



**2026 NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS
SEASON PREVIEW**

MVP OR BUST

**Facing a much tougher
schedule and higher
expectations, the
Patriots will need
Drake Maye to be
even better in 2026**

JULIO CORTEZ/AP

Friday, September 4, 2026



*A special publication of The Eagle-Tribune, The Salem News,
The Daily News of Newburyport and the Gloucester Daily Times*



AP PHOTO

Drake Maye's back, and so are the Patriots. How they recover from an embarrassing Super Bowl loss — with a much tougher schedule than in 2025 — will depend a great deal on the play of their third-year quarterback.

2026 NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS SEASON PREVIEW

REVISITING A SUPER LETDOWN

Bill Burt column on Super Bowl disappointment. Is rebound coming? *Pages 4-5*

A BIGGER CHALLENGE

Patriots schedule again topic of discussion in 2026, by Bill Burt. *Page 10.*

NEXT LEVEL

Drake Maye needs better MVP effort in 2026, by Hector Longo. *Page 6*

THEY'RE THE KEY

Five Pats under microscope, by Bill Burt. *Page 13.*

BEST TO WORST

Hector Longo ranks all of the 32 teams, top to bottom, with surprise Super Bowl pick. *Pages 8-9*

DYNAMIC DUO

Two-headed Backfield: Pats strength might be backs Stevenson and Henderson, by Hector Longo. *Page 15*

Here's to
another
GREAT
season
in New
England!!



INDEPENDENTLY OWNED & FAMILY OPERATED

Since 1979

BROADWAY
TIRE PROS

(978) 682-0000

456 BROADWAY, LAWRENCE, MA

BROADWAYTIRE-AUTO.COM

ROAD HAZARD
WARRANTY AVAILABLE!

\$10 PER TIRE

**BROADWAY
TIRE PROS**

(978) 682-0000

456 Broadway, Lawrence, MA 01841

Coupon must be presented at time of service.

COMPUTERIZED
ALIGNMENT & BALANCE

\$129.99

INCLUDES: FRONT CASTER, CAMBER, AND TOE SET TO MANUFACTURER'S SPEC (WHERE APPLICABLE) REFERENCE AND COMPENSATION FOR ADJUSTMENT OF THRUST LINE (DEPENDENT ON ALIGNMENT TYPE)

**BROADWAY
TIRE PROS**

(978) 682-0000

456 Broadway, Lawrence, MA 01841

Coupon must be presented at time of service.

STATE LINE PET SUPPLY



\$5 OFF*

STATE LINE PET



PLAISTOW, NH

Any Purchase of
\$30 or more

Online Code: CTM5

*Limit one coupon per customer. Excludes Foods. Expires 9/14/26

\$15 OFF*

STATE LINE PET



PLAISTOW, NH

Any Purchase of
\$75 or more

Online Code: CTM15

*Limit one coupon per customer. Excludes Foods. Expires 9/14/26

\$25 OFF*

STATE LINE PET



PLAISTOW, NH

Any Purchase of
\$125 or more

Online Code: CTM25

*Limit one coupon per customer. Excludes Foods. Expires 9/14/26

STATE LINE PET



PLAISTOW, NH

www.statelinepetsupply.com

Guaranteed Lowest Prices & Extra Savings Everyday!



137 Plaistow Rd (Route 125) Plaistow, NH



Store Hours:

Mon-Sat 9am-9pm, Sun 9am-6pm

*We reserve the right to limited quantities. *Cannot be combined with other offers. *Cannot be used on prior purchases. *While Supplies Last

Rehashing Super Bowl season without super ending

Bill Burt



I don't mean to start the 2026 season preview on a negative note, but now is a better time than ever

to discuss a topic we never really talked about or truly researched last February.

The New England Patriots performance in Super Bowl XL in Santa Clara, Calif.

It was abysmal.

Other than a late fourth quarter surge by Drake Maye, it looked a lot like the 1985 Chicago Bears' burial – 46-10 – of the Patriots in New Orleans.

That Bears team was a little different. They were cocky and iconic. And it was obvious about 10 minutes into the game that the



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Drake Maye had one of his worst games when it mattered most in last February's 29-13 Super Bowl loss to the Seattle Seahawks. It was a game, says Bill Burt, that never really was rehashed like it should have been.

Patriots weren't going to move the ball ... ever ... that game.

The Seahawks' thrashing of the Patriots, 29-13, was more frustrating

before turning into embarrassment.

The Seahawks, like the

The media in particular — glazed over the worst 60 minutes of big-time football the Patriots had played in 40 years

Patriots, weren't supposed to be in Santa Clara from the get-go in 2025. The Rams, 49ers, Bills and Broncos, among others, were better in September and some would argue in January.

They were good, but ... meh!

Yet, the Patriots, with two weeks to prepare, couldn't move the ball when it mattered and couldn't stop eventual the MVP, running back Kenneth Walker III (27 rushes, 139 yards) when it mattered.

Talk about a frustrating

game.

While the Patriots defense wasn't bad, keeping the score semi-close, Walker's big runs were the story of the game.

Mike Vrabel and Drake Maye were not good, as many people predicted due to the Patriots weaker than weak schedule.

While the Seahawks defense was no slouch, ranked No. 1 in the NFL in points allowed (17.2), the Patriots found ways against three top five defenses – Houston, Denver and L.A. Chargers were first, second and fifth respectively in fewest yards allowed – to get to Santa Clara.

But there were no memorable adjustments by Vrabel, offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels or Maye. None.

The Patriots were going against a decent quarterback who had a career year in Sam Darnold, but never forced that big mistake that

Work with the best. Ron was named to the top 10% of BHHS agents nationwide.

TOP 10% OF THE NETWORK
LEADING EDGE SOCIETY

Your FOREVER AgentSM

Ron Supino, REALTOR®
Direct: 978.590.1628
ron.supino@commonmoves.com
Stay Connected: @ronsupinosells

BERKSHIRE HATHAWAY HOMESERVICES

BUYING OR SELLING A HOME?
Call Ron Today!

978.590.1628

BERKSHIRE HATHAWAY
HOMESERVICES
COMMONWEALTH REAL ESTATE

26 Main Street, Lynnfield, MA 01940 | Office: 781.246.2100

has followed his career since drafted third overall by the Jets in 2018.

But guess what? That Super Bowl loss was never really analyzed; the failings in particular by the guys that were put on a pedestal the week before.

Instead, almost instantly after that loss, the narrative shifted to the improbable season; the worst to first run; the near-MVP season; the Vrabel touch, etc.

Almost to a man in the locker room after the loss, it was “chin up,” “we shocked the world for five months,” and “our future is really bright.”

We — the media in particular — glazed over the worst 60 minutes of big-time football the Patriots had played in 40 years, with the estimated 125 million world-wide viewers that tuned in.

The Patriots were flat, particularly on offense, and never provided a spark that things were going to get better that beautiful February Sunday in Santa Clara.

Maye was the leading

culprit. After one of the most accurate passing seasons in NFL history, Maye was off. And, if we're being honest, he was off the previous three playoff games.

While he made plays in those playoff tilts — three memorable TD passes against the Texans and a huge third-down conversion run in the snow to literally finish off the Broncos — there wasn't anything memorable until the game was over.

The offseason didn't get off to a great start either with the Vrabel “scandal” related to his relationship with TV football journalist Dianna Russini.

It was a few months of ugliness surrounding the Patriots coach and his decision-making off the field.

In fact, “decision-making” off the field was a topic he brought up often since the day he was hired.

It appears that Vrabel has his juice back; that he and his players have each other's backs. But that's easier said than done.

And Maye, who went through a lot in the play-offs, even possibly an injury to his throwing shoulder that could break a weaker man. He heard negativity unlike anything he had ever dealt with as an athlete. Welcome to the big-time, right?

The 2026 season has a lot of hope. The Patriots are better in a few areas, more explosive with what appears to be a top five offense and proven wide receiver room headlined by newbies A.J. Brown (Eagles) and Romeo Dobbs (Packers).

Losing a Super Bowl is oftentimes more painful the next season. History, outside of Bill Belichick's Patriots which lost in 2017 but returned to win it all in 2018, shows it takes a year-plus to lick the wounds from a February loss.

And that loss last February was uglier than most. Anything less than Vrabel's or Maye's best and history will probably repeat itself.

You can email Bill Burt at bburt@northofboston.com.

GO PATS!



Jen Hamilton

REALTOR

508-954-7941



Bus: 978-475-2111

jennifer.bower9@comcast.net

jenhamilton.kw.com

138 River Road, Suite 107

Andover, MA 01810

kw

KELLER WILLIAMS REALTY

Go Pats!



Get Your Faves Faster



Ronald McDonald House

YOUR LOCAL McDONALD'S:

660 Chickering Road, North Andover, MA

155 Newburyport Turnpike, Rowley, MA

150 Canal Street, Salem, MA

210 Andover St., North Shore Mall, Peabody, MA

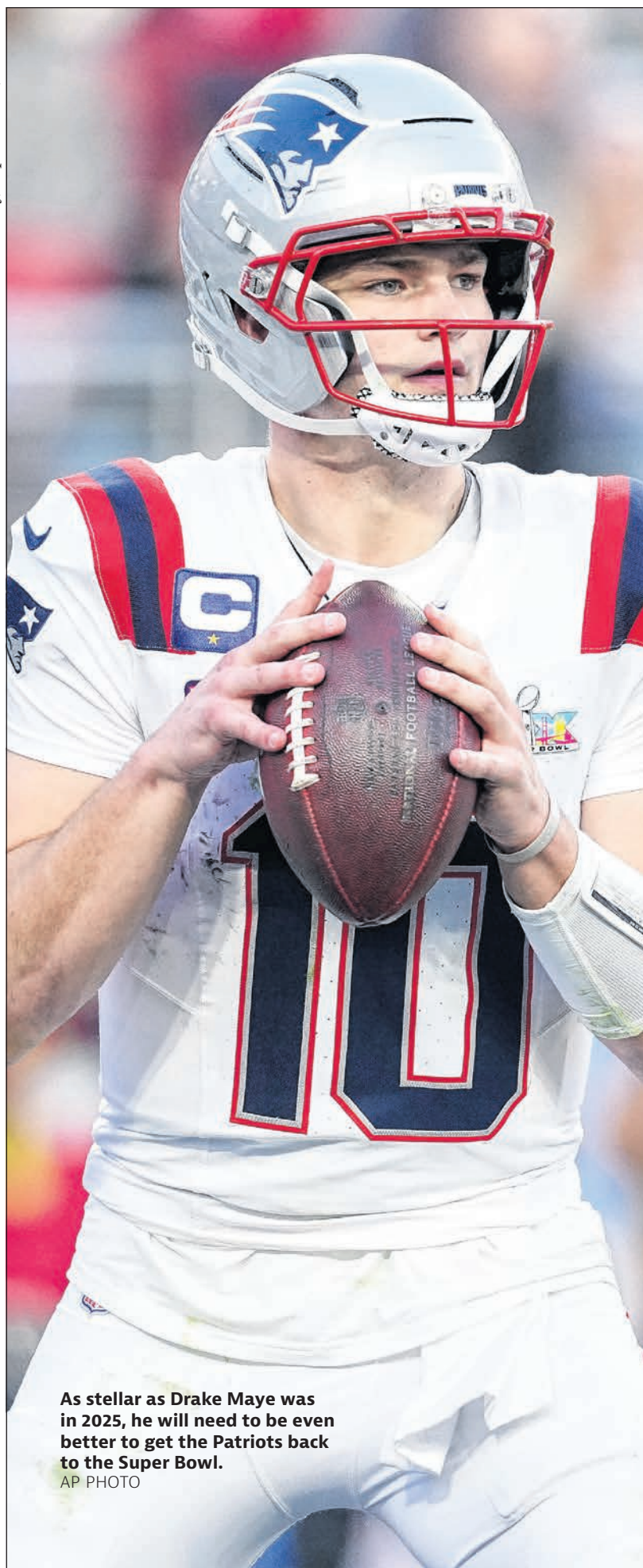
40 Enon Street, Beverly, MA

77 Hight Street, Danvers, MA

50 Maplewood Avenue, Gloucester, MA

567 Lynnway, Lynn, MA (Opening in November)

781 Lynnway - Walmart, Lynn, MA



As stellar as Drake Maye was in 2025, he will need to be even better to get the Patriots back to the Super Bowl.

AP PHOTO

Magnificent Maye

Late January run is on his shoulders

By Hector Longo

» sports@eagletribune.com

FOXBOROUGH — The preseason plaudits for Drake Maye here at New England Patriots training camp have been off the charts.

Maye has accepted and delivered in the leadership role of the organization.

He's more polished and more demonstrative with his teams in his third season.

The North Carolina product looks stronger and more poised in the pocket. He's making all the throws look easy.

And yes, it is Maye's second season in Josh McDaniels system. He knows more has a firmer grasp of things and simply understands the concepts.

All that is great. But if the No. 3 pick in the 2024 National Football League doesn't raise his game to the highest levels — MVP type levels — in 2026, the Patriots could be in for a shock or two.

Against this schedule, Drake has to deliver.

Throwing 31 TDs to just eight interceptions, Maye crept to the top of the MVP conversation, settling for second behind the Rams' Matthew Stafford.

That performance, including the phenomenal .720 completion percentage, comes with a bit of an asterisk — maybe two.

First off, it came against one of the most historically weak schedules of all time in the NFL. And second, in the playoffs in a run against "not the best" opposition, Maye was sacked 21 times, fumbled seven times and threw four interceptions, all in just four playoff games.

There is plenty to do here.

"Obviously (the postseason and losing in the Super Bowl) stings, but I don't think it's very hard (to bounce back) because you're still hungry," said Maye. "I think you got something to chase, and I think that's one of the best things about experiencing it. Obviously

Maye Is Not Alone in 2026

The prized picks in the 2024 National Football League Draft — No. 1 Caleb Williams of the Bears, No. 2 Jayden Daniels of the Commanders, and No. 3 Drake Maye of the New England Patriots — stand in very similar predicaments in 2026, their third NFL seasons.

All three have plenty yet to prove.

Williams — After a rather ho-hum rookie year, he grew into a man of many miracles, leading Chicago into the playoffs and falling just short of a shocker in the Divisional round, falling in overtime to the Rams.

Daniels — As a rookie, he completely turned the Commanders around, reaching the 2024 NFC Championship game. He fell on hard times last year, oft-injured and playing hurt, and Washington suffered.

Maye — Turned the Patriots around from 4-13 to 14-2 in 2025, but that came against a very questionable schedule.

All three face the question. Can they rise to the top of the NFL's elite? We will find out in 2026.



Chicago Bears quarterback Caleb Williams.



CHARLES KRUPA — AP

Drake Maye signs autographs after the team's training camp.

not getting to where we wanted and finishing off how we wanted, but you experienced it, know what it's like and know what it takes to get there. And we got to be even better because, our standard from last year, if we just play the same way, we won't make it there."

Patriots management has done all it could to eliminate potential excuses.

Maye's top target in 2025, Stefon Diggs, gave the franchise what it needed last year, stability in an unstable group. Now they need and want more.

Mike Vrabel & Co. went out and signed Romeo Doubs away from the Packers, catching a lot

of people off guard and then dealt for one of the game's best in Philadelphia's A.J. Brown.

Message sent.

That same offensive line that was ravaged in the playoffs got an influx of talent with the signing of free-agent guard Alijah Vera-Tucker and the second straight offensive tackle taken in the first round of the draft — Caleb Lomua out of Utah.

It's on Maye now, and he's relying on a familiar force to help him through: coordinator McDaniels. Year two should be one of growth for the duo.

"I think it's great to have Coach McDaniels, who knows this offense at the best of the best. I think one of the coolest things is when I have questions or when I feel like there are problems, he always has a clip to explain why those are the answers or a reasoning behind it," said Maye.

"I think that's really cool for me, who is inquisitive and loves to ask questions and understand why we do things," added Maye. "To have someone who always has answers, knows what could come up before it comes up — that's one of the best things for me."

GO PATS

SERVING ALL YOUR PLUMBING, HEATING AND COOLING NEEDS

\$50 OFF
ANY SERVICE CALL

LIMIT ONE PER CUSTOMER, CAN NOT BE USED WITH ANY OTHER DISCOUNTS
DOES NOT APPLY TO BOILER CLEANINGS
EXPIRATION DATE 9/30/26



(978) 689-8336 • office@giard.plumbing

MA License# 10301

Owned and Operated by Tim & Jeremy Giard

NH License# 4444

HECTOR LONGO RANKS THE NFL TEAMS FROM 1ST TO 32ND

Rams loaded and won't be stopped

On Pro Football

Hector Longo

When the Seattle Seahawks won the Super Bowl last February, it continued the shift of power in the National Football League to the west.

That will not change in this fall.

Four of the top five teams in football – as we see them – compete in either the AFC or NFC West, and it says here when the dust settles in Super Bowl LXI, it will be the Los Angeles Rams reigning supreme on their home turf, this time against a resurgent Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs.

Here's a look at our rankings in 2026.

1. LOS ANGELES RAMS (14-3)

Why They'll Win: They've put together an absolute powerhouse around MVP Matthew Stafford. The stars align and coach Sean McVay earns his spot among the all-time greats.

Why They Won't: The tumult of Puka Nacua's offseason combines with the bad "Cleveland" vibes that Myles Garrett brings to town. Also, Stafford and Davante Adams finally show their age.

2026 Season Theme: The time to win is now.

2. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS (13-4)

Why They'll Win: Patrick Mahomes overcomes the torn ACL and returns to vintage form.

Why They Won't: Mahomes is coming off two less than stellar seasons. Perhaps, this is a trend and the knee just speeds up the decline.

2026 Season Theme: Win one for (retiring) Travis Kelce.

3. BUFFALO BILLS (13-4)

Why They'll Win: Josh Allen remains the best quarterback



BEN VANHOUTEN/AP

With regining MVP Matthew Stafford leading the way at quarterback, the Rams look like an unbeatable powerhouse.

in the game and won't be derailed by the worst game manager in NFL coaching history.

Why They Won't: Doesn't it take a little time for a new coach to establish himself? and do you really trust Joe Brady?

2026 Season Theme: Sean McDermott absolutely killed us.

4. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS (13-4)

Why They'll Win: QB Sam Darnold holds it together, and a dynasty is hatched.

Why They Won't: They let Kenneth Walker walk to KC. Did nobody watch the Super Bowl?

2026 Season Theme: Win one for injured ex-North Andover resident Jake Bobo!

5. DENVER BRONCOS (12-5)

Why They'll Win: It is the best complete roster in the AFC, and Bo Nix continues his climb up the QB charts.

Why They Won't: We all watched Nix at Auburn. At some point, he turns into a pumpkin, right?

2026 Season Theme: Just win but don't celebrate.

6. DETROIT LIONS (12-5)

Why They'll Win: When this Lions offense gets cooking on that Ford Field turf, it's pure greatness. Also, Aidan Hutchinson repeats a monster 2025 campaign at edge rusher.

Why They Won't: Doubt about Dan Campbell began creeping in during the 2025



CHARLIE RIEDEL — AP

How well quarterback Patrick Mahomes bounces back from an ACL injury will go a long way in determining the Chiefs' fate in 2026.

campaign. A slow start could blow the locker-room apart.

2026 Season Theme: Let's win one for the late Danny Ventura, a Lions super fan if there ever was one.

7. CHICAGO BEARS (11-6)

Why They'll Win: Caleb Williams was the No. 1 overall pick in the 2024 NFL Draft, and he claims the top spot in the class over Drake Maye and Jayden Daniels with an MVP-like season.

Why They Won't: The receivers scare me. D.J. Moore is gone to Buffalo, and Luther Burden has battle soft-tissue injuries in training camp.

2026 Season Theme: Caleb is the real deal.

8. WASHINGTON COMMANDERS (11-6)

Why They'll Win: Two words. Stefon Diggs. His presence in the wide receiver room means that Terry McLaurin can't be triple-covered like he has been the last couple years. This offense is ready to erupt.

Why They Won't: QB Jayden Daniels just puts his body in jeopardy way too much.

2026 Season Theme: Keep the QB upright at all cost.

9. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS (10-7)

Why They'll Win: Liam Coen is the first decent head coach since Tom Coughlin exited Duval County in 2002. No, don't give me Jack Del Rio either.

Why They Won't: If you had to win a game against a real team, do you trust QB Trevor Lawrence?

2026 Season Theme: Back to back AFC South titles or bust.

10. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS (10-7)

Why They'll Win: Realizing how he wilts in the post-season, Kyle Shanahan has coached this team to 10 wins or more in four of the last five seasons.

Why They Won't: The power lines over the practice field take their toll again, and everybody gets hurt.

2026 Season Theme: Please watch your step.

11. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS (10-7)

Why They'll Win: Drake Maye moves into the elite of the elite with Allen, Stafford and Mahomes. No, he's not there yet.

Why They Won't: The offensive line is as thin as it gets. One injury could leave Maye running for his life as it did in last year's playoffs.

2026 Season Theme: If we get to opposing QBs and protect Drake, seventh banner a possibility.

12. HOUSTON TEXANS (10-7)

Why They'll Win: C.J. Stroud climbs off the canvas at the count of nine and figures out that, yeah, he's a pretty decent NFL QB with one of the best receivers in football (Nico Collins) and the best defense in football.

Why They Won't: Stroud's 2025 playoff implosion was a mortal wound to his NFL career.

2026 Season Theme: You had better account for Will Anderson and Danielle Hunter or they will rip your quarterback's nose off.

13. PHILADELPHIA EAGLES (10-7)

Why They'll Win: They are the NFL's best team in the trenches, both offensively and defensively.

Why They Won't: Life without A.J. Brown severely shackles not just QB Jalen Hurts but also running back Saquon Barkley.

2026 Season Theme: We brought the right Brown (Jaylen) to town and dumped the right one (A.J.).

14. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS (10-7)

Why They'll Win: Please don't read the seven previous times we've done this, because it's been the same response every year – QB Justin Herbert finally wakes up.

Why They Won't: Jim Harbaugh (0-2 in the playoffs since 2013) isn't the savior Chargers fans think he is.

2026 Season Theme: Two healthy tackles is better than no healthy tackles.

15. NEW ORLEANS SAINTS (9-8)

Why They'll Win: Explosive offense on a carpet in a truly mediocre division. QB Tyler Shough opened some eyes a year ago. Chris Olave is a bigtime talent at receiver, and Travis Etienne adds explosiveness in the run game.

Why They Won't: Young QBs like Shough often take a step backward in Year 2 before taking that next jump.

2026 Season Theme: We don't have to be good, just the best of a mediocre lot.

16. CINCINNATI BENGALS (9-8)

Why They'll Win: Speaking of mediocre, the AFC North is going to be a quagmire. If Joe Burrow stays healthy, he's the best passer in the division by miles.

Why They Won't: In just 77 starts, Burrow has been sacked 213 times, and that trend does not look like it's slowing down any time soon.

2026 Season Theme: Seriously, somebody please block someone.

Hector Longo's Playoff Predictions

WILD CARD WEEKEND

AFC

Bills over Texans
Jaguars over Patriots
Broncos over Bengals
Bye: Chiefs

NFC

Eagles over Lions
Commanders over Niners
Bears over Saints
Bye: Rams

DIVISIONAL WEEKEND

AFC

Chiefs over Broncos
Bills over Jaguars
NFC

Rams over Eagles
Bears over Commanders

CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIPS

AFC: Chiefs over Bills
NFC: Rams over Bears

SUPER BOWL LXI

Rams over Chiefs

17. GREEN BAY PACKERS (9-8)

Why They'll Win: They survive over the first month-plus of the season, and Micah Parsons' recovery from ACL surgery is ahead of schedule.

Why They Won't: QB Jordan Love realizes how much not having Romeo Doubs around anymore hurts.

2026 Season Theme: We've fallen to No. 3 in the division, and we can't get up.

18. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS (9-8)

Why They'll Win: Running back Jonathan Taylor is a lethal weapon, receiver Alec Pierce finds a way to stay on the field, and QB Daniel Jones assumes the game manager role to perfection.

Why They Won't: The AFC South is no slouch, and the Indianapolis defense can't be trusted.

2026 Season Theme: Don't let the window close on Jonathan Taylor's career without doing some damage.

19. CAROLINA PANTHERS (8-9)

Why They'll Win: Bryce Young's 2025 season was not a mirage.

Why They Won't: Since 2017 when they went 11-5 with



Will rookie Raiders quarterback Fernando Mendoza watch and learn behind Kirk Cousins this year? Or will the team put him on the field before he's ready?



In Nico Collins (12), the Texans and C.J. Stroud have one of the best receivers in the NFL.

Cam Newton, the Panthers are 44-89.

2026 Season Theme: Will somebody please believe in us?

20. BALTIMORE RAVENS (8-9)

Why They'll Win: Derrick Henry, in his 11th pro season, continues to defy running back logic, while the game's best-kept QB/receiver combo of Lamar Jackson and Zay Flowers forces the NFL to pay attention.

Why They Won't: They don't realize that John Harbaugh was not the problem, he was the solution.

2026 Season Theme: We're not your father's Ravens.

21. DALLAS COWBOYS (8-9)

Why They'll Win: Somebody in Big D figures out how to

hold opponents under 30 points a night.

Why They Won't: Somewhere along the way – pretty much right after signing his \$240 million deal – Dak Prescott decided it was OK to regularly throw the football to the other team.

2026 Season Theme: We don't miss Micah Parsons. No, seriously, we don't. Why don't you believe us?

22. ATLANTA FALCONS (7-10)

Why They'll Win: Whoever wins the battle of QB lefties — Michael Penix or Tua Tagovailoa — will be blessed with an amazing array of offensive weapons with which he can work.

Why They Won't: The worst thing that could have happened to the Falcons was the emergence of Kyle Pitts. It

meant fewer touches for Bijan Robinson. And that's not a good thing.

2026 Season Theme: When you have two starting quarterbacks, you have no starting quarterbacks.

23. ARIZONA CARDINALS (7-10)

Why They'll Win: The desert is not an easy place to play, and Arizona could give defensive coordinator's fits with its many offensive options.

Why They Won't: They're the fourth team – by a long margin – in the most dynamic division in football.

2026 Season Theme: We believe in Jacoby Brissett, just not enough to give him a real contract.

24. NEW YORK JETS (7-10)

Why They'll Win: So, you get two gimmes with the Dolphins and play a fourth-place schedule. That has to be worth something, right?

Why They Won't: Coach Aaron Glenn might be sitting on the hottest seat in the game. Rumors have New York already tossing feelers out to Mike Tomlin.

2026 Season Theme: We're better than you all think.

25. MINNESOTA VIKINGS (5-12)

Why They'll Win: Justin Jefferson deserves it.

Why They Won't: Can you believe they are going to war with JJ McCarthy and Kyler Murray?

2026 Season Theme: We can rebuild Kyler Murray. We swear.

26. TENNESSEE TITANS (5-12)

Why They'll Win: Coach Robert Saleh has to be better than just a guy who led the Jets to back-to-back seven-win seasons.

Why They Won't: The quarterback position matters in football, and the Titans haven't had one since the late Steve McNair left in 2005.

2026 Season Theme: Time to rebuild. Again.

27. PITTSBURGH STEELERS (5-12)

Why They'll Win: Aaron Rodgers has been "immunized" and is ready to roll at age 42.

Why They Won't: Rodgers was washed up in 2019.

2026 Season Theme: It was all Mike Tomlin's fault.

28. TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS (5-12)

Why They'll Win: Baker Mayfield overcomes the offseason anger after an insulting contract offer from the team.

Why They Won't: The trademark defense aged out, leaving Tampa with Vita Vea, Antoine Winfield and a slew of question marks.

2026 Season Theme: If Baker is at his best, we can compete.

29. NEW YORK GIANTS (4-13)

Why They'll Win: John Harbaugh can coach them up.

Why They Won't: Too many question marks on both sides of the football.

2026 Season Theme: If Jason Dart can play and both Cam Skattebo and Malik Nabers come back from devastating injuries, we could be OK.

30. CLEVELAND BROWNS (3-14)

Why They'll Win: They won't.

Why They Won't: Bad coach (Todd Monken) being forced to play a character-barren quarterback (Deshaun Watson) with a guaranteed \$230 million contract.

2026 Season Theme: So what if we are 1-3 in the playoffs since Bill Belichick was our coach in the mid-1990s.

31. LAS VEGAS RAIDERS (3-14)

Why They'll Win: They stick with Kirk Cousin at QB and let him do his thing – win meaningless games against mid-pack opponents.

Why They Won't: You know they are going to force rookie QB Fernando Mendoza onto the field before he is ready.

2026 Season Theme: Back-to-back No. 1 overall picks is not a bad thing.

32. MIAMI DOLPHINS (2-15)

Why They'll Win: No chance. Zero. Nada. None.

Why They Won't: Too many reasons to list here.

2026 Season Theme: Please be the real thing Arch Manning. We beg of you.



TreVeyon Henderson heads upfield against the Las Vegas Raiders in 2025. TIM JEAN/Staff photo



Patriots running back Rhamondre Stevenson (38) finds an opening against the Miami Dolphins last year. JAIME CAMPOS

SLEEPER STRENGTH

Pats two-headed rushing monster among NFL's best

By Hector Longo
» sports@northofboston.com

FOXBOROUGH – Together, they combined for over 2,000 yards of offense in 2025.

Put those numbers up with any running tandem in the National Football League.

The backfield partnership of Rhamondre Stevenson and TreVeyon Henderson worked out pretty darn well for the AFC champion New England Patriots in 2025.

In fact, if you look around the NFL this fall, is there another duo you would lie to have instead?

Perhaps, the best in the game is the Rams' pair of Kyren Williams and Blake Corum. You might like

Jahmyr Gibbs and former Chief Isaiah Pacheco in Detroit.

The Robinson boys – Bijan and Brian – in Atlanta? Or maybe D'Andre Swift and Kyle Monangai in Chicago?

New England's Stevenson and Henderson reside in the same elite neighborhood.

"I think (we complement each other) really well. We saw it a little bit last year and even this year, us competing each and every day and just feeding off each other," said Henderson, the explosive second-year man out of Ohio State. "I'm just excited to continue to play alongside of him."

Stevenson, heading into his sixth pro season in New England, is coming off a tale of two seasons.

STEVENSON AND HENDERSON: BY THE NUMBERS IN 2025

Player	Rushes	Yards	TDs	Catches	Yards	TDs
TreVeyon Henderson	180	911	9	35	221	1
Rhamondre Stevenson	130	603	7	32	345	2
Combined	310	1,514	16	67	566	3

Both guys came into training camp this summer with something to prove.

Three early fumbles in 2025 drew the ire of the Patriots football community.

Stevenson, after missing three games in Weeks 9-11 with an injury, returned and played the best football of his life down the stretch. He averaged 6.9 yards a carry over the final seven games of the season.

Henderson showed

big-play capabilities with every touch. Yes, there were rookie mistakes — too many missed opportunities and short gains. But the high-lights are there.

Both guys came into training camp this summer with something to prove.

"I feel great, probably one of my healthier training camps I would say," said

Stevenson. "My body feels fresh. I've been proactive in the training room, just trying to stay ahead of it."

And Henderson has noticed the work. He's feeding off it.

"I think in every aspect of my game, I'm just continuing to grow," he said. "Nothing is guaranteed. Nothing is promised. I'm just trying to be my best every day."

And the backs were rewarded in the offseason with the gift that keeps for

runners, a full-time full-back, when Reggie Gilliam was signed out of Buffalo.

Gilliam has been a willing lead blocker all summer.

"Reggie comes to work each and every day, working his tail off, looking to get better, competing his tail off. It's been great," said Henderson.

And the former Bills bulldozer, who only played limited downs in Buffalo in front of James Cook likes what he sees here at Gillette Stadium.

"We're all pretty much on the same page. I just know TreVeyon is a little faster and Rhamondre is a little more patient. So, it's just knowing who is in the game behind you," said Gilliam. "The scheme is the scheme."

DANVERS: 182 North Street, 978-777-3000 • NEWBURY: 2 Morgan Ave., 978-463-3001

LET US CATER YOUR NEXT FAMILY OR COMPANY PARTY

Open 7 days a week: Sun.-Sat. 9 a.m.-7 p.m.

ADD SOME FLAVOR TO THE GAME!

FAMOUS MARINADES

Sirloin Tips | Boneless Chicken
Boneless Pork | Wings & Thighs

NEW SEASONED STEAKS

Seasoned with Montreal Seasoning
Available in All Cuts

BEER & WINE

A Great Selection of Beer & Wine
to Complement Our Food Items

PREPARED FOODS

Salads | Soups | Quiche
Dips | Desserts

MEATS

Full Line of Packaged &
Custom-Cut Meats

PRODUCE

Expanded Produce
Department



The
BUTCHERY

The Difference is Delicious

www.danversbutchery.com



**BATH
FITTER®**

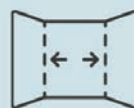
FITS YOUR *standards*

When high quality is the only quality that matters, we fit your standards. Our high-gloss, custom-crafted baths and showers are backed by a lifetime guarantee. Why have over two million people brought Bath Fitter into their homes? *It Just Fits.*

OUR BENEFITS



One day
installations†



Seamless wall for
a watertight fit



Virtually
maintenance free



Book your **FREE** design
CONSULTATION today!

800-928-2284

41 ELM ST. #3, STONEHAM, MA 02180
It Just Fits™ **BATHFITTER.COM**



©Registered trademark of Bath Fitter Franchising Inc. *Save 10% up to \$750. Special offer good on the purchase of a bathtub, wall and faucet kit. One offer per customer. May not be combined with any other offer. Offer must be presented at the time of estimate. Previous orders and estimates excluded. Offer valid only at the above location. †Lifetime Warranty on Bath Fitter®-manufactured acrylic products. See Warranty terms at Bathfitter.com/warranty. Offer expires 09-30-2026. ‡Most Bath Fitter installations are completed in one day. Some exceptions apply. See location for full details. MA Lic. 9654

Let's talk 'schedule' ... again

By Bill Burt
» bburt@northofboston.com

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Or in laymen's, a k a NFL terms, the New England Patriots schedule goes from a litany of tomato cans to "The Iron."

A year ago, as the Patriots win count continued to roll up, the naysayers pointed to the flotsam and jetsam they faced for most of that run.

It's what happens to NFL cellar-dwellers. They get a reprieve the next year.

While we came to find out the Patriots weak schedule in 2025, at least when it came to facing below average quarterbacking, bordered on epic. Honestly, it was as impressive as Drake Maye was accurate.

The Patriots won 10 in a row after a 1-2 start and won 15 of 16 before the Super Bowl.

With everything be equal — which of course it never is — and the Patriots are the same team we saw a year ago, the 2026 schedule is a problem.

And while many of us believe the 2026 Patriots, with health on their side, are a much better group on offense, about the same on defense and a year more experience together, there is pause for concern.

Here are some observations: The Patriots could start the season at 1-3. Really.

Losing at Seattle, Jacksonville and Buffalo, according to oddsmakers, is expected.

The Patriots could go 3-3 from late October to early December.

Another difficult stretch which includes trips to Chicago and L.A. (Chargers), but also home games against Green Bay, Detroit and Buffalo. Oh yeah, and the other road game is in Miami, which New Englanders understand is more likely

2026 PATRIOTS SCHEDULE			
WK	DATE	OPPONENT	TIME Eastern/TV
1.	Wed., Sept 9	at Seattle Seahawks	8:20 p.m. NBC
2.	Sun., Sept 20	vs. Pittsburgh Steelers	1 p.m. CBS
3.	Sun., Sept 27	at Jacksonville Jaguars	1 p.m. CBS
4.	Sun., Oct 4	at Buffalo Bills	1 p.m. CBS
5.	Sun., Oct 11	vs. Las Vegas Raiders	1 p.m. CBS
6.	Sun., Oct 18	vs. New York Jets	1 p.m. CBS
7.	Thu., Oct 22	at Chicago Bears	8:15 p.m. Prime Video
8.	Sun., Nov 1	at Miami Dolphins	4:25 p.m. CBS
9.	Sun., Nov 8	vs. Green Bay Packers	4:25 p.m. FOX
10.	Sun., Nov 15	at Detroit Lions in Munich, Germany	9:30 a.m. FOX
11.	Sun., Nov 22	BYE WEEK	
12.	Sun., Nov 29	at Los Angeles Chargers	8:20 p.m. NBC
13.	Sun., Dec 6	vs. Buffalo Bills	4:25 p.m. CBS
14.	Thu., Dec 10	vs. Minnesota Vikings	8:15 p.m. Prime Video
15.	Mon., Dec 21	at Kansas City Chiefs	8:15 p.m. ESPN/ABC
16.	Sun., Dec 27	at New York Jets	1 p.m. CBS

Note: Beginning Week 5, Oct. 11, games are subject to flex scheduling.



In a laugher last year, the Patriots buried the N.Y. Giants, 33-15, with wide receiver Kyle Williams catching a TD pass from Drake Maye. The Giants were among the Patriots 11 wins (out of 14) against teams with a losing record.

than not a loss.

The Patriots could go 2-2 over their last four games.

The Monday night in Kansas City and a Week 17 game

at Gillette against Denver are probably going to be season-defining games, with seeding or even a playoff spot at stake.

So, if you do the math, the Patriots "could" finish 9-8 without any bells and whistles going off. A standard, decent season and your



The Patriots open the season in a road game against Sam Darnold and Seattle Seahawks, who beat New England handily in Super Bowl LX. The Pats also have early road games against Jacksonville and Buffalo.

Patriots are flirting with the playoffs and while probably not with a division title/playoff bye.

The big part of the Patriots "schedule" debate, at least it was last year, was the opposing quarterbacks.

Again, barring injury, the Patriots will be facing some of the better quarterbacks in the league much more often, including Josh Allen (Bills) twice, Trevor Lawrence (Jaguars), Caleb Williams (Bears), Jordan Love (Packers), Jared Goff (Lions), Justin Herbert (Chargers), Patrick Mahomes (Chiefs) and Bo Nix (Broncos). Five of these games will be at their place.

While the Patriots offense appears to be better in all areas, particularly at wide receiver and the offensive

line, it had better be.

As witnessed by the aforementioned quarterbacks, getting to mid-January will be much tougher, not to mention improvements by the former NFL behemoths Baltimore, Kansas City and Cincinnati in the AFC, all of which are expected to return to the playoffs after down, injured (QBs!) season in 2025.

And those three teams all benefit from "easier" schedules after a down season.

The Patriots, to a man, were very positive after the Super Bowl drubbing, realizing the future for this young team is in front of them.

But the bull's-eye is on their backs, particularly the young quarterback, Drake Maye, and a first place schedule in front of them.

GO PATS!!

Whether you need
Asphalt or Metal Roofing,
Siding, Windows, Doors,
Decks, Porches, Additions,
or General Contracting
services, **DeFrancesco**
Quality Roofing, Siding &
Windows has you covered.



ASPHALT/METAL
ROOFING



SIDING



WINDOWS



DOORS



DECKS



PORCHES



ADDITIONS



GENERAL
CONTRACTING


DeFrancesco
QUALITY
ROOFING • SIDING • WINDOWS
God Bless.



CALL TODAY FOR YOUR
FREE ESTIMATE!
(603) 818-4075
www.snhqualityroofing.com

Learn More About Us!



5 GUYS

with something to prove

By Bill Burt



A.J. BROWN

WIDE RECEIVER

The New England Patriots, finally, have a WR1. We figured that was the case when they traded a first-round pick for the wideout but we saw it with our own eyes the last month.

It opens doors on this offense, which has been upgraded with a legit WR2 in Romeo Dobbs and a better offensive line.

Brown's issues, almost his entire team in the NFL, has been his leadership as a top option. Contract issues and "throw me the damn ball" have been semi-regular occurrences in both Tennessee and Philadelphia.

If Brown accepts his role, sometimes as decoy because of his talents, the Patriots are golden.

His ability to win 50-50 balls borders on special. His ability to create space, particularly in tight spaces, because of his strength is equally impressive.

His locker is next to his quarterback's stall. If he puts winning over "me," the Patriots offense is built to win many games and overcome a brutal schedule.



WILL CAMPBELL

LEFT TACKLE

The Patriots left tackle has received more support among this franchise as anybody. His struggles, particularly after returning from injury, was evident while playing against some of the best edge rushers in the game last January and February.

He returned from a slight MCL tear, probably affecting his mobility, but also a sign of his grit.

The criticisms hurt and he took it personal, doing the extra work this offseason, adding strength and obsessing with technique improvements.

The Patriots offense is committed to running the football and protecting Drake Maye, as evident by the improvements on the offensive line.

A healthy, more confident Campbell at the prime location on the line is a must for this team, which is expected to push 30 points per game.

It's time to put the "arm length" debate to bed.



CARLTON DAVIS

CORNERBACK

Signed to a three-year, \$54 million deal a year ago, Davis rang every bell in 2025, starting every game of the season for the first time in his career. He also played all for playoff games.

And he did it at a high level in the No. 2 corner spot opposite Christian Gonzalez.

Davis made the defense go as teams had to look elsewhere, down the middle, as he and Gonzalez did damage on the outside. Can he do it again?

Injuries forced Davis to play an average of 12.5 games a year in his previous seven pro seasons. New England has to keep him on the field this fall.



KYLE WILLIAMS

WIDE RECEIVER

It's time for Williams to shine. And as a second-tier receiver his opportunity to make plays, especially downfield, will be there for the second-year wideout.

His strength and speed are evident. So was his inconsistency. He had only 10 receptions with 21 targets in the regular season and two receptions with seven targets in the playoffs. Not good enough.

The Patriots were able to send Kayshon Boutte away because of their belief in Williams, who made some memorable receptions in 2025.

Williams picking up 40 receptions and five-plus TDs is there to be had even with newbies Brown and Doubts.

The Patriots future successes depends on winning the draft and this third-round pick from a year ago has the talent and chance to make this offense elite.

GABE JACAS

EDGE RUSHER

Mike Vrabel and his draft team traded up in the second round to select the rookie out of Illinois. And it wasn't because he might help out on special teams.

The 6-foot-4, 270-pounder attacked the quarterback with reckless abandon throughout his collegiate career. Not so coincidentally, getting to the QB could be one of the glaring weaknesses on an otherwise stout Patriots defense.

This summer has not gone as planned on the edge for the Patriots. Harold Landry is still out and has not practiced in his return from a 2025 injury. Free-agent pickup Dre'Mont Jones has been pretty quiet through August. And Jacas got to camp



late with injury and contract issues.

New England needs the rookie to play catch-up – fast – and grow into the game-changer from the edge that they believe

**Your future is
in your hands.
Think of
Kevin B. Comeau
for your
Future Funeral
Needs.**



Over the years, many families have taken advantage of the benefits offered by funeral pre-arrangement and pre-payment.

We believe in the advantages of pre-planning so much, we even honor pre-arrangements made at other funeral homes.

You can transfer your arrangements to our funeral home without losing any benefits. In fact, we will most likely be able to offer you more.

Primary Business Address
486 Main Street
Haverhill, MA 01830

Phone: 978-521-4845
Fax: 978-374-8711
Email: kevincomeau1@aol.com
Website: www.comeaufuneral.com

**Kevin B. Comeau
Funeral Home**