be a pro, what it means to respect this game."

"This game owes none of us anything; we're very privileged to be playing this game and we have to give it its just due in the way we prepare on the field and off the field so we'll have no regrets at the end of the day. I got a lot of that from my dad."

'This is my craft'

For most players, special teams is a means to an end: It's a way to get on the field as a young player, with the hope of getting more snaps at your preferred position later in the season.

Though he practiced as a defensive back and receiver in his first years with the Patriots, Matthew Slater, now 6 feet and 198 pounds, at some point realized that special teams was his position, and he set his mind to excelling at his position.

"I can't tell you how much I love this game of football," he said. "This game has been really good to me and my family, and once I got on the field and was able to play, I really saw that hey, this is fun. I like doing this."

"I'm very competitive by nature. I want to be great at whatever it is I'm doing, it doesn't matter if we're playing tic-tac-toe.

"In college, when I would see guys not take special teams seriously, I would feel like they were slighting the game, like they weren't respecting the game.

"This is a huge part of the game. It's not a job, it's my craft, and I want to be a master at my craft. It's not just me coming in punching a clock, going from 9 to 5 and doing the bare minimum.

"This is my craft, I want to perfect it."

Working on his own, working with O'Brien, Slater improved. He draws double-teams when he's on the field, opponents doing whatever they can to keep him from making a tackle on punt coverage or kickoff coverage.

More times than not, he's still the first player to get to the returner.

He has refined his craft to the point that he is considered by some the best special teams player in the NFL; last month, he was named to the Pro Bowl for the second straight year.

"There's something that sets the elite apart from everybody else, at any position, and to me it's really a desire and a passion that you have for what you do," O'Brien said. "Not only understanding it and wanting to be good at it but wanting to be the best at what you do. And the positions he plays are the hard ones, so that's a credit to Matt."

"When I talk to my peers, other coaches from different teams across the league, and they come up and say, 'Did you have Matthew Slater at UCLA?' I'm excited to talk about him," Dorrell said.

"I was very proud of what he did at UCLA but I'm even more proud of how he's established himself with such a great reputation, and also to be recognized as really the best special teams player in the league, that says a lot.

"He's a self-made man and he did a lot of that on his own because of how hard he works."

For the father, who didn't think his son was cut out for the game, who for a long time didn't appreciate the work done by special teams players, seeing his son's success is humbling.

"I always knew [special teams] was an important aspect of winning, it was just, in my heart of hearts, I didn't value it as much as some of the other positions," Jackie said. "It's been humbling to watch my son go that route.

"This is the opportunity that he was given to get on the field at UCLA, this is the opportunity he was given to get in a training camp in the National Football League, it's the opportunity he's taken advantage of to make one of the best teams in the country, and it's the opportunity he's taken advantage of to distinguish himself as one of the best players in the best league in the world."

Proud of the burden

When Matthew Slater steps onto the football field, it is with the last name of a Pro Football Hall of Fame player on his back.

He is glad he isn't an offensive lineman, with the burden of playing the same role his father did, with the expectations of playing it at the same level. There was pressure enough when he was younger to be like his father.

But Jackie raised him to be his own man, and on the football field he certainly is.

"It's hard because, no matter what I do, I'll always be the son of Jackie Slater," said Matthew. "But you know what, I'm OK with that. I'm OK with being the son of Jackie Slater because I am the son of Jackie Slater.

"But what I have to remember is I can't be him, I won't be him, I just have to be Matthew. He told me that at a young age, and even though at times I may struggle with that, I just have to be me and try to represent the name as well as I can."

On and off the field, he does.

LB John Simon

The Boston Globe

John Simon giving Patriots an edge, and plenty more

By Jim McBride Globe

December 1, 2019

In fact, he makes his living doing it.

The Patriots defensive end — go ahead and call him a linebacker, he won't mind one bit — has specialized in setting the edge for the Patriots defense since arriving in September 2018.

"John Simon sets the edge on Friday," assistant coach Jerod Mayo said with enthusiasm when asked what Simon brings to the front seven.

Resembling a rugged lumberjack, the brawny and bearded 6-foot-2-inch, 260-pound Simon smiled slightly when alerted to Mayo's reaction.

"We make it a high priority in our type of defense," he said. "The way we want to play, having the edge set is extremely important because if there's no edge out there, then the ball can break free and really it leaves the running back in no man's land with no one to tackle him. We take it very seriously around here and I try to do my best to make sure that when I'm out there, it's set."

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A seven-year veteran who had previous stops in Baltimore, Houston, and Indianapolis, Simon made an immediate impression on Bill Belichick when he "got up to speed in a few days, really," after being signed.

The coaching staff continued to be impressed by Simon's ability to consistently and continuously increase his responsibilities and his workload.

"He's played a lot of different roles for us, defensively, and then those roles have expanded this year quite a bit, I'd say maybe a little bit surprisingly because it looked like he had quite a few roles from last year and then starting this year," said Belichick. "But, as the season has progressed and we've emerged to where we've emerged a little bit to defensively, schematically, his roles have, I would say, expanded not contracted."

Simon said that's really the calling card of this defense.

"I think we just have a lot of versatile guys who can perform multiple roles and guys who know their strength and weaknesses and play off each other," he said. "And we've been together long enough now where we communicate well between one another and that definitely helps on Sunday as well."

Simon fell into the Patriots' laps after the Colts cut him because they didn't think he meshed into their 4-3 look. Simon didn't take it personally and he didn't let it shake his resolve.

"I had confidence in my abilities, and I knew I could still play," he said. "It didn't work out in Indianapolis and that's just the way the business is — sometimes the fit isn't there. And this [defense] is very similar to what I ran in Houston, with Romeo Crennel, but we're doing a lot of little different things here now but just to help me with the vocabulary and how some of the things are worded and just — whatever team I'm on — trying to earn the respect of the guys, producing, and showing that I belong on this team every day. So, you just learn the playbook as fast as you can so you can, get out there and start producing."

Simon played under Mike Vrabel at Ohio State and with the Texans and has modeled his game, in part, under the former Patriots linebacker — and part-time tight end. There were times Vrabel would regale his troops with tales from New England.

“He was pretty good about that, sometimes he’d get on a rant, you know, the back-in-my-day-type of thing, but no, he was pretty good.

“But he definitely has those [Patriot] characteristics in him and it rubs off on people for the rest of their lives and he still has those tendencies in how he acts and how he coaches and how he’s still passionate about the game and I think some of that rubbed off on me,” Simon said.

John Harbaugh, Simon’s coach in Baltimore, called Simon a player he respected and “personally loved. Harbaugh and Colts general manager Chris Ballard have said they wished they could have kept Simon.

“It’s a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately business,” said Simon. “Those comments are nice and all and maybe when you retire you can reflect on things like that. But it’s all about helping this team right now and it is all about getting better because you can always find something that you can improve your game on and that’s the goal right now at this time of year.”

Belichick is happy to have him on his club.

“He’s a really smart, tough, dependable player. Shows up every day, works hard, does a good job,” said the coach. “He’s going to give it to you every day, whether it’s Wednesday, Friday, or Sunday. That’s a good thing.”



Patriots LB John Simon is the best 'Boogeyman' you've never heard of

Henry McKenna

November 3, 2019 10:07 am ET

Every team needs a trash man, according to linebacker Kyle Van Noy. For the New England Patriots, it’s John Simon.

Simon is one of New England’s lesser-known characters on defense. But there’s no doubt he’s a boogeyman, a nickname devised for this scary linebacker group. He’s taken 44% of defensive snaps, fourth-most among linebackers in the Patriots’ 3-4 defense.

Who is this guy?

“He plays to his name,” Dont’a Hightower said.

Um, OK. So what does that mean?

“He’s John [expletive] Simon,” Hightower added. “He’s setting the edge on the biggest, baddest dudes. He doesn’t say no to contact. He’ll do the trash man duties that some guys don’t necessarily like, because they won’t get the praise and recognition from everybody. Simon’s one of those guys who doesn’t care if you know, doesn’t want you to know.”

Sorry, John. We’re about to blow up your spot.

The 29-year-old linebacker has bounced around the NFL from Baltimore to Houston to Indianapolis, even if his past coaches, including John Harbaugh, wished he hadn’t left after Simon’s rookie season in 2013.

“He was a guy that I just personally loved. I thought he had a real knack to get to the quarterback and play the run, and just nobody wanted to be a good football player more than John,” Harbaugh said on a conference call.

Simon is the kind of player coaches apparently adore. And it's easy to understand why. He has showed up to Gillette Stadium early with the rookies — long before most other veterans. He starts work at 6 a.m. every day. Simon said he'd made a habit of rising early when he was younger so that he could work out with his father. Since then, it has been his routine. By the time the other linebackers get to work, Simon usually has worked out, gotten treatment from the Patriots' trainers and enjoyed a tub (either cold or hot).

Simon's teammates also seem to genuinely enjoy him, too. When defensive tackle Lawrence Guy needs a partner for gin rummy in between meetings, he finds the linebacker. If Guy needs advice on life, he seeks out Simon, who immediately responds to his texts or calls. That dependability shows on the field as well. The 260-pound linebacker lines up on the edge of New England's amoeba defense, which can include two or three-man fronts. Often playing on running downs, Simon seeks contact, regardless of his opponent's size. Even when an offensive lineman outweighs Simon by 70 pounds, he's a specialist at making run blockers look bad.

"I would say one guy that defines tough, smart, dependable, is John Simon," outside linebackers coach DeMarcus Covington said. "He's a guy where, you wish you had more guys like him because he's so freaking smart, so tough, dependable. You hear other guys' names throughout the week. You always hear Jamie [Collins] or Hightower or Van Noy, but John Simon — he's a guy who might not get the recognition, but in this building, he's definitely one of our guys we lean on each week."

At times, Simon plays with a crazed pace and power.

During the Patriots' Week 7 win over the Jets, one of the linebacker's best games this season, he lined up on the left edge of New England's defense for a first-and-10 in the second quarter. When the ball was snapped, he met a pulling guard in the backfield. That seemed to accomplish his first job on that play: he had set the edge. Simon stopped the guard, Alex Lewis, while tailback Le'Veon Bell patiently weaved into the second level of the defense. Then Simon chased down Bell and jumped on him from behind to bring him down.

"You can see why defensive coordinators and teammates love him, because you know what you're going to get," Hightower said. "You know he's going to work hard. He's going to set the edge. He's going to make the right call."

Simon's job is often to set up his teammates to make the big play. It's a game of Simon Says. Browns running back wants to run a stretch play around the edge? Simon says: Stay inside and take a big hit from Collins. Bell can't find room to run up the middle? Simon says: Stay inside and take a loss.

On a first-and-15 in the first quarter in Week 8, Browns tailback Nick Chubb ran to the left side, where he found Simon waiting on the edge after shedding a block from 315-pound left tackle Justin McCray. That's when Chubb slipped inside, but Simon still managed to slow him down so that Collins could finish off the play for no gain.

Strength and toughness are two of the traits teammates and coaches appreciate the most in Simon. While he may be on the smaller side for the role he executes, he plays much bigger than he is. In fact, Bill Belichick got a little defensive at the suggestion that Simon was too small for his position.

"John's got good playing strength. He's got good leverage. I don't think playing strength is an issue. I don't think it was an issue wherever he's been. It wasn't an issue in Houston, and I didn't think it was an issue at Indianapolis. Didn't think it was an issue at Ohio State," Bill Belichick said. "He always has played strong, that's one of his strengths. ... He's smart, very smart. Very instinctive. So, he's got some things going for him."

That instinctive approach might be what helps Simon bat down passes at the line of scrimmage. He has four pass breakups and an interception in 2019, and he makes a habit of getting his hands up on most plays. Even if Simon doesn't penetrate the backfield while rushing the passer, he often still can read a quarterback's eyes or identify an open throwing lane — generally a gap in the offensive line — and get in the way of the pass.

Sometimes, he doesn't need to bat the ball. Against the Jets, Simon came unblocked off the left edge and strip-sacked quarterback Sam Darnold. Van Noy recovered the fumble, and returned it for a touchdown — but not before Simon decked receiver Jamison Crowder.

While it might be a pick-on-someone-your-own-size moment, with Simon outweighing Crowder by about 80 pounds, perhaps Crowder got a sense of the matchups Simon often faces.

QB Jarrett Stidham



Talent. Intelligence. Confidence. Jarrett Stidham’s ceiling with Patriots could be sky-high

By Jeff Howe

August 9, 2019

Quarterback Jarrett Stidham was in the midst of the marquee game of his career, playing the star role in one of the most heated rivalries in college football, and an unlikely fan couldn’t get enough.

Every time Stidham took over the Auburn offense during the 2017 Iron Bowl, Alabama running back Damien Harris made sure to secure a good view. Harris even admitted he was privately rooting for Stidham’s success, clutching to a close connection the two formed as 8-year-olds on a Kentucky Little League football team that went undefeated.

Their childhood bond stayed intact even after Stidham moved to Texas and ultimately wound up playing for rival Auburn — just one testament to the way people remain drawn to Stidham, a charismatic leader who has won over teammates and coaches at every step and earned levels of loyalty that couldn’t even be dented in a football atmosphere that paralyzes an entire state and temporarily divides families.

“For me to want an Auburn guy to do well, it says a lot about our friendship,” Harris said with a laugh.

Stidham completed 21-of-28 passes for 237 yards that day and added a career-high 51 rushing yards, including the game-sealing 16-yard touchdown through four defenders, as sixth-ranked Auburn gave No. 1 Alabama its lone loss of the season.

Harris’ Crimson Tide eventually won the national championship, which softened the blow of the Iron Bowl. Harris still beamed about his memory of Stidham that afternoon.

“I paid very close attention to him,” said Harris, who was reunited with Stidham in April when the Patriots drafted both. “He’s one of my best friends. Even though we were playing against each other, having that relationship, every time he went out there, I watched him. Secretly, I wanted him to do well and wanted him to perform. I just wanted us to win. He played a great game and obviously has had success since then.”

Talk to anyone about Stidham, and the 2017 Iron Bowl will come up. Former teammates at Baylor, where he played before Auburn, tuned in to watch on TV. Ditto for former coaches. It was the defining moment of a breakout season in which he was named SEC Newcomer of the Year and that led prognosticators to label Stidham a potential first-round draft pick.

See, Stidham has always had star-level ability, and he’s a dream for teammates and coaches — a fact verified by those at each stop of his career. He has overcome various degrees of adversity, including a less-than-ideal 2018 season when Auburn had to replace four starting offensive linemen and SEC Player of the Year Kerryon Johnson. The result was a fall to the fourth round of the draft. He was the seventh quarterback off the board.

The Patriots might have stuck gold, as Stidham has blown away all expectations over the past three months by showcasing incredible accuracy through 19 practices over the spring and summer and in the preseason opener against the Lions on Thursday. He already looks ahead of where Jimmy Garoppolo was at this point of his 2014 rookie season, as Stidham makes a few highlight-reel throws during most of his workouts and performs with enough consistency to suggest this isn’t a fluke.

Bill Belichick and the coaching staff have also given Stidham a handful of opportunities to work with the first-team offense and defense, something that never happened during the summer for recent draft picks Jacoby Brissett and Danny Etling. And it took quite a while for Garoppolo to earn that type of trust at practice.

Stidham was 14-of-24 for 179 yards and a touchdown Thursday in a solid preseason debut against the Lions, and he could have had a couple of other scoring strikes if they didn't clang off his targets' hands. He has also completed 71.1 percent of his passes in team drills during training camp.

Stidham's poise, consistency and ability to lead his teammates have been evident since he reported to Gillette Stadium in the spring. They're all traits he's shown throughout his career, conveying the tantalizing, ever-growing possibility the Patriots have a franchise quarterback in the making.

The potential exists for Jarrett Stidham to be the heir to Tom Brady's throne.

Humble roots

The first time Joe Gillespie heard Stidham's name, he was described as something of a mythical figure.

And Stidham was only in middle school.

Stidham, fresh off that championship run with Harris and the mini-49ers in Kentucky, moved to Stephenville, Texas, when he was 9, enrolling in school in the same class as Josh Gillespie. Josh went home one day and told his football coach father about this new giant who could block out the sun.

"I remember driving up to the intermediate school to pick up my son one day," Joe Gillespie said. "There was Jarrett Stidham out there horseplaying just like every other fifth-grader, but he's a foot taller than everybody else. My son gets in the truck and I said, 'Is that the kid you were talking about?' From that point forward, Stephenville is, shucks, 20,000 people in the community. Everybody knows everybody. It's a one-horse town."

The football-crazed town that shuts down on Friday nights was instantly drawn to Stidham, whose spotlight brightened throughout his youth. Stephenville High became a Texas powerhouse under coach Art Briles in the 1990s, and Joe Gillespie helped keep the winning ways intact during 20 years on the staff, including his final seven (2008-14) as head coach. Their quarterbacks drew a crowd, too, with Kevin Kolb and Jevan Snead causing college recruiters to flock to town before Stidham.

When Stidham got to Stephenville High, Gillespie said he had the "best backup quarterback in the nation," but he wouldn't sit upperclassman Tyler Jones in favor of the younger signal-caller. So they moved Stidham to wide receiver, cornerback and safety, a combination of positions that Gillespie believed helped Stidham gain a better overall understanding of the game as a way to see it through other vantage points. They won the state title that season, so clearly it worked.

The country knew Stidham as a signal-caller, though, and he already had scholarship offers to play quarterback before his junior season without playing a snap. He shined at elite all-star camps during his first couple years of high school, and Gillespie shared film of his practice work with recruiters to help his stock.

"Then he goes out and performs on Friday nights for us, and the floodgates opened," said Gillespie, who is now Tulsa's defensive coordinator. "The recruiters were flocking in by the droves almost daily."

As a teenager, Stidham was one of the most wanted quarterbacks in America for the better part of two years, sometimes speaking to college coaches on the phone for three hours a night. All the while, he dealt with some private struggles as his family underwent financial issues.

Stidham, who ultimately moved in with a guardian family when he was 18, kept a heady presence about himself. He worked out before school in the morning, handled himself well enough in the classroom to finish in the top 10 percent of his class and graduate early, and somehow balanced his life as a big-time recruit.

"A phenomenal young man who, honestly, did not have everything handed to him," Gillespie said. "He had a good home, but had some difficulties – finances, where am I sleeping tonight, am I going to get a decent meal?"

"At an early age, this young man came into high school talking about, 'I want to make it all the way.' He also knew what he had to do to get there and was hungry for as much knowledge as he could gain. You couldn't outwork him. You couldn't beat him to the weight room or to school in the morning, showing up at 5:30, 6 in the morning."

It surely translated. Like nearly all NFL quarterbacks, Stidham had absurd high school stats – 6,516 passing yards and 80 touchdowns, 1,790 rushing yards and 29 scores over two years – but Gillespie thought one story stood out the most.

As a senior, Stidham broke a finger on his throwing hand toward the end of the regular season and had to sit out a month while recovering from surgery. Stidham was close to returning during a second-round playoff game against Lubbock Estacado, but Gillespie wanted to use him only in case of emergency. It ultimately took four minutes to break the glass.

“So he hasn’t played in a month and went out there and threw six touchdown passes,” Gillespie said of his performance in the 69-60 victory. “This is a guy who wasn’t expecting to play.”

Next phase

The recruitment was another story. Stidham verbally committed to Texas Tech as a junior, but that didn’t do much to deter his pursuers.

After all, it was evident Stidham was the real deal.

“It was without question the best guy I saw throw that year and really one of the best high school guys I’ve ever seen throw,” said Rhett Lashlee, who was Auburn’s offensive coordinator from 2013-16.

Lashlee also recognized he didn’t have a great chance to get Stidham out of high school. A few days after Auburn fell in the national championship game to Florida State in January 2014, Lashlee went to Stephenville to watch Stidham throw in a basketball gym that was lined with auxiliary turf. The word on Stidham was that he was already the best quarterback to ever come out of the area, which was something Lashlee needed to see to believe.

But Lashlee wasn’t alone. He was joined by Philip Montgomery, who previously worked as an assistant at Stephenville and was Art Briles’ offensive coordinator at Baylor at the time. And Chad Morris, another former Stephenville coach who had been Clemson’s offensive coordinator for that tour. The ties to the town ran deep.

Stidham blew them all away.

“He was just ripping the ball all over that thing,” Lashlee said.

Stidham ultimately chose Baylor, which was an hour-and-a-half from Stephenville and surging to national prominence with a dynamic offense that was understandably attractive to an athletic quarterback with a live arm.

The community celebrated Stidham even more for staying local. But as his status soared, his humility remained intact. That’s a trait that hasn’t been lost on anyone throughout his journey.

“He had to live with a lot of pressure and stuff like that,” Gillespie said. “I’m going to tell you, he was so publicized at such a young age – I know I can speak for me – if I would have been that way, my arrogance level would have gone out the roof. I would have been extremely immature and unable to handle that with a great deal of grace. Never once did you concern yourself with other players on the team not being the same (level) as he was. He made them all feel as great. They were extremely important to his success, and he made that well known.”

Stidham enrolled early at Baylor in December 2014 to prepare for the 2015 season. His talent was apparent enough to get him into seven games behind starter Seth Russell, who then sustained a season-ending neck injury that thrust the freshman into the pole position.

It was a high-pressure situation that Stidham handled with relative ease, taking an undefeated, second-ranked Baylor to a win at Kansas State before the Bears welcomed both No. 12 Oklahoma and the “College Gameday” circus to campus a week later. Stidham excelled, though Baylor fell, 44-34.

“When he first came in, he was spinning the ball like no other,” Baylor wide receiver Chris Platt said. “Coming in as a freshman and starting against Oklahoma, all the publicity and all that stuff, he wasn’t worried about it at all. Everybody saw it like, ‘This dude is the real deal. He’s going to be something one day.’ It was just amazing.”

The next week, playing through a nasty bruise that extended from his hip to his armpit in a road victory over No. 4 Oklahoma State, Stidham went down for the season with a chipped bone in his ankle. It wasn’t just the coolness in the huddle that impressed Platt, but the willingness to try to play through a variety of injuries. Stidham was their leader.

Until the storm hit.

Briles was fired in May 2016 as part of the fallout from a major sexual assault scandal at Baylor, and Stidham transferred to remove himself from the program. He enrolled at McClennan Community College in Waco, Texas, and worked out with the Midway High School team to keep himself in shape while recruiters again tripped over themselves to get him to their program.

Lashlee had a second chance, and his prior relationship with Stidham paid off as Auburn competed with Florida and Texas A&M for the commitment. Lashlee saw an even more mature Stidham this time around, a quietly confident and easygoing kid who wanted to play on a big stage and pursue his NFL dreams.

And Lashlee recalled when Stidham, who can seemingly relate to anyone in any situation, visited his home and got hounded by his twin boys. Rather than sticking to the Auburn recruitment pitch or discussing any future plans on campus, Stidham joined the 5-year-olds to play football in the front yard for 45 minutes. Lashlee actually had to be the one to stop the impromptu game of catch.

He knew he had his guy. There aren't many me-first quarterbacks with long-term staying power.

New environment

Jarrett Stidham still owes Kerryon Johnson \$20.

Johnson made that point very clear this week after the Patriots and Lions practiced in Allen Park, Mich. Stidham just rolled his eyes.

Stidham joined a talented Auburn team that had championship aspirations in 2017. It could have theoretically gone awry with a high-profile quarterback walking into an established locker room, especially with coach Gus Malzahn's staff tabbing him as the likely starter – after a year in community college and throwing to high schoolers, no less.

But Stidham has that endearing personality and genuine work ethic. So one day, as Stidham bragged about the running ability he showed off in high school and at Baylor, he told Johnson he'd have a 40-yard score before the end of his career.

"I told him when he first transferred to Auburn that you're not running for a 40-yard touchdown," Johnson said, growing more animated. "It's too fast out here (in the SEC)."

Stidham insisted to Johnson that he was going to run for that 40-yard touchdown.

He never did.

"So he owes me \$20 for that," Johnson said. "Make sure he gets that message because he's acting like he forgot. I have not forgotten.

"I want my \$20."

Sometimes, it's the little things. Stidham was described as a guy who can joke around or lighten the mood in a high-stress locker room. Maybe it'll come at his own expense.

Rewind to Baylor for a moment, and Platt still thinks about the time he was putting air in his tires at a random gas station in Waco. Out of nowhere, Stidham snuck up behind him. He spotted Platt while driving by and stopped to make sure he was OK. Players gravitate toward guys who offer gestures like that.

At Auburn, it was easy to see throughout offseason workouts that Stidham would win the job, and it was also natural for his teammates to root for him. He cheered for his fellow quarterbacks at practice and got to know them as people as well as teammates.

"He's a natural-born leader," Johnson said. "He came in, acted as himself and people respect that. Then obviously, his play on the field spoke for itself."

Stidham rewarded Lashlee for his persistence by dominating the competition at practice.

"Ultimately, his play proved he was the guy. It wasn't even close," Lashlee said. "Jarrett is as accurate of a quarterback as I've ever seen. ... He is a fierce competitor. He's tough as nails."

Sharpening Iron

Chip Lindsey, Auburn's offensive coordinator the past two seasons and now Troy's head coach, really appreciated that Stidham had a good head on his shoulders. Stidham, who is now married, was engaged to a Baylor soccer player for most of his time at Auburn. Lindsey said Stidham focused all his attention on football and rarely went out at night, a combination of characteristics that showed a quality moral fiber and a drive to succeed on the field.

So Lindsey gave Stidham a ton of responsibility at the line of scrimmage, crediting his quarterback with changing protections and routes based on his pre-snap read. Lindsey stressed his praise for that element as something Stidham earned through all the extra hours at the facility.

Stidham was lighting up the SEC in 2017 when Auburn and Alabama met Thanksgiving weekend for their annual Iron Bowl clash. Both teams were still in the hunt for the national championship.

Stidham's numbers didn't necessarily pop off the page, but he controlled the pace of the game by himself with his command and accuracy. In the two years since that game, 13 defensive players from Alabama have been drafted, including four first-rounders. It was as close to an NFL defense as any college team has boasted in the past two decades.

Stidham's supporters ranged from the opposing sideline to homes around the country.

- Damien Harris (Alabama running back in 2017): "We always kept in touch."
- Chris Platt (Baylor wide receiver in 2017): "If he wasn't playing in that game, I probably wasn't going to watch it. He was just on point throwing dimes. I was like, 'Oh my god, I knew this was coming, but dang, he's tearing it up right now.'"
- Rhett Lashlee (UConn offensive coordinator in 2017): "That's why he came to Auburn. I remember him coming here saying, 'I want to come here and help Auburn beat Alabama,' and he did that. You just know when a guy is clicking. They have a certain look in their eye when they're on. I think great competitors rise to the occasion in big moments. For a guy like him, that moment wasn't too big. And at a place like Auburn, there's nothing bigger than the Iron Bowl. He acted like he was made for it."
- Kerryon Johnson (Auburn running back in 2017): "He loves the pressure. He loves the big-time moments. He gets excited for things like that, and that's what helps him play well. He came out there and led us. That whole season, he did his thing – under scrutiny, under pressure, all the talk, it doesn't faze him. He just goes out there and plays the game, and he succeeds."

Future of the franchise?

Stidham earned the label of a potential first-round pick after the 2017 Iron Bowl validated what was evident all season. But after Stidham couldn't convince Johnson to stay another season and Auburn lost 80 percent of its starting offensive line, the Tigers dipped in 2018.

Stidham was criticized for holding the ball too long or succumbing to pressure. While this is a hyperbolic comparison, look what happened to Tom Brady in 2015 when the Patriots didn't have an offensive line or a running game. But hey, that's the nature of the quarterback position – corral the glory when it's going well, seize the blame when it's not.

It's not like it was a disaster, though. Stidham completed 66.5 percent of his passes in 2017 but 60.7 percent in 2018; averaged 225.6 passing yards in 2017 but 214.9 in 2018; had 18 touchdowns and six interceptions in 2017 and 18 touchdowns to five picks in 2018. He did nearly as much with a whole lot less.

"He made a lot of (great) throws in practices and games, especially in 2017 when we protected him much better," Lindsey noted.

The Patriots might have stolen Stidham in the fourth round, but it'd be a stretch to say they were sold on him. They were on the clock for the 10th time, including three trades down the board, before calling Stidham's name in April.

It's also true that Stidham has impressed the Patriots far quicker than anyone anticipated. It started in organized team activities and minicamp, and it's bled into progress in training camp and the preseason. This isn't just a summer fling.

His accuracy rarely waivers, a fact on display in front of a large audience against the Lions. But throughout training camp, he has made the easy throws with a high degree of frequency while also showing eye-popping touch with the intermediate and deep attempts, whether it's been an arcing fade to Jakobi Meyers, or an extended dart to N'Keal Harry, or a drop in the bucket to James White on a wheel route or several instances when he rolled both left and right out of the pocket. Each example featured a well-covered receiver, too.

Does he occasionally hold the ball a little long? Sure, but it takes a lot longer than a few months for the game to slow down for a rookie quarterback. Even with that, Stidham uncorked 14 of his passes against the Lions in 2.4 seconds or less, with 10 completions. The timely reads are more prevalent.

"The talent is unmistakable. The intelligence level is there. The confidence is there," Lashlee said. "I think it's a credit to the Patriots for recognizing the talent."

Stidham is off to one heck of a start. He doesn't have the keys to the kingdom yet, but they're within reach.

The roots of a potential franchise quarterback have been planted for years, and now it might be time for them to sprout in Foxboro.

Stidham might be the Patriots' next big thing.

RB JJ Taylor

The Providence Journal

FOR A FRIEND: Late teammate 'Tank' never far from Pats RB J.J. Taylor's mind

By Mark Daniels

Oct 3, 2020

J.J. Taylor sat in front of his locker just moments before the biggest game of his life. Quiet, he was staring at the silver helmet in his hands. Taylor wasn't looking at the Patriots decal or the red face mask, or thinking about making his NFL debut.

Instead, his focus was the name on the back of the helmet. In all caps, it reads, "TANK GOODMAN."

The name means everything. It elicits every emotion. It reminds him of the best times. And the pain, loss and heartbreak.

"Before the game, I'd probably spend about five to 10 minutes just looking at the back of my helmet," Taylor said. "Just reminiscing."

This season, several players have names on the backs of their helmets as part of the NFL's Say Their Stories initiative. They're doing it to honor victims of systemic racism and police brutality, as well as social justice heroes.

But Taylor took it in a different direction to honor his longtime friend.

Goodman was killed this summer in an act of gun violence. He was 23 and one of Taylor's closest friends. That's whom Taylor's thinking about before each NFL game. It's the name on his mind when he first runs on the field and the person he prays for before each kickoff.

"Right now, with everything going on and just knowing how much he meant to me as a friend, it means a lot," Taylor said. "It means the world."

A 5-foot-6 undrafted rookie free agent, Taylor is already an inspiration for making the team's roster. What people don't see is the pain he's dealing with or the motivation behind it all.

Taylor entered his first NFL training camp in mourning. He now carries his friend's name with him every Sunday.

"It was hard," the young running back said. "Now, I'm not just doing it for me anymore. I wasn't doing it for me in the first place. It was for my family, those who believed in me or those who looked up to me, but now I'm doing it for him — to keep his legacy going."

An early bond

Jamal “Tank” Goodman was always stocky for his age. He always loved football. That’s why the nickname “Tank” was fitting.

The first time Jea Reese heard it was when she dropped her son off at his first football practice at Centennial High School in Corona, California. Players were running the 40-yard dash, and when he took off, a coach yelled, “Where did this tank come from?”

The name stuck.

A quiet kid, Goodman stood 5-8 and weighed upwards of 230 pounds as a teenager. On the field, he developed into a competitive, hard-hitting linebacker.

“Oh, he loved football. He played from the time he was 9,” said Reese. “He just really, really took to it. It even provided him a scholarship at Dixie State. He really enjoyed it. He actually went into Centennial as a running back, but they needed a linebacker. He had really not played defense, but he was athletic and ended up thriving.”

Goodman wasn’t the next star running back. Instead, it was his friend, Taylor — a 160-pound dynamo. Taylor entered Centennial as a sophomore and was a year behind Goodman.

“It was a bond instantly,” said Centennial coach Matt Logan. “They all played for similar previous coaches and played against each other. They’re all really the type of comical type kids who would bag on each other, have fun. It was a close-knit group.”

In 2015, Goodman made first-team All-State as a linebacker and Taylor did the same as a running back. The pair bonded in part because of football, but they were also alike. Off the field, they were quiet but on the field, their actions spoke volumes.

“[Jamal] would always talk about how good J.J. was and said he’s just really quiet. As they got older, I told J.J., I could see the reason why he and my son developed the friendship, because my son was very quiet,” Reese said. “They were very similar in that kids that have talent, just remarkable talent, but just we’re not the showboaters.”

“They enjoyed the sport and enjoyed playing it. ... They were very competitive on the field, but came off the field as gentle, caring people.”

Tragedy strikes

Goodman ended up at Dixie State University in Utah because of football, but his goal was to make an impact off the field. He was in the process of completing a bachelor of science degree in criminal justice when his life came to a tragic end on June 23.

That night, his roommate, Tommy Bradshaw Jr., admitted to police that he shot Goodman in the chest. This allegedly happened because Goodman knocked loudly on Bradshaw’s bedroom door, according to court documents. Bradshaw, 32, was arrested and charged with one count of first-degree felony murder.

At the time, Goodman was working with youths at a juvenile detention center and he wanted to make a difference after earning his degree. His mother said he was living with Bradshaw to help him.

The nickname “Tank” was appropriate, due to his stature, but not an indication of who he was.

“He was funny, he was goofy. Some will call him a big ole teddy bear,” Taylor said. “He got the name Tank because he’s a big dude, but he was a real good dude at heart and just a real genuine person.”

The news crushed Taylor. The friends talked almost daily. Their core group from Centennial got together constantly to play PlayStation. They called themselves the 'PS Squad.' No matter what was happening in life, they took the time to play, trash talk and catch up. Taylor always looked forward to those moments.

"I got a few good friends that we all keep in contact to this day. And he was one of the few that I talked to almost every day," Taylor said. "Even though it was maybe through PlayStation or whenever I came home from college, we all hung out and went to play basketball. He was one person that was just a constant person in my life."

Goodman's death happened a month before Taylor's first NFL training camp. He struggled with motivation and leaned on past coaches for guidance.

"At first, it was very difficult losing a friend, especially a friend that was as close to me as he was," Taylor said. "It was kind of hard to be in the right mental state about anything, really."

The advice he took to heart was that he should honor and play for Goodman.

Honoring 'Tank'

The email sat in Reese's inbox and she wasn't sure what to do. Initially apprehensive, she spoke with Candy Cray of the NFL on Aug. 31. Cray explained how players were honoring people in the name of social justice. Although her son's situation was different, his name was among those requested.

Reese was shocked.

"For my son to be honored in that way, I was just completely floored," Reese said. "As a parent, I know the type of child that my son was. Even the person that took his life he was helping. For him to be honored at that level was actually breathtaking. For his name to be recognized at a national level is something big, because I'm in the process of starting a foundation. Now people across the world will want to know — "who is this Tank Goodman?""

Initially, Reese didn't know Taylor requested the name. People back in Corona didn't even know it was happening until after Taylor made his NFL debut against Miami. When word got around, he took a picture and sent it to friends and coaches. The gesture resonated with everyone who knew Goodman.

"It brought tears to my eyes to see," said Logan. "Everybody down here thought it was a truly, truly remarkable tribute to our fallen teammate and friend. It was amazing."

Following the game, Taylor had an emotional phone call with Reese. The pain is still fresh. It won't go away anytime soon, but that helmet made for a nice moment for people who truly needed it.

"His mom ended up calling me after my first game, and she told me how much it meant to her for me to put his name on the back of his helmet and how much it meant for her family," Taylor said. "I guess you could say it was a little bittersweet."

"It was emotional. I cried," Reese said. "It's bittersweet. For me, it was exciting, but then it was like, 'Wow, why does he have to be honored in such a way when he could have been [here]?' People saw the light that he shared on so many when he was alive. So it was very, very emotional, but a happy emotional, because he used his platform to recognize my son."

Jamal "Tank" Goodman is gone, but not forgotten. J.J. Taylor has made sure of that.

OL Joe Thuney

The Boston Globe

A rookie guard is only Patriot to play every down this season

By Nora Princiotti
DECEMBER 7, 2016

FOXBOROUGH — The Patriots have changed quarterbacks and game plans, played on different fields and against different defensive schemes, but they've had only one left guard all season.

Joe Thuney has never been subbed out. The rookie has played every snap of every game. Whenever the offense has been on the field, so has Thuney.

Some of his fellow linemen also have been remarkably consistent and have missed only a couple of snaps here and there.

The difference is negligible in terms of football, but not in terms of pride. When a postgame stat sheet initially shorted Thuney a snap against Pittsburgh — claiming he had played 56 snaps instead of all 57 — it mattered.

"It said I missed one," Thuney said. "I had to square that away. I did not."

Thuney has four games left to complete his Iron Man challenge. Whether he does or not, the third-round pick out of North Carolina State has been a model of consistency.

That kind of stability is a change for all parties involved. Thuney played every position on the offensive line for the Wolfpack, and the Patriots were a revolving door along the line last season. Settling down has been good for both of them.

"It produces a feeling of familiarity, and, you know, you get comfortable with the guys around you," said Thuney. "So that's, I think, you know, a benefit. It helps with chemistry. That's important on the offensive line, so yeah, I think it's just that familiarity factor is helpful."

As in any workplace, chemistry on the football field isn't purely a matter of complementary skill sets. Getting to know colleagues and making them feel they know you and trust you is important, especially for linemen who can't play as individuals. The closer a player is to the center of a formation, the more they rely on coordination with the players around them.

Luckily for him, Thuney has a good track record of winning people over.

He's a people person, a jokester, and impeccably mannered. He introduces himself by name and with a firm handshake to anyone who comes over to his locker (which, of course, has his name on it). He mounted a winning campaign for senior class president at Archbishop Alter High School in Kettering, Ohio.

Thuney thinks the campaign video he made sealed the deal because it was funny. He claims he can't remember the jokes, or whether he had a slogan, though the grin on his face said otherwise.

"That helped," Thuney said. "I can't remember specifically, but it was good. I think. I like to think so. It got me elected."

It's obviously not a direct comparison, but can Thuney use those same qualities to fit in with his new team?

"I try to," he said, smiling sheepishly. "I try to be personable."

Whatever he's doing, it's working, as the offensive line has gone from a weakness to a strength for the Patriots. New England is eighth in the NFL in sacks per passing play, and the line has given up only 20 sacks all season. The team is headed for the postseason trotting out the sixth-ranked run game in the league, having gained 1,407 yards and 14 touchdowns.

They passed a tricky test Sunday against the Rams defense, which didn't register a sack and hit Tom Brady only four times.

The Patriots ran for 133 yards in hefty chunks of 4.9 yards per carry, with 64 yards coming from the interior behind Thuney, David Andrews, and Shaq Mason. LeGarrette Blount's 43-yard run down the right sideline skews the numbers, but the Patriots' bread and butter was up the middle.

Moreover, Los Angeles defensive tackle Aaron Donald didn't have a heavy impact on the game.

"He was a really good player and they have a really good defense," Thuney said. "I've just got to try to learn from that game film and move on for the Ravens."

If the film reveals one teaching point that line coach Dante Scarnecchia probably will harp on, it's that Thuney can be a bit jumpy and a bit handsy. He has cost the Patriots 55 yards with seven penalties (four holding calls and three false starts) this season.

It's one area of Thuney's game where his rookie status shows. In most others, he's shouldering a rare amount of responsibility for a player his age who wasn't an elite draft pick and is enjoying a rare amount of success as a result.

"I'm really glad," he said. "It's great to be 10-2 and in this position. It's a long season but you just focus on what you can control and try to get a little better each day."

"It's a great start and I couldn't be happier where I am."

The Boston Globe

Day job: Protecting Tom Brady. Side gig: Working toward MBAs.

By Nora Princiotti
NOVEMBER 4, 2017

The weekend is a perfect time to catch up on the "Season Ticket" podcast.

FOXBOROUGH — The Patriots famously had to reconstruct space in the south end zone at Gillette Stadium this offseason to make room for the team's fifth Super Bowl banner. Now, thanks to some crane work, there's room for each and then some.

Offensive lineman Ted Karras was a rookie last season, so he's got only one Super Bowl ring. But Karras has his own drive for five going — five college degrees. And he knows exactly where he'll put them.

"I'm just going to have a rainbow above my desk of diplomas," Karras said.

Karras, a backup drafted in the sixth round in 2016, graduated early from Illinois with a bachelor's degree in communication. He completed it in December 2014 but still had eligibility for football, so he enrolled in the recreation, sport, and tourism master's program.

That made two by the time the NFL called. During his rookie season, though, Karras learned that if he wanted to keep studying and go back to school, the NFL Players Association had programs that would help him do so.

"A little-known perk that no one seems to take advantage of is when you get an accredited season in this league you get \$20,000 worth of school a year," Karras said, sounding a bit incredulous that others don't do the same.

"It just seems to be that everyone keeps wanting to pay for my school, so I'm not going to turn it down."

Karras is working on degree No. 3. He enlisted fellow Patriots offensive lineman and 2016 draft classmate Joe Thuney to join him, and the two are pursuing MBAs through Indiana University. The NFLPA has a partnership with IU's Kelley School of Business that's designed to make it easy for players to study around their schedules.

Karras and Thuney started the program two weeks after the Super Bowl and took classes online, Skyping with professors, up until training camp. They're about a third of the way done. They share a guidance counselor, but they said they don't share notes with each other and they study separately.

"I take it pretty seriously," Karras said. "In the offseason I get up there in my room, read my business books."

The Patriots' resident brainiac takes some good-natured teasing from his linemates, some of whom have dubbed him "the most educated man in the 2016 draft."

Fellow lineman Cole Croston, who occupies the locker to the left of Karras, deadpans that there's no living with Karras now, as he's "always condescending" about his superior intellect.

Thuney, a starting left guard the Patriots drafted in the second round in 2016, might hang 'em up (his note-taking pens, that is) after the MBA. Thuney studied accounting and international studies at North Carolina State, and also had a Spanish minor he occasionally shows off in the locker room.

Karras will keep going. Next up, he wants to study anthropology.

"I like the study of human behavior," he said. "I think it's interesting. I like the MBA, it's just a little dry sometimes with the math stuff."

Though it's important to note, Karras said, that he did well in accounting, he prefers learning about the decision-making side of running a business. His favorite assignments were company profiles, where Karras chose to look at the business models of luxury car companies Audi and BMW.

"I learned a lot of aspects of analyzing a business that you wouldn't even think of. There's so much, it's so in-depth," Karras said.

After anthropology, he's thinking literature. That would be five. At that point, why not blitz for six? Karras says he's thinking five would be enough, but if it gets to that point he might change his mind.

"I'm not going to stop until they kick me out of the league and then hopefully by then I can get another one just based on how many years I've accrued," he said.

As long as Karras accrues three NFL seasons, he'll also be entitled to \$60,000 in tuition money after his football career is finished.

Karras isn't sure what he'll do with all the degrees, he'll figure that out later. Right now, he just wants to learn. Besides, Karras had enough business savvy before starting the MBA program to know that when something is free, you take it.

"I'm going to keep going," he said. "Since I've been playing football people have been paying for my school."

RB James White



There's Always This Year

By James White
September 29, 2017

As I stood there, I remember not being able to feel a single thing. Well, nerves. I felt the nerves. That's kind of unavoidable when you have that many people focusing on you.

That's never been what I'm about — getting attention. I'm someone who prides himself on just keeping his head down and putting in the work. But on a stage like this, with that many people watching, you can't just blend in.

I remember that it was really loud, but that the crowd's cheers were kind of muffled — all I could hear were my own racing thoughts, the biggest one being, Don't screw this up, man.

I looked to my right, searching for the only person whose strength could get me through the next few minutes. A guy who has been at the top of this business for years — decades even. A guy who's been on this stage so many times before and always handled it with ease.

Conan O'Brien.

So, the first thing you need to know about Conan is that he's absolutely huge. Like not just a huge celebrity or huge personality — like the guy is a really big human. And that's coming from me, an NFL player.

The other thing you should know about him is that he's just as funny — maybe even funnier — off camera as he is on it. After winning the Super Bowl in Houston last February, I was flown out to L.A. to appear on his show. I was kind of nervous — like I said, I'm not someone who really seeks out attention. But Conan loosened me up by cracking jokes backstage, and once we actually got started, it all felt pretty natural.

It was a pretty unbelievable way to cap off what was probably the best week of my life. Not just because I won a Super Bowl and appeared on a talk show and all that, but also because, for the first time since I started playing football, I had the spotlight solely on me.

That's something that had never happened before.

If you're reading this, you've probably heard the term running back by committee before.

I've been a member of crowded backfields for as long as I've been playing football. It began in eighth grade, when I was on the same team with this kid named Gareef Glashen. He must have run like a 4.2 or 4.3 forty-yard-dash. Well, probably not, but at that age it felt like it. Just the fastest kid alive. I thought I was pretty good, but I couldn't say I was better than him.

I started at St. Thomas Aquinas in Fort Lauderdale at the same time as another kid on the football team who ended up becoming one of my best friends. He also happened to play running back and his name was Gio.

Yeah, the one who plays for the Bengals, that Gio. Giovani Bernard.

He's still one of my best friends to this day, and in high school I think we were almost like brothers who pushed each other constantly to not be outdone by the other. We would line up in the backfield at the same time and both got a lot of experience catching passes back then. I don't think at the time we ever dreamed we'd both end up in the NFL doing the same thing. I mean, you don't really think that far ahead when you aren't even the clear-cut starter on your own team. But I think playing with someone as talented as Gio helped me learn how to put my ego aside. If I got down because Gio had a better game or got more carries, I probably would never have become the player I am today. I learned right away that you can't be envious of a teammate's success, because that's unproductive. I let Gio's success inspire me to do better, and, eventually, we both ended up getting where we needed to be.

That mentality of putting the team ahead of myself became very useful for me at Wisconsin, where there was no shortage of great running backs to share the backfield with. I don't know if I attract talent or what, but while I was in Madison I played with Montee Ball, John Clay and Melvin Gordon. It's not often that that many guys at the same position at the same school all end up in the NFL. But that's where the bar was set for us. I was surrounded by a lot of talent. Even though I was named the Big Ten freshman of the year, I ended up getting fewer carries my sophomore year because Montee was so electric that season. I'll admit it was a little discouraging, but, instead of quitting, I pushed myself to get on the field in other ways, even trying to block punts on special teams. I just wanted to help us win.

What I never fully realized back then was how great all of those experiences would be for me later on in my career. College players who don't get playing time early on can sometimes get discouraged and either quit or transfer. But I'm glad I had the experience I had at Wisconsin because I ended being drafted by an organization that not only discourages selfishness, it absolutely will not tolerate it. When you play for the Patriots, there's never any second-guessing what the goal is. There's no questioning your role or how you're used. You take direction, you practice and you execute.

That's how you win Super Bowls.

My first training camp as a rookie with New England, we were doing practice drills with the full team and I broke through for a long run.

The crowd watching started cheering, and I was feeling pretty good because it was one of the best plays I'd made all camp. I was a little winded, but I didn't want to miss any reps so I lined up for the next play. When the ball snapped, I started going right, then cut the ball back to my left and boom. I ran directly into a brick wall named Brandon Browner.

I could tell it was a big hit not just because of how it felt, but because immediately the crowd went from cheering to saying, Ooooooooooooooh.

Yeah, that sound usually means the defense won the play.

When I finally got back to my feet, I saw Coach Belichick walking towards me. I kind of figured he was going to tell me whatever I'd messed up. But when he got to me, he said kind of casually, in his voice that never really changes tone, "So one thing you'll learn: The bigger they are, the harder they hit." And then he walked away.

I still laugh about that.

What I learned pretty quickly after joining the Patriots was that the games are almost like a reward. During the actual games we're all just flying around and having fun. We go into every game knowing that the team we're playing against is going to try to give us their best shot. And there's no doubt that they practiced extra hard the week before to make sure they do. But as a team we never go into a game believing that the other team had a tougher week of practice than we did. That's because Coach Belichick demands the best out of you, and challenges you to give your best. It's honestly not for everyone. But if you want to be great, that's pretty much all you can ask for from a coach.

Both from a mental and physical standpoint, the way we prepare is so challenging that there's really nothing that can happen during the itself game that will make us panic. Even a 25-point deficit in the Super Bowl.

Like I said, in the past few months I've been asked about that game a lot. People want to know whether there was some sort of dramatic moment or speech that inspired our comeback. The truth is, during the course of the game itself, there weren't a lot of moments when I was really thinking about the fact that I was playing in the Super Bowl. Nobody on the team really had wide eyes. There was just focus.

There was no magic behind why we ended up coming back. Definitely some great plays from great players, but nothing we hadn't practiced or prepared for. Even when we were down, we all knew we had the opportunity to win the football game. Not because of luck, but because we felt like we were in control of the game based on our time of possession, even though we were behind on points. We knew the turnovers were killing us, but we aren't a team that usually turns the ball over, so that would be easy to fix. Also, we knew we had Tom Brady and having Tom Brady on your team means that you're always in the game.

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When we went into overtime and won the coin flip, I think that's when we all knew we had this thing. All the tough practices, the intense meetings, the crushing hits — all of those little moments added up to this big one. I don't think a single person who'd been through it all doubted we were ready for it.

Going into that game, based on our preparations, I had the sense I might have a big role, but obviously I didn't think that meant 14 catches or anything. I didn't get to play in the game when we went to the Super Bowl my rookie year, so this time around all I really hoped for was to make a meaningful contribution to the game.

That entire final drive, there was no pep talk or anything from Tom in the huddle. We didn't need that. The entire offense knew we just needed to follow his lead and we were going to take it down the field. From a player perspective, everything we do comes from Tom. When I first began with the Patriots, it was honestly almost weird being in the same locker room as him. You're accustomed to looking at him as an icon rather than a teammate. But he has a way of moving past that with everyone really quickly. He takes the time to really get to know all of us, especially the guys on the offense. That disarms you in a way, and when you see how selfless he is and how much he's focused on winning, of course you're inspired to operate the same way.

That entire drive in overtime, even though it was this humongous moment, there was never a time when it didn't seem like we were in control. And when our offense is in the zone like that, it's so fun being on the field with him because everything just clicks so seamlessly. The ball is there when it needs to get there, not before or after. If you're in the right spot and stick out your hands, that's a catch. I know there are a number of ways we could have won that game, but I'm always going to feel very humbled that I got the honor of putting us across the goal line for the last time to make us champions.

I think the most interesting thing is that when we finally did win, even though it was the sole focus of all of our preparation that year, for me it felt kind of... fake. Like I was in another dimension or something. I had all of these reporters circling around wanting to interview me. That's not something that's ever really happened before. That's not how it works when you're part of a committee. But on that day, after that game, the attention was on me and it felt weird as much as anything else.

In the days immediately following the Super Bowl, I got more attention than I'd ever received in my entire career combined up until that moment. It wasn't just going on Conan, but also talking to reporters, going on radio shows, even just walking on the street in Boston and having people recognize me and freak out. It was all very different. Not in a bad way. I guess it just really hit me that my performance in that one game — one of hundreds of football games I've played in my life — is going to be something some people will remember me by.

I can see how those who aren't prepared for the spotlight can get overwhelmed by it. I guess that's why I'm glad my entire life had prepared me for my moment.

No matter who you are, it's tough to win games in this league. But that's especially true when you're the defending champs and everybody is trying to take you down.

Coach Belichick tends to have a short memory when it comes to victories, but he always remembers the stuff we can improve. That's really the goal that pushes the organization forward, even more than playoff victories and Super Bowls. We want to try to achieve perfection every time we take the field, no matter who we're playing — even if it's against our own team in practice. And when that's your goal, the work never ends.

Still, it's pretty sweet to win a Super Bowl.

You know it's kind of funny, after we won last year, I had so many people mobbing me to get interviews that by the time I actually made it back to the locker room all my teammates had left the stadium to go celebrate somewhere else. It was honestly kind of a bummer to walk in there expecting a party and not see anyone. I think that's the only thing about the whole experience I might have changed. I really wish I could have celebrated right there with my teammates in the locker room after we won that game we worked so hard together to get to.

Well, I guess there's always this year.

DB Joejuan Williams

The Boston Globe

Patriots rookie Joejuan Williams has come a long way to make it to the NFL

By Nora Princiotti
July 23, 2019

NASHVILLE — It was the second night of the NFL Draft. Joejuan Williams, just selected as the No. 45 overall pick by the New England Patriots, hopped in a black sedan and snuck out of the downtown crowds flooding the streets of his hometown.

They drove west and pulled up in front of a dorm on the Vanderbilt campus. Williams unfolded his 6-foot-4-inch frame from the back seat, thanked the driver, and walked in.

He went to his friend Kalija Lipscomb's room, where a group was watching the draft. Without knocking, he opened the door and stuck his head, Patriots cap affixed to it, inside.

"Guess who?"

The guys in the room went crazy, jumping and hugging.

Back downtown, Williams's friend, coach, and mentor, Corey Phillips, saw the scene in the dorm room posted on Instagram. He showed Williams's agent, relieved, because Williams hadn't told everyone he was taking off when he left the green room. There was supposed to be a party in his honor starting soon.

That Williams wanted to go jump up and down in a dorm room with his best friends instead of going to a party surprised no one. But when you've had to jump over so many hurdles to get to this point, people worry.

Difficult start

Williams grew up with his mom, Stephanie Robertson, in Nashville public housing. His father wasn't in the picture, and Williams doesn't talk about him publicly except to say in a video produced by Vanderbilt that he knew his father was a very good football player in Tennessee and that he did give him one thing, a goal: "To be better than him in everything that I did in life."

Williams moved around so much he refers to places he "stayed" instead of places he lived. They were evicted multiple times. Violence and police presence were constants. One Christmas Eve, Williams went to sleep convinced he'd finally see a tree and presents the next morning because he'd seen red lights flashing outside his window.

But life hit its nadir in April 2010, when Robertson was arrested by an undercover police officer for selling crack cocaine. She was convicted and sentenced to 4½ years in prison. Williams and his older brother, Deontre, went to live with their grandmother.

"My kids saw a lot, they saw a whole lot of stuff that they weren't supposed to see at that age," Robertson said in the video. "That hurts me every day, I still think about it."

No one wants to get too deep into what that period of time was like for Williams. The basic facts are known, but the specifics — of where he was for the days after his mom's arrest when no one could find him, of what it really felt like to grow up without his dad, of how he and his brother made it work — he's only shared with a select few. Phillips, the high school coach turned Vanderbilt recruiting coordinator, has known Williams since he was a middle schooler and is like family. He knows the story. Vanderbilt head coach Derek Mason knows, too, from the nights when Williams was in college when he needed to talk and they'd just get in the car and drive. It's a small inner circle.

Williams can mask it with charisma, but he's an introvert. This is the guy who goes to the dorm room, not the draft party. He hates the idea that in telling his story his mom — his hero, the person who taught him to tackle in the streets outside their apartment and the first person he hugged after the call came from the Patriots — might come across as a villain instead of someone who struggled but fought.

"We've had a lot of low points, but through that she always tried to show her love for her kids," Williams said in the Vanderbilt video.

The story of his childhood is dramatic enough that it can eclipse everything else, that Williams loves *Call of Duty*, has worn the same pair of Vans sneakers basically every day for the past year and always keeps Skittles, Starbursts, Rips or gummy worms in his backpack. So he keeps it private. And yet, everybody wants to know. Phillips remembers once ahead of the draft, when the interview requests and feature stories were piling up, when Williams got frustrated.

"How many times am I going to tell how [crappy] my life was growing up," he asked.

Help from others

When Robertson went to prison, Williams was a middle schooler at Smithson Craighead Academy, a public charter school on the outskirts of the city. Many students were there because they'd had problems at other schools, so it wasn't the easiest place to stay on track, but Williams had some of the right people in his corner.

One was Maurice Fitzgerald, dean of students and head football coach. At this point, Williams was a round little tailback with average athleticism, but his coaches liked that he was smart and competitive. Fitzgerald kept him on the right path, got him working out with his son, Buck, who runs a training program, and connected him with Phillips who was then coaching at Father Ryan High School, a private school on a manicured campus just south of downtown that counts Tim McGraw and Faith Hill among its neighbors.

Father Ryan also has a very strong athletic program, and its head football coach, Bruce Lussier, was interested in a few students at Smithson Craighead. With some urging from Phillips and Maurice Fitzgerald, Williams was included in that group and was able to get a financial aid package. He matriculated as a freshman in 2012.

Williams was a gangly 5-10 as a high school freshman. He didn't play much, but he made friends quickly and soaked up new opportunities. Sometimes that masked the jealousy and the sense of unfairness he often felt meeting his new friends' families or visiting their homes, and the difficulty of the transition to Father Ryan.

There was one moment that sticks out to Phillips for two reasons. To understand its significance you need to understand one of the young coach's biggest rules: Never wear your pants below your waistline.

"If you're in my presence and you're sagging, we're going to have a bad misunderstanding and you know it," Phillips said.

So, when Phillips spotted Williams sagging one day just after Christmas break Williams's sophomore year, he immediately pointed it out to him. What he didn't realize until Williams yanked his trousers up was that they were several inches too short. He was growing fast, and he didn't have any others that fit.

Phillips was immediately mortified he'd singled out Williams. He went into "full-fledged panic mode."

"As an African-American kid at a private school that's predominantly white, I didn't want him to get made fun of," Phillips said.

Phillips went to Walmart and bought the biggest pair of pants he could find, size 34 x 36. When he saw them on Williams was when he realized Williams had grown at least two inches since he started at Father Ryan.

As Williams grew he became more coordinated, and word of the big cornerback from Nashville started to spread among college coaches. The summer after sophomore year was when the offers started rolling in. Williams was going to camps and standing out. Tennessee. Kentucky. Ole Miss. Auburn. Alabama. He had about a dozen offers before he was a junior.

That same summer, Phillips would bring Williams along when he worked out with an old friend, former NFL cornerback Cortland Finnegan. Williams was shy at first, barely spoke to Finnegan, and only watched the drills, but one day Finnegan got fed up with watching Williams stand there and yelled for him to jump in.

The workout was done 45 minutes later. Williams thanked Finnegan, gave him a hug, grabbed his things, and left. Finnegan walked right over to Phillips, stared him in the eye, and said "Whatever you do, don't [screw] that kid up. He's going to be a pro."

Williams made 48 tackles, 2 interceptions, and 11 pass breakups as a junior in 2014. All he had to do was choose a college. The phone was ringing off the hook. A few weeks before he had to decide, Williams posted a note on social media telling all the schools he needed some space and to give him a week to himself. Mason, from Vanderbilt, was one of the few who listened.

Mason and Williams, both raised by single mothers, had connected from the jump. Williams also loved Vanderbilt for the value of the education he knew he'd get there and for the chance to stay and play for his home city. He also knew that Mason had coached another big cornerback, Richard Sherman, at Stanford.

It was important to Williams that his college coach have a plan for him because his size was unusual for his position. He believes he's a cornerback at heart, at his best one-on-one against a No. 1 receiver, but some coaches felt he would outgrow the position.

"The word safety was almost like a cuss word, a four-letter word," said Buck Fitzgerald, Williams's trainer and the son of his middle school coach. "You don't go with the safeties, you do everything that the small guys do."

Williams knew Mason saw him as a corner. In high school, after Williams went through another growth spurt, Phillips consulted Mason on how to handle it.

"How did you get Richard to play with good pad level," Phillips texted.

"I stopped trying to make him look like the other kids," was Mason's response.

Williams chose Vanderbilt. Before he could get there, there was another hurdle. Robertson's sentence ended in October 2014. She was working to put things back together and moved her family for a job. Williams transferred to Hendersonville, a nearby public school that had a good football team. Then, the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association brought the hammer down because of a rule that states any student who transfers from a private

to a public school has to live at least 20 miles from the school they're transferring from. Williams's new home missed the cutoff by two-tenths of a mile. He was ineligible. He appealed, but it was denied. The second-ranked college football prospect in the state missed his senior football season because of the distance of three football fields.

"The whole thing was stupid," Buck Fitzgerald said. "It was just dumb."

It was a lonely time. Williams traded camaraderie and competition for solo hours in the weight room. He was still growing — Buck Fitzgerald eventually realized that the weeks when Williams seemed to trip over himself were the expression of growing pains, not poor focus — and never complained about missing football, even though he did.

"I'm sure it was tough and really dark, but again, if you didn't know you thought he was just fine, you know?" Buck Fitzgerald said. "I think he focused. When you've had to deal with as much as he did, I think you lock into what you want to lock into."

College years

At Vanderbilt, Williams played in every game as a true freshman and, by the end of the season, had worked himself into the team's primary cornerback rotation. His sophomore year, he started. That year against Georgia was when he gave up his first touchdown. Vanderbilt had beaten the Bulldogs the year before, but on their way to a national championship game appearance, Georgia got revenge, 45-14.

Williams was hardly the only player to lose a matchup in that game, but that didn't matter. He'd bit on a double move and had to watch the ball sail over his head. In the locker room he sobbed uncontrollably.

Phillips, who was hired to help with recruiting at Vanderbilt not long after Williams started there, was within earshot to hear Williams tell Mason he felt like he'd let him down.

"I knew in hearing him say that, this kid is chasing perfection," Phillips said. "He's not trying to be a good player, he's trying to be the best, most dominant player on the field."

Williams made the All-Southeastern Conference second team as a junior with four interceptions and 13 passes defended. He played mostly on the outside, but he'd travel to follow the best receivers in the SEC. Williams relished those matchups, walking into cornerbacks coach Terrence Brown's office first thing every Monday asking, "Who's next," before watching as much film as he could.

"I watch film like I watch 'Game of Thrones,'" Williams said after the draft.

Williams got serious about his body, too. There's still an indent on the right-side panel of his old Vanderbilt locker from where he stapled an index card with his weekly recovery routine. Normatec compression recovery device on Monday, cold tub Tuesday, extra lifts, massages, band work, and the rest.

The next step

Williams's draft process hit a snag when he ran a disappointing 4.64 40-yard dash at the combine, though he improved to 4.55 at his Pro Day. He weighed in at 211 pounds in Indianapolis, something Buck Fitzgerald thinks might have slowed him, but is back down around 205 now.

It didn't bother the Patriots. They showed so much interest in Williams before the draft — interest that included two private workouts and a five-hour meeting in Nashville with coach Bill Belichick — that some around him began to think it might be a smoke screen until they traded up from pick No. 56 to get him at No. 45.

Williams joins a loaded secondary in New England. Stephon Gilmore, J.C. Jackson, and Jason McCourty all figure in ahead of him on the depth chart, at least for now.

"He's a tremendously impressive kid," said Patriots director of player personnel Nick Caserio. "I would say he's very mature. He's a great person, which is important. It says a lot about him and the things he's endured throughout his life. But as a player, he's got some unique attributes that not a lot of players in that position have."

Phillips often says that Williams's life has been a sequence of "almost there" moments. He perseveres and progresses, only for life to throw another hurdle in his way. It's why the people around him worry easily. Old habits die hard, but Phillips said that when Williams walked across the stage and put on his Patriots cap, what he felt more than anything was relief. Finally, he could take the "almost" out of the equation.

It was apt that Williams's draft was held in Nashville. In the only place he's ever called home, Williams got where he was going.

DL Deatrich Wise, Jr.



Patriots rookie Deatrich Wise Jr. proving early to rise in NFL

Adam Kurkjian

Sunday, September 24, 2017

FOXBORO — With the evidence in hand, Brian Brazil made his case to the referees.

The coach of Hebron High in Carrollton, Texas, Brazil had just watched his team lose to Allen, 28-21, in 2011. What had Brazil up in arms was how his defensive end, Deatrich Wise Jr., fell victim to one hold after another without a single yellow flag thrown.

The explanation he received made it even worse.

"The game was over and I took (Wise's) jersey over to the official, and the jersey was completely ripped. It was torn to shreds. I took it to the officials after the game and said, 'Not one holding call. Did not call holding once, and I told you before the game (he would be held),' " Brazil recalled. "And they said, 'Coach, he's on the backside of the play.' And I said, 'Exactly. He runs everything down from the backside.' "

That didn't matter. The officials, despite acknowledging the fouls, believed Wise wasn't in position to make the plays and, thus, didn't see it as a violation.

"I guess (the holding) worked," Brazil said. "I had to get his jersey replaced because I couldn't use it after that game. It was totally shredded."

Wise said Thursday that game taught him a valuable lesson.

"High school is when I learned that refs never call a holding call," Wise said, "and I've kind of got to get used to it."

As Wise enters his third career NFL game this afternoon with the Houston Texans coming to Gillette Stadium, opposing offensive linemen have yet to keep him out of the backfield. Already with two sacks in two games, Wise has drawn an illegal hands to the face call, but no holding penalties yet.

He can see it, do it

All one must do to get a sense of how Wise can dominate at the point of attack is shake his hand. Not only does Wise have fingers that stretch out seemingly to the size of a catcher's mitt, but his grip can have a crushing effect. Those big, strong hands, combined with 35-plus-inch arm length, make for a daunting physical specimen. Brazil even theorized that the 6-foot-5, 270-pound Wise could have grown into an offensive tackle.

Wise's coach at the University of Arkansas, Bret Bielema, knows a thing or two about developing defensive linemen, having also coached fellow Pats defensive end Trey Flowers. Bielema said that while Wise's arm length is a strength, it's his skill that sets him apart.

"He's got tremendous eye-hand coordination, which allows him to make really quick decisions with his hands and it follows through on the field," Bielema said. "Some people can think all the right things, but they really can't do them. Deatrich has a unique ability to be able to see it and be able to do it."

Wise said he did not develop those techniques until his redshirt sophomore and junior years at Arkansas. However, at the beginning of his senior season, he broke his hand and had to deal with an AC joint injury in his shoulder. His production dropped significantly, as he made eight sacks and 10.5 tackles for loss in 2015 and just 3.5 and 5.5 his final year.

Bielema said that was “100 percent” due to injury.

It did not scare off the Patriots, as they drafted Wise in the fourth round with the 131st overall pick. But Wise's injury woes were not over.

Focus firmly on field

While success in training camp practices can be taken with a grain of salt, Wise had plenty of it in early individual and team drills. But against the Jacksonville Jaguars in the first preseason game, Wise suffered a concussion. He went through the protocol and did not again play until the season opener against the Kansas City Chiefs.

Another injury might bring a “here we go again” feeling to some, but Wise said that was not the case.

“I actually didn’t have that thought,” Wise said. “I’d been through so much in college, I just remained positive saying that this too shall pass. I was going to keep studying film every week. I was studying O-line tape with the guys . . . and keeping my mind in the game even though my body wasn’t in the game. I’ve been down before, but I wasn’t out. So I knew I was going to come back.”

When he did, he made an immediate impact. Wise had a sack and five quarterback hits in the team’s 36-20 win over the New Orleans Saints last week. He looked basically like the player observers raved about in camp.

And Bielema thinks better days lie ahead.

“The thing about (Wise) is he’s just really long,” said Bielema, who deems Wise as strong a pass rusher as he’s ever coached. “He’s got a long torso. . . . Those guys take some time to develop. . . . I don’t think he’s even scratching the surface of what he can be.”

Wise, too, knows he can get better.

“Everybody’s giving me praise right now,” Wise said, “but I’m staying focused because I have a long way to go.”

But, as Brazil noted, the present isn’t too shabby, either.

“I mean, two games, two sacks, I think that’s a pretty good start to his career.”

Maybe when opponents are forced to hold Wise so much they rip his jersey off, people — and officials — will know he’s hit that next level.
