



NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS
2018 SEASON PREVIEW



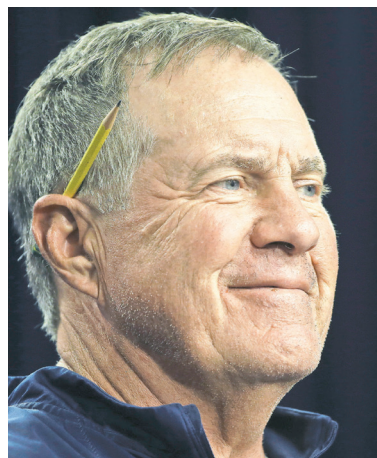
HAVING FUN?

A TOUGH **SUPER BOWL LOSS** IGNITED SOME TEAM FRICTION, BUT AS A NEW SEASON BEGINS, PLAYERS DEFEND **BELICHICK** AND THE PATRIOT WAY



Quarterback Tom Brady smiles as he takes the field to warm up before the Patriots' first preseason game against the Washington Redskins.

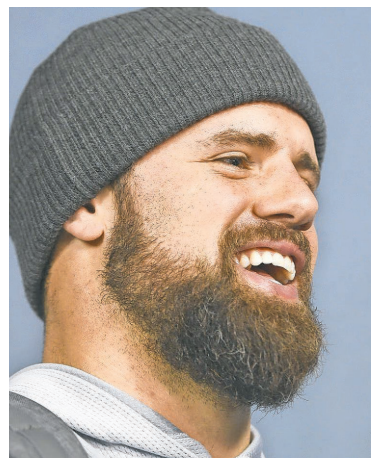
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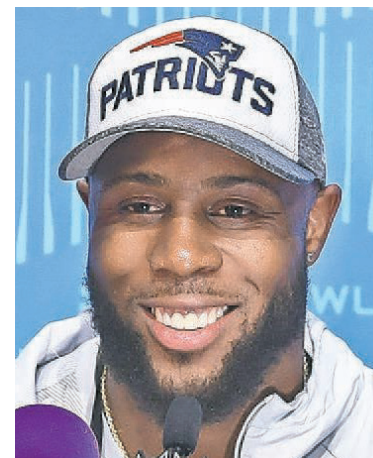
Head Coach **Bill Belichick**



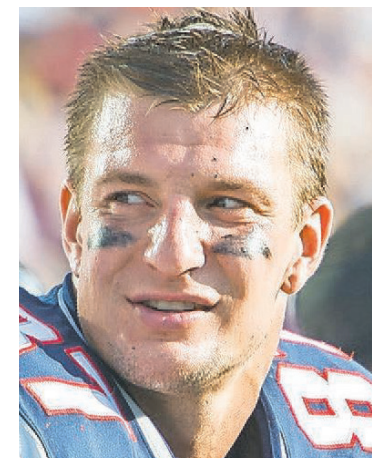
Strong Safety **Duron Harmon**



Fullback **James Develin**



Running Back **James White**



Tight End **Rob Gronkowski**

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IS PLAYING FOR THE PATRIOTS

FUN?

Outsiders still don't understand New England franchise

BY BILL BURT
STAFF WRITER

Who here is having fun?
If you're a member of the

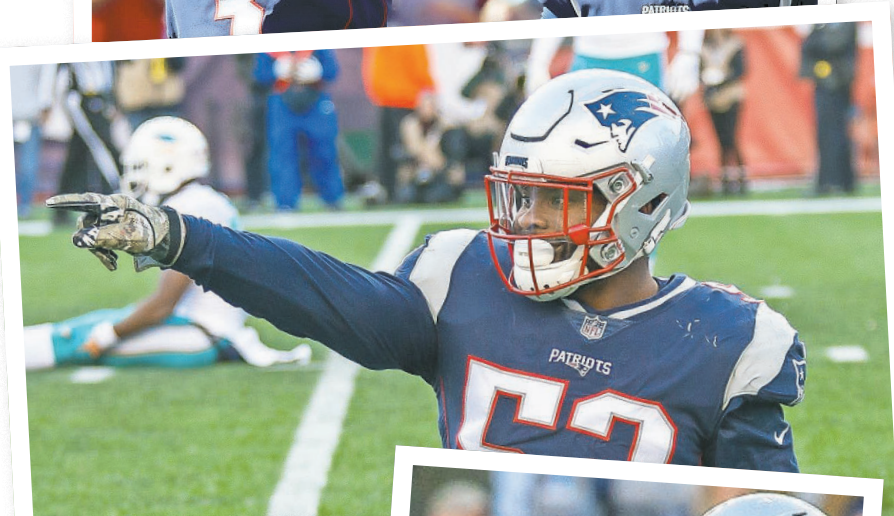
New England Patriots, you could be forgiven for having spent your spring and summer in the doldrums. It was not a great off-season. It never is when the preceding Patriots season ends abruptly.

And when that season has ended with a Super Bowl loss — as was the case against Philadelphia last February — you can multiply the anguish by 10.

The Patriots and their fans had plenty of reasons to stew.

There was cornerback Malcolm Butler's mysterious tears during the Super Bowl's national anthem. We found out the reason for his emotions within a half-hour.

See **FUN**, Page S8



FUN IS THE NAME OF THE GAME: From top, kicker Stephen Gostkowski (3) and Ryan Allen celebrate a 58-yard field goal; Elandon Roberts gives props after a sack; Adam Butler (70) and Devin McCourty share a moment; Chris Hogan (15) and James White (28) beam after touchdowns; and Rob Gronkowski, creating his own fun in 2017, makes off with Tom Brady's recovered Super Bowl game jersey.

Patriots could be better, but it still might not be enough

Bill Burt

I am going to go on record: I believe the New England Patriots, if they aren't decimated by injuries, will be a better team in 2018.

How's that possible?

Two reasons: Subtle acquisitions on the defensive side of the ball. And head coach Bill Belichick will be overseeing the defense with his lieutenant Brian Flores, the linebackers coach, probably assuming the role during games and most practices.

Sure, there are questions, starting with the relationship between Belichick and Tom Brady. Is it on solid enough ground to survive a two-week losing streak or a bad stretch by Brady?

But let's say the Dynamic Duo sets aside its differences on Malcolm Butler, Jimmy Garoppolo and Brady's health guru Alex Guerrero, settle the chain of command between them and come to agreement on a future together.

Let's also say Rob Gronkowski was teasing people about retirement after the Super Bowl, pulling a "Team Gronk" move. Now that he's demanded a contract he deserves, let's say he gets his money and is happy to be a Patriot.

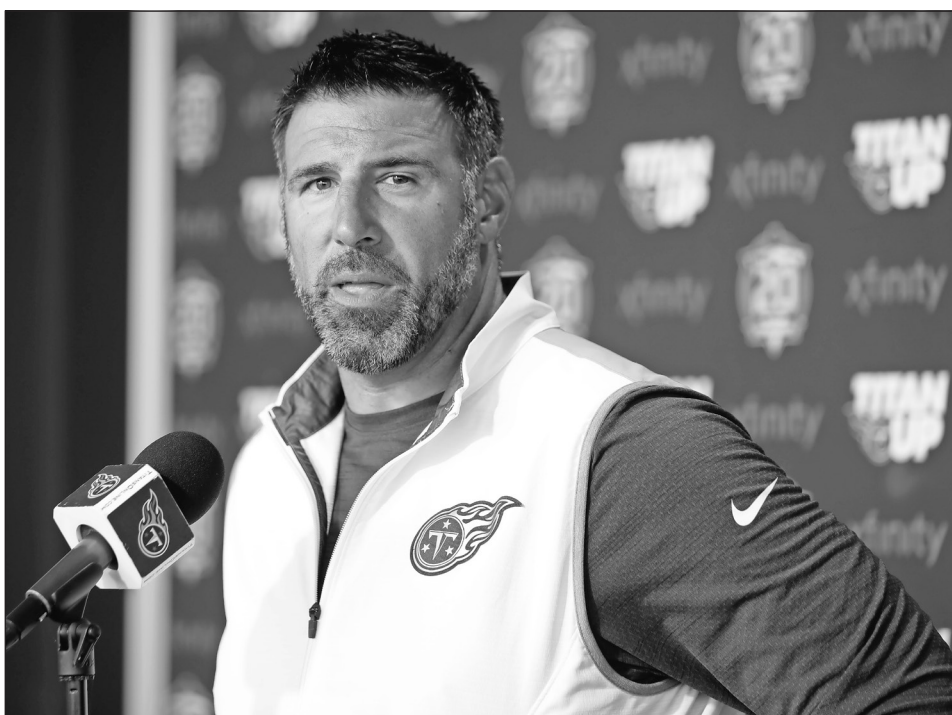
Let's say all of these things happen before the season opener against the Texans.

The Patriots as we know them — at 13-3, with their annual postseason bye, and their annual automatic bid into the AFC title game — might not be good enough to get back to their ninth Super Bowl in 17 seasons.

And this isn't about Brady's age or potential the collapse of the team.

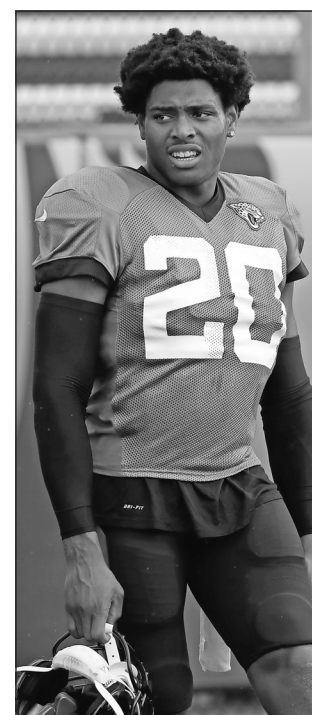
It's about the other guys.

Young, talented teams are on the rise in the NFL. In fact, many of them already appear ready to compete and/or win championships.



Oakland Raiders head coach Jon Gruden, top, and Tennessee Titans head coach Mike Vrabel, above, will have their talented teams ready to face the Patriots.

AP file photos



Cornerback Jalen Ramsey is part of a talented, athletic Jacksonville Jaguars defense.

possible franchise quarterbacks and young, talented rosters — not to mention coaches (Mike Vrabel in Tennessee and Jon Gruden in Oakland) who fear no one.

Note that I didn't mention the Pittsburgh Steelers. With some focus on defense in player personnel, the Steelers could trump everybody with their offensive trio of Ben Roethlisberger, Le'Veon Bell and Antonio Brown.

The competition might be even better in the NFC — comparable to the 1980s with San Francisco, Chicago, the N.Y. Giants and Washington colliding in the playoffs almost every year.

The Eagles and Rams appear here to stay, maybe for an extended time, with upper-echelon coaching and young "franchise" quarterbacks.

Once they figure out their quarterback quandary, the Vikings have the roster and coaching to match the Eagles and Rams on defense.

Then there are "wild card" teams in Green Bay, Dallas, Detroit and Atlanta — all of which have reason to expect to make a run.

The bottom line is that the Patriots' time to win, as the favorite, as they've done so often, may have passed. There is a new sheriff in town. In fact, there are a lot of new sheriffs in town.

The NFL is trending up. The number of very good teams is growing.

Even if the Patriots can overcome the Super Bowl Losers Club — since 1994 (Bills), no team losing the Super Bowl has returned the next year — and appear to be as good as they were this year, it probably won't be enough.

The Patriots had better be better — just to have a chance.

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

In the AFC, Houston and Jacksonville are the teams to beat.

The Texans under coach Bill O'Brien, with quarterback Deshaun Watson

entering his second year and with a defense getting healthy, might be the best there is in the conference.

Jacksonville — with a good quarterback, a

running game and a great, athletic defense — is a close second if not better.

Neither of these teams will fear the Patriots — see Eagles coach Doug

Pederson's braggadocio blueprint.

Then there are up-and-comers in Tennessee and Oakland on the Patriots schedule. Both have

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New England Patriots 2018 schedule

Week 1	vs. Houston Texans	Sept. 9	1 p.m.	CBS
Week 2	@ Jacksonville Jaguars	Sept. 16	4:25 p.m.	CBS
Week 3	@ Detroit Lions	Sept. 23	8:20 p.m.	NBC
Week 4	vs. Miami Dolphins	Sept. 30	1 p.m.	CBS
Week 5	vs. Indianapolis Colts	Oct. 4	8:20 p.m.	Fox/NFLN
Week 6	vs. Kansas City Chiefs	Oct. 14	8:20 p.m.	NBC
Week 7	@ Chicago Bears	Oct. 21	1 p.m.	CBS
Week 8	@ Buffalo Bills	Oct. 29	8:15 p.m.	ESPN
Week 9	vs. Green Bay Packers	Nov. 4	8:20 p.m.	NBC
Week 10	@ Tennessee Titans	Nov. 11	1 p.m.	CBS
Week 11	Bye week			
Week 12	@ New York Jets	Nov. 25	1 p.m.	CBS
Week 13	vs. Minnesota Vikings	Dec. 2	4:25 p.m.	Fox
Week 14	@ Miami Dolphins	Dec. 9	1 p.m.	CBS
Week 15	@ Pittsburgh Steelers	Dec. 16	4:25 p.m.	CBS
Week 16	vs. Buffalo Bills	Dec. 23	1 p.m.	CBS
Week 17	vs. New York Jets	Dec. 30	1 p.m.	CBS

FUN

■ Continued from Page S3

The Patriots defense put on the worst show in Super Bowl history. A backup quarterback, albeit a good one, went play for play with Tom Brady and, in the end, did him one better.

Shortly after the game, the news got worse. Tight end Rob Gronkowski announced he wasn't ready to commit to another year of playing. In fact, for a while, he was said to be considering a career in entertainment and movies, with Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson suggesting "Gronk" could be a very rich man.

There was the wedge between Brady and Bill Belichick, which was mentioned in early January but gained credence with an ESPN Magazine story in late February. Brady's personal trainer and guru, Alex Guerrero, reportedly went too far, with some players not opting to take strength and conditioning advice from Patriots' staff.

Then came the comments from Brandon Brooks, all-star guard for the Eagles. During an interview in



late May, he went off on the Patriots and Patriot Way.

While Brooks never played for New England, he played under

Belichick lieutenant Bill O'Brien in Houston. And he likened the experience to what it's been like to be part of the Patriots Dynasty.

"It's crazy that people haven't known this," Brooks told Bleeding Green Nation, a website that follows the Eagles. "It's

“
I love playing for the Patriots – for these coaches and for these fans. I’m having fun every day. If I wasn’t, I probably wouldn’t be here. Honestly, there’s no other place I’d rather be playing in the NFL than for the Patriots and Bill Belichick.
”

Matthew Slater, Patriots special teams captain (pictured)

been this way for like a decade. You’ve seen — Reggie Wayne did it. He retired. He went there [to the Patriots] for a training camp and retired. (Expletive) is not fun there. I was under the same regime in Houston. I almost
See FUN, Page S9



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FUN

■ Continued from Page S8

retired. (Expletive) was miserable, every day. Every day.”

Brooks went on:

“I came in [as a rookie] under [Gary] Kubiak, who was just an older version of Doug [Pederson]. Then I went to O’Brien, who was Belichick, and then I came back to Doug, who’s like Kubes, so for me, man, (expletive) was great. Like, I cannot tell you how much better this is than it was down there. Like, it’s just night and day. What does [Eagles offensive line coach Jeff Stoutland] say? Happy workers make more productive workers. ...

A few Patriots veterans players didn’t return the volley to Brooks. Instead, they took exception.

“Fun? I love it here. That’s why I’m still here,” said safety Patrick Chung, who has been in New England for eight seasons.

“I have fun every day with these guys and this coaching staff. I learned how to become a man here, being held accountable. We work our butts off. We do the extra work because that’s what you have to do if you want to win.

“I wouldn’t trade where I am with anybody,” he said. “You do your job here and you are rewarded. Fun? I have fun every day. Every day! I laugh when somebody from outside tells me that I’m not having fun.”

Patriots special teams captain Matthew Slater has been here 10 years — his entire career.

This spring he signed a two-year, \$5.2 million contract. According to reports, he’d been offered at least 50 percent more by two to three other teams.

“I love playing for the Patriots — for these coaches and for these fans,” said Slater. “I’m having fun every day. If I wasn’t, I probably wouldn’t be here. Honestly, there’s no other place I’d rather be playing in the NFL than for the Patriots



Patrick Chung was the cover boy for the preseason opener at Gillette Stadium.

“
I wouldn’t trade where I am with anybody. You do your job here and you are rewarded. Fun? I have fun every day. Every day! I laugh when somebody from outside tells me that I’m not having fun.”

Safety Patrick Chung

and Bill Belichick.”

Other Patriots weren’t so kind about Brooks’ comments, including safety Devin McCourty, whose twin brother joined the team in March.

“That’s so childish,” he said. “They’re saying we’re not having fun, so now you shouldn’t have fun. Go do what you’ve been doing. It’s been working. We’re employed by the Patriots. We’ve won games. We were just in the Super Bowl last year. I wouldn’t say that was the most awful season ever.”

McCourty suggested asking members of the team who just arrived from Cleveland, having played a 0-16 season, if they’re having fun.

“They tell me that wasn’t fun,” he said. “So I’m going to stay on this side of it.”

Defensive captain Dont’a



TIM JEAN/Staff photo

Whether being employed by the Patriots is fun or not is up to the individual players and coaches, but fans seem to enjoy coming out to watch the hometown team.

Hightower said critics can say what they want.

“To each his own. I don’t really have anything to say to them,” he said. “... It’s definitely harder than most places, but I mean, that’s part of it. A lot of guys know that when they come here.

“It’s not Bill’s job to make this fun and this atmosphere fun. It’s the guys around it,” said Hightower. “Every guy in that locker room, I love like a brother. We have fun, whether it’s out here struggling together — blood, sweat and tears — or we’re back in the locker room or we’re hanging out outside of football.

“So, there’s a time and place for everything, but we know whenever we walk through the building, it’s time to work,” he said.

Losing a Super Bowl isn’t fun.

But playing for the Patriots?

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MAC CERULLO
STAFF WRITER

The New England Patriots went to a Super Bowl last year. But their roster has since taken a hit with several key contributors — see Danny Amendola, Nate Solder, Malcolm Butler and Dion Lewis — taking their talents elsewhere for much more money.

You could make the argument that replacing two of those players, with equal talent, might be too much to ask.

But maybe, just maybe, Bill Belichick and the Patriots Personnel Dept. found a few others to upgrade other positions.

Here are five key additions, none of which are household names, who could actually make the Patriots depth of talent even better than it was a year ago:

5 NEW Patriots you should know



AP file photos

Former Cleveland nose tackle Danny Shelton (55), now a member of the Patriots, celebrates with former teammate Jamie Meder.

Danny Shelton

- **Position:** Defensive Tackle
- **Size:** 6-2, 345 lbs.
- **Former team:** Cleveland Browns

A first-round pick (No. 12 overall) by the Cleveland Browns in 2015, Shelton was acquired by the Patriots along with a 2018 fifth-round draft pick in early March in exchange for a 2019 third-round pick. At 24, Shelton hadn't lived up to expectations in Cleveland but did develop a reputation as an effective

run stopper. He has recorded 129 tackles through his first three NFL seasons, including a career-high 59 in 2016.

Because the Patriots declined his fifth-year option shortly after making the trade, Shelton is going into the season in the final year of his rookie contract. With a change of scenery and a chance to play under Bill Belichick, Shelton could be a candidate for a breakout year. Look for him to play a large part in what is shaping up to be a strong run defense.



Former Falcons defensive end Adrian Clayborn, left, is honored on the field before a game at the University of Iowa with Kid Captain Maddox Smith. Clayborn was a free agent acquisition by the Patriots.

Adrian Clayborn

- **Position:** Defensive End
- **Size:** 6-3, 280 lbs.
- **Former team:** Atlanta Falcons

Coming off a year in which the Patriots struggled to pressure opposing quarterbacks, the team made one of its highest profile off-season signings by inking Clayborn to a two-year, \$12 million deal. At age 30, Clayborn has injury concerns but is coming off one of his more productive seasons, recording a career-high 9.5 sacks in 2017. (Granted

six of those came in one game against an undermanned Dallas Cowboys team.)

Clayborn has given plenty of reason for optimism since camp began. He has held his own in one-on-one drills against massive offensive tackle Trent Brown, and in the preseason, he had a strip sack of Nick Foles that led to Ja'Whaun Bentley's 54-yard scoop and score touchdown. Teamed up alongside returning players like Trey Flowers and Deatrich Wise, Clayborn should make a big difference on the Patriots' pass rush this fall.



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TIM JEAN/Staff photo

Patriots left tackle Trent Brown (77) is one of the club's most important players given the rash of injuries on the offensive line.

Trent Brown

- **Position:** Offensive tackle
- **Size:** 6-8, 380 lbs.
- **Former team:** San Francisco 49ers

This guy is impossible to miss. Brown is one of the largest players in the NFL. Originally drafted in the seventh round by the San Francisco 49ers in 2015, the big offensive lineman was acquired this off-season by the Patriots (along

with the fifth-round pick used to draft Ja'Whaun Bentley) in exchange for a 2018 third-round selection.

Since his arrival, Brown has been dominant and seems set to start for the Patriots at left tackle, filling the void left by Nate Solder. He has drawn praise from Patriots defenders for his abilities as a blocker, and has also demonstrated deceptive athleticism and quickness for a man his size.



AP file photo

Cordarrelle Patterson wasn't used as much more than a kickoff returner while in Oakland last season. Could he be more with the Patriots this fall?

Cordarrelle Patterson

- **Position:** Wide receiver
- **Size:** 6-2, 228 lbs.
- **Former team:** Oakland Raiders

Another first-round pick who hasn't quite lived up to expectations, Patterson was acquired along with a sixth-round pick in exchange for a fifth rounder from Oakland back in March. A big wide receiver with world class speed and athleticism, Patterson figures to make an immediate impact for the Patriots in the return game.

However, if the preseason has

been any indication, Patterson might play a bigger role than that. In nearly every practice open to the public, Patterson made at least one highlight reel catch. Then in the preseason against the Eagles, he put his blistering speed on display, nearly juking a defender out of his shoes to turn what could have been a negligible gain into an 11-yard touchdown. He can do serious damage with the ball in his hands. If the Patriots find ways to get him open in space, he could become one of the team's most electrifying players since Randy Moss.



AP file photo

Florida defensive back Duke Dawson intercepts a pass for a touchdown in the first half against Michigan on Sept. 2, 2017, in Arlington, Texas.

Duke Dawson

- **Position:** Cornerback
- **Size:** 5-10, 198 lbs.
- **Former team:** University of Florida

Dawson was the Patriots' top draft pick on defense this past April, when the team selected the cornerback in the second round (No. 56 overall). While in college, Dawson played in 48 games over four seasons and recorded 82 tackles, along with 17 passes defended and six

interceptions. He was named Second Team All-SEC as a senior.

Since his arrival, Dawson has made a strong impression and looks set to start the season as the team's slot corner, playing between Stephon Gilmore and Eric Rowe. He has been limited in practice lately and did not play against the Eagles in the preseason, but should be fine to start the regular season.



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New England Patriots 2018 Offseason Moves

AUGUST

Aug. 6: Released WR Malcolm Mitchell.

Aug. 3: Signed WR Eric Decker.

Aug. 2: Released G Nate Theaker.

Aug. 1: Signed FB Henry Poggi. Released WR Jordan Matthews.

JULY

July 31: Signed OL Brian Schwenke. Released TE Shane Wimann.

July 28: Signed WR Paul Turner. Released TE Troy Niklas.

July 25: Named Bret Bielema consultant.

July 25: Released WR Cody Hollister. Signed DB Eddie Pleasant and G Nate Theaker.

July 23: Signed RB Sony Michel and WR Devin Lucien. Placed OL Andrew Jelks on the reserve/retired list. Released DB David Jones.

JUNE

June 22: Signed OL Isaiah Wynn.

MAY

May 19: Released WR Chris Lacy. Re-signed OL Jason King.

May 16: Signed DB Duke Dawson.

May 15: Signed P Corey Bojorquez. Released WR Darren Andrews.

May 11: Signed LBs Ja'Whaun Bentley and Christian Sam; WRs Braxton Berrios, Darren Andrews and Chris Lacy; QB Danny Etling; DB Keion Crossen; TE Ryan Izzo; DLs John Atkins, Trent Harris and Frank Herron; DBs J.C. Jackson and A.J. Moore; RB Ralph Webb; and TE Shane Wimann. Released OL Tony Garcia.

May 10: Released OL Jason King.

APRIL

April 24: Signed OL Ulrick John.

April 6: Signed WR Jordan Matthews.

April 4: Signed OL Luke Bowanko and TE Troy Niklas.

MARCH

March 19: Released LB Shea McClellin.

March 17: Signed DE Adrian Clayborn, RB Jeremy Hill and OL Matt Tobin.

March 8: Released TE Martellus Bennett and WR Bernard Reedy.

FEBRUARY

Feb. 6: Signed OL James Ferentz and Jason King; WRs Cody Hollister and Riley McCarron; DBs David Jones and Damarius Travis; CBs Ryan Lewis and Jomal Wiltz; LB Trevor Reilly; and TE Will Tye.



The Patriots signed former Bills receiver Jordan Matthews but then released him Aug. 1.

AP photo



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Keeping it professional

If Belichick and Brady renew one of the oldest partnerships in the NFL, the winning continues

By BILL BURT
STAFF WRITER

All we need to about the Bill Belichick-Tom Brady relationship is that when Belichick publicly refers to the future Hall of Fame quarterback, he calls him “Tom.”

Brady’s close friends and family call him “Tommy.”

Nearly 19 years into their relationship — nearly half of Brady’s life — and it’s still “Tom.”

In other words, this special, legendary partnership is purely professional. They don’t go out for beers, attend each other’s family cookouts or name their kids (or grandkids) after the other guy.

If former Jets and Bills head coach Rex Ryan had Brady as his quarterback for this long, Ryan would have two sons named “Tommy” and “Brady” by now — and maybe a dog named TB12.

One could argue that Belichick and Brady are equal partners in this incredible run. The five-time Super Bowl champs cannot wreak havoc on the record books alone. They have conquered the NFL together.

But let’s get this much straight: Belichick is the boss, and Brady is the understudy.

Behind the scenes, maybe there are issues between them. Brady wants more respect. And he wants his training guru, Alex Guerrero, to have more access. Belichick doesn’t want Brady ever going over his head to ownership — see the Jimmy Garoppolo trade — and he wants his quarterback all-in with the team.

But is any of that worth breaking up the partnership?

If this were their fifth or sixth year together, maybe. But more than 18 years, eight Super Bowls, five Lombardi trophies and assorted MVP plaques (four Super Bowl, three regular season) are a lot of history.

When former Red Sox general manager Theo Epstein left Boston after a decade due to issues with then-team president Larry Lucchino, he said his run was

probably over anyway.

“Ten years is a long time,” he said. “Everyone needs a change of scenery after that long.”

Not everyone. Not Belichick and Brady.

The duo represent two interesting characters with contrasting personalities.

Belichick is a lousy athlete, bookish, difficult to figure out, and he couldn’t care less what he wears or what people think about him.

Brady is a world-class athlete with the looks of a model who is married to a supermodel. He’s got a way with people and cares deeply about being liked.

What bonds them are their similarities — focus, work ethic and leadership skill.

Then there’s competitiveness. They hate to lose — and I mean “hate.”

Both are legendary sore losers. Handshakes after Super Bowl or conference championship losses are either non-existent or brutally cold.

It’s rare that two powerful alpha personalities — really three, if you include owner Bob Kraft — would put up with each other for so long, especially in this social media-driven climate.

Brady deserves big-time kudos in this “marriage” because he has the cachet to bolt and/or make demands (see LeBron James).

There have been many opportunities in which he could’ve disagreed with and publicly questioned Belichick — over Lawyer Milloy, Deion Branch, Richard Seymour, Wes Welker, Jamie Collins or Malcolm Butler — over the years.

But, other than a few negative vibes, Brady bit his tongue.

His humility and acquiescence, particularly as an all-time great, is recognized in the locker room. If Tom doesn’t complain, they must think, why should I?

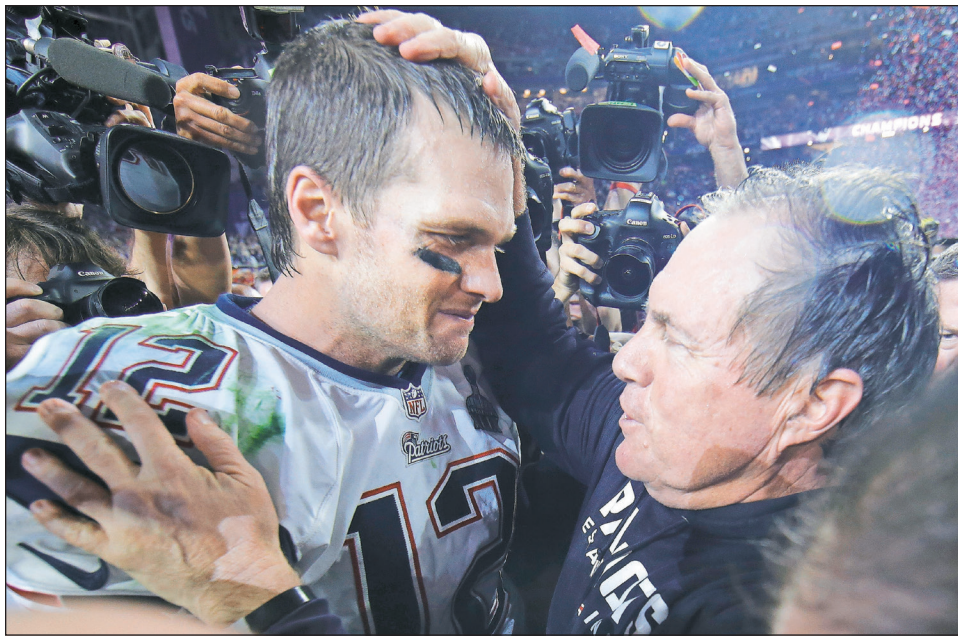
But Brady is no fool. There’s a reason he has swallowed his pride, taken less money and kept

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Patriots head coach Bill Belichick watches quarterback Tom Brady during a joint practice with the Houston Texans in August 2016.

AP Photo/Chris Jackson



AP file photo

Tom Brady and Bill Belichick have celebrated five Super Bowl wins together. Will there be a sixth this season?

WINNING

■ Continued from Page S14

his own counsel. The brilliant coach is his ticket to all-time greatness.

So, while human nature says one or both would eventually tire of this “marriage,” and maybe go looking for a new mission, theirs is the exception.

Still, it’s always professional.

“He’s the greatest coach that ever lived,” said Brady recently.

Belichick was almost as complimentary a few months ago: “I wouldn’t rather have anybody other than (Tom).”

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New England Patriots history

Year	W	L	T	Div.	Postseason	Coach	Year	W	L	T	Div.	Postseason	Coach
2017	13	3	0	1st of 4	Lost SB	Belichick	1987	8	7	0	2nd of 5		Berry
2016	14	2	0	1st of 4	Won SB	Belichick	1986	11	5	0	1st of 5	Lost Div	Berry
2015	12	4	0	1st of 4	Lost Conf	Belichick	1985	11	5	0	3rd of 5	Lost SB	Berry
2014	12	4	0	1st of 4	Won SB	Belichick	1984	9	7	0	2nd of 5		Meyer, Berry
2013	12	4	0	1st of 4	Lost Conf	Belichick	1983	8	8	0	2nd of 5		Meyer
2012	12	4	0	1st of 4	Lost Conf	Belichick	1982	5	4	0	3rd of 5	Lost WC	Meyer
2011	13	3	0	1st of 4	Lost SB	Belichick	1981	2	14	0	5th of 5		Erhardt
2010	14	2	0	1st of 4	Lost Div	Belichick	1980	10	6	0	2nd of 5		Erhardt
2009	10	6	0	1st of 4	Lost WC	Belichick	1979	9	7	0	2nd of 5		Erhardt
2008	11	5	0	2nd of 4		Belichick	1978	11	5	0	1st of 5	Lost Div	Fairbanks, Erhardt, Bullough
2007	16	0	0	1st of 4	Lost SB	Belichick	1977	9	5	0	3rd of 5		Fairbanks
2006	12	4	0	1st of 4	Lost Conf	Belichick	1976	11	3	0	2nd of 5	Lost Div	Fairbanks
2005	10	6	0	1st of 4	Lost Div	Belichick	1975	3	11	0	5th of 5		Fairbanks
2004	14	2	0	1st of 4	Won SB	Belichick	1974	7	7	0	3rd of 5		Fairbanks
2003	14	2	0	1st of 4	Won SB	Belichick	1973	5	9	0	3rd of 5		Fairbanks
2002	9	7	0	2nd of 4		Belichick	1972	3	11	0	5th of 5		Mazur, Bengtson
2001	11	5	0	1st of 5	Won SB	Belichick	1971	6	8	0	3rd of 5		Mazur
2000	5	11	0	5th of 5		Belichick	1970	2	12	0	5th of 5		Rush, Mazur
1999	8	8	0	5th of 5		Carroll	1969	4	10	0	3rd of 5		Rush
1998	9	7	0	4th of 5	Lost WC	Carroll	1968	4	10	0	4th of 5		Holovak
1997	10	6	0	1st of 5	Lost Div	Carroll	1967	3	10	1	5th of 5		Holovak
1996	11	5	0	1st of 5	Lost SB	Parcells	1966	8	4	2	2nd of 5		Holovak
1995	6	10	0	4th of 5		Parcells	1965	4	8	2	3rd of 4		Holovak
1994	10	6	0	2nd of 5	Lost WC	Parcells	1964	10	3	1	2nd of 4		Holovak
1993	5	11	0	4th of 5		Parcells	1963	7	6	1	1st of 4	Lost Champ	Holovak
1992	2	14	0	5th of 5		MacPherson	1962	9	4	1	2nd of 4		Holovak
1991	6	10	0	4th of 5		MacPherson	1961	9	4	1	2nd of 4		Holovak, Saban
1990	1	15	0	5th of 5		Rust	1960	5	9	0	4th of 4		Saban
1989	5	11	0	4th of 5		Berry							
1988	9	7	0	3rd of 5		Berry							

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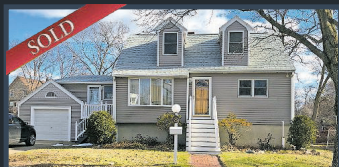
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Cutting his teeth

He may not (yet) have the title, but Flores has earned respect of Patriots defense

BY MAC CERULLO
STAFF WRITER

Bill Belichick has been through this before. Following the departure of defensive coordinator Dean Pees after the 2009 season, Belichick left the position vacant and took the reins himself. He largely did the same the next season, too.

That two-year stretch was more about preparing the next guy than it was indulging his own interest in coaching defense.

By the time Matt Patricia, the unofficial defensive coordinator-in-waiting, took over in 2012, he'd learned everything there was to know from perhaps the best defensive coach ever. He hit the ground running, and the Patriots didn't skip a beat for the next six years.

Now Patricia is a head coach himself, and Belichick is following the same playbook as he grooms his next defensive guru, linebackers coach Brian Flores.

While Flores has not been named defensive coordinator, he has assumed just about all of the job's responsibilities. Flores has taken over defensive play-calling, leads all of the meetings and is widely looked upon as the leader of the defense.

"He's a great teacher, a great coach, makes sure we have the information, and he's just a great coach, man, point blank," said defensive end Derek Rivers. "He's a great coach and a great teacher."

"He's good," said fellow defensive end Adrian Clayborn. "He knows the defense well and he's been helping me out with learning it as fast as I can."



JAIME CAMPOS/Staff photo

Linebackers coach Brian Flores calls the plays during a preseason game between the New England Patriots and the Philadelphia Eagles on Thursday, Aug. 16.

Flores has taken over defensive play-calling, leads all of the meetings and is widely looked upon as the leader of the defense.

Belichick is involved, of course, and Rivers said Belichick has been awesome to work with. Behind the scenes there is no doubt that Flores is gaining valuable experience by virtue of having Belichick available as a mentor.

But it's also clear the players see Flores as more than just the next man up. He's their guy, and when asked about the coaches, they have frequently made

a point to praise him for the work he's doing for the defense.

He has a big job to do this fall, too.

This past February, the Patriots defense melted down in historic fashion in

Super Bowl LII. Despite a record-setting offensive performance, the defense broke down at every level, allowing Philadelphia to shred the Patriots on the ground and in the air en route to a 41-33 victory. The Patriots

allowed 538 yards, including 373 yards to back-up quarterback Nick Foles, who was contemplating retirement a mere two years prior.

The pass rush was nonexistent, the run defense was ineffective, and the secondary just couldn't keep up, especially with Malcolm Butler inexplicably left on the bench.

This past off-season, Belichick was responsible for shoring up the unit and

making sure the talent was there to bounce back. Adding Clayborn and Danny Shelton to the defensive line, along with the return of Dont'a Hightower from injury, should help.

But now that the season has begun, it will largely be up to Flores to put the pieces together and get the defense back on track.

If recent history is any indication, he has a bright future ahead of him.

Patriots 2017 game summaries

GAME ONE (SEPT. 7, 2017)

Chiefs 42, Patriots 27

It was supposed to be a night of celebration with the Patriots unveiling their fifth Super Bowl championship banner and beginning the quest for 19-0 with an opening night win over Kansas City. Instead, the Chiefs turned the script on its head and blew out the Patriots on their home field. Rookie Kareem Hunt scored three touchdowns and recorded 246 yards from scrimmage in his debut, and Alex Smith threw four touchdowns passes and no interceptions as he picked the Pats defense apart.

Key Play: Trailing 27-21 late in the third quarter, Alex Smith hit Kareem Hunt for a 78-yard touchdown. The Chiefs went on to score two more touchdowns in the fourth quarter, and the Patriots never threatened again.

GAME TWO (SEPT. 17)

Patriots 36, Saints 20

Coming off a painful opening night loss, the Patriots went down to New Orleans and bounced back with a big win on the road. Tom Brady threw for 447 yards and three touchdowns, and Rob Gronkowski made six catches for 116 yards

and a touchdown in the win.

Key Play: Shortly before half-time, Mike Gillislee took the ball in 2 yards for a touchdown, which stretched New England's lead to 27-13. The Pats added a field goal before the break, and New Orleans couldn't get anything going in the second half.

GAME THREE (SEPT. 24)

Patriots 36, Texans 33

Texans rookie quarterback Deshaun Watson gave the Patriots all they could handle, throwing for 301 yards and two touchdowns to put his team ahead late. But needing a fourth-quarter comeback, Tom Brady delivered, leading a two-minute drill to take the lead. Brady finished with five touchdown passes in his sixth career game with five or more touchdowns, tied for third all-time with Dan Marino.

Key Play: Trailing by five points with 23 seconds left, Tom Brady hit Brandin Cooks in the front corner of the end zone, and Cooks got both feet down for the 25-yard game-winning touchdown.

GAME FOUR (OCT. 1)

Panthers 33, Patriots 30

The first four weeks of the season were a struggle for the

Patriots' defense, and week four against Carolina represented a low point. After the Patriots were able to engineer another fourth-quarter comeback to tie the game, 30-30, the defense wasn't able to close it out, allowing Carolina to march down the field and set up a 48-yard game-winning field goal by Graham Gano.

Key Play: On 3rd and 7 with 2:23 to play, Deatrich Wise sacked Cam Newton to force a punt and set up a potential game-winning drive for the Patriots. But cornerback Stephon Gilmore was penalized for illegal use of hands, giving Carolina a first down and ultimately setting the stage for the game-winning field goal.

GAME FIVE (OCT. 5)

Patriots 19, Buccaneers 14

The Patriots didn't have long to regroup after the loss to Carolina, quickly hitting the road to face Tampa Bay on a Thursday night. The game wasn't pretty. Tampa Bay had a chance to take the lead toward the end, but the game marked the first signs of a turnaround for a defense that had been historically bad through the first month of the season.

Key Play: Stephen Gostkowski kicked four field goals in the win, the last coming from 48 yards out to put New England up by five. That prevented Tampa from winning on a field goal, which the Bucs likely could have done after driving to the Patriots' 19 before stalling in the red zone.

GAME SIX (OCT. 15)

Patriots 24, Jets 17

Tom Brady became the NFL's all-time winningest quarterback in the regular season as the Patriots knocked off the Jets. New York jumped out to a 14-0 lead in the first half, but New England came back with 24 unanswered points to improve to 4-2 on the season.

Key Play: Early in the fourth quarter, the Jets appeared to cap off a 12-play, 74-yard drive with a 4-yard touchdown pass to Austin Seferian-Jenkins. Upon review, it was determined that Seferian-Jenkins had the ball knocked loose by Malcolm Butler, fumbling out of the end zone for a touchback.

GAME SEVEN (OCT. 22)

Patriots 23, Falcons 7

The highly anticipated

rematch of Super Bowl LI lived up to the hype in terms of atmosphere, with a fog blanketing the stadium and forcing the television broadcast to make use of alternate camera angles. But in terms of the actual game, it was a dud. New England led from start to finish, with the much-improved defense smothering Atlanta's high-powered offense. The Falcons didn't score until Julio Jones caught a 1-yard touchdown with 4:09 to go, by which point the game was well out of reach.

Key Play: Late in the first quarter, the Falcons lined up for a 37-yard field goal, but Matt Bryant's kick was blocked by Cassius Marsh. It was the first of two misses for Bryant, who also hit a 36-yarder off the upright later in the game.

GAME EIGHT (OCT. 29)

Patriots 21, Chargers 13

The Patriots could only manage one touchdown on Los Angeles' tough defense, but Stephen Gostkowski picked up the slack with four field goals, and the defense and special teams took care of the rest. New England improved to 6-2 with the win, with Tom Brady leading the way with 333 passing yards.

Key Play: In the second quarter, Chargers' return man Travis Benjamin committed a cavalcade of errors on a single play. Benjamin muffed a punt inside his own 15, recovered it, then ran backward toward the goal line while trying to cut across the middle of the field. He was caught and tackled in the end zone by Brandon King for a safety, giving the Patriots a 9-7 lead.

GAME NINE (NOV. 12)

Patriots 41, Broncos 16

Mile High Stadium has historically been a house of horrors for Tom Brady and the New England Patriots, but it was anything but this time. The Patriots took the game, with Brady throwing for 266 yards and three touchdowns while virtually eliminating Von Miller from the equation. It marked New England's 12th consecutive road win and fifth straight loss for the Broncos.

Key Play: After the Patriots went three and out on their first drive, Broncos rookie Isaiah McKenzie muffed the ensuing punt, setting up Brady's 14-yard touchdown to Rex Burkhead to start off the scoring.

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2017

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GAME 10 (NOV. 19)

Patriots 33, Raiders 8

Playing in front of an enthusiastic crowd of 77,357 at Mexico City's famed Azteca Stadium, the Patriots defense shut down the Oakland Raiders en route to one of the team's best defensive performances of the season. Tom Brady went 9 for 9 on the opening drive, which ended with a 15-yard pass to Dion Lewis, and at one point New England led 30-0 before the Raiders finally put together a touchdown drive midway through the fourth quarter.

Key Play: Late in the second quarter, Oakland had driven into the red zone and looked set to score until Marquis Flowers forced a fumble, giving the Patriots the ball and helping set up a 62-yard field goal by Stephen Gostkowski as time expired.

GAME 11 (NOV. 26)

Patriots 35, Dolphins 17

Dion Lewis enjoyed his first career 100-yard game, rushing for 112 yards on 15 carries, and Rex Burkhead scored two touchdowns as New England cruised to victory. The Patriots went five for five in the red zone, and Tom Brady threw for 227 yards and four touchdowns.

Key Play: The Patriots went three and out on their first possession, but rather than punt it away, the team opted to run a fake to Nate Ebner. He picked up a first down, and the Patriots went on to score on a 2-yard Burkhead touchdown run.

GAME 12 (DEC. 3)

Patriots 23, Bills 3

The Patriots picked up an easy victory over Buffalo on the road, but at the end of the day, all anybody wanted to talk about was Rob Gronkowski. The tight end was dominant, making nine catches for 147 yards, but he also prompted a national firestorm after he shoulder dropped Bills cornerback Tre'Davious White. Gronkowski was apologetic afterward but wound up earning a one-game suspension.

Key Play: New England started the scoring with a 50-yard field goal to cap off a 14-play, 59-yard drive. The Patriots never trailed again from that point on.

GAME 13 (DEC. 11)

Dolphins 27, Patriots 20

Even the best Patriot teams have been prone to laying an egg in Miami. The Patriots played their worst game in months, with Tom Brady throwing two interceptions and the team collectively going 0 for 11 on third down. Miami's Jay Cutler threw

for 263 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions, and the Dolphins defense forced the Patriots to punt seven times.

Key Play: New England had a chance to potentially tie the game, kicking a field goal to cut the deficit to seven, but then Miami recovered the ensuing onside kick and was able to run the clock down to zero.

GAME 14 (DEC. 17)

Patriots 27, Steelers 24

The biggest game of the regular season lived up to the hype, as the matchup everyone expected would be a preview of the AFC Championship Game turned into an instant classic decided on the very last play. New England trailed 24-16 going into the fourth quarter but scored 11 points to pull ahead with 0:56 remaining. Pittsburgh was able to drive down to the goal line, but after the apparent winning touchdown was overturned, New England picked Ben Roethlisberger with five seconds left to clinch the win.

Key Play: Before the Patriots took the lead, Pittsburgh had a chance to capture the win when Sean Davis got his hands on a Brady pass. But the pass slipped through his fingers. Brady then hit Rob Gronkowski for a series of big gains to set up Dion Lewis' score.

GAME 15 (DEC. 24)

Patriots 37, Bills 16

With the running back corps heavily depleted due to injury, the Patriots gave the ball to Dion Lewis, and he delivered with the best game of his career. Lewis rushed for 129 yards on 24 carries and two total touchdowns. Mike Gillislee, back in the lineup after being inactive the previous six games, added a 1-yard score of his own.

Key Play: Trailing 13-10, the Bills appeared to take the lead after Tyrod Taylor hit Kelvin Benjamin for a 4-yard touchdown pass in the corner of the end zone. The play was overturned after review, a call that drew widespread criticism from around the league.

GAME 16 (DEC. 31)

Patriots 26, Jets 6

What should have been a forgettable game was made somewhat epic by the freezing cold temperatures, which dipped below zero factoring in the wind chill. Officially it was the second-coldest game ever played at Gillette Stadium, but it didn't seem to bother the Patriots, who clinched home field advantage throughout the playoffs and the seventh 13-win season in franchise history.

Key Play: James Harrison, signed days after being cut by the Pittsburgh Steelers, had two

sacks on consecutive plays to end the game. He finished with five total tackles and a forced fumble.

AFC DIVISIONAL GAME (JAN. 13, 2018)

Patriots 35, Titans 14

Tennessee scored on a brilliant touchdown catch by Corey Davis to start the scoring, but then New England ripped off 35 points and cruised to an easy victory. Danny Amendola had 11 catches for 112 yards and his first career 100-yard receiving game in the playoffs, and Tom Brady had 337 yards passing with three touchdowns.

Key Play: The Patriots put away the game in the second quarter, outscoring the Titans 21-0. The real clincher came on a 16-play, 91-yard scoring drive, capped off by a 4-yard touchdown pass to Chris Hogan with 1:52 to play before halftime.

AFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME (JAN. 21)

Patriots 24, Jaguars 20

Danny Amendola had long earned a reputation as a clutch player, but this effort was the stuff of legends. He made a 20-yard reception on 3rd and 18 to keep a critical drive alive, and later made an acrobatic 4-yard touchdown catch to give the Patriots the lead. Tom Brady threw for 290 yards and two touchdowns despite suffering a bloody cut on his throwing hand at practice days before.

Key Play: Jacksonville was thoroughly outplaying New England for much of the first half. The first sign of trouble came late in the second quarter when, coming off a timeout on 3rd and 7, Jacksonville was called for a delay of game. The penalty erased a first down gain, forcing Jacksonville to punt and eventually leading to New England's first touchdown just before halftime.

SUPER BOWL (FEB. 4)

Eagles 41, Patriots 33

Tom Brady threw for 503 yards, three touchdowns, zero interceptions, and the Patriots never punted. Still, they lost. In what will forever be noted as the game in which Malcolm Butler was benched, the Eagles and quarterback Nick Foles matched Brady and the Patriots offense. Foles threw for 373 yards and three touchdowns, and scored on a reception in a 4th and 1 play called the "Philly Special," during an MVP performance.

Key play: With all of the incredible offense, it was a strip sack by Brandon Graham with 2:16 remaining, and the Pats trailing 38-33, when it appeared Brady was setting up another late drive to win the Super Bowl. The forced fumble proved too much to overcome.



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