

that Green ran so slow he was afraid the game would end before Green crossed the goal line.<sup>504</sup> In 2004, 33-year-old Willie McGinest intercepted a pass and ran it back 27 yards before getting tackled. Fellow defender Richard Seymour had returned a fumble for a touchdown two weeks earlier and was eager to get into the film room and tease his teammate for not scoring: “He said he had a lot of speed, but I don’t know. It was a big play, a momentum-changing play for us. I just hope it wasn’t an offensive lineman [who caught him]. I hope it was a running back who got him. If it was, I’ll let it slide a little bit.”<sup>505</sup> (It was a running back, but I doubt that stopped Seymour from having fun at McGinest’s expense.)

Patriots players aren’t too proud to poke fun at themselves. Linebacker Mike Vrabel caught a touchdown in Super Bowl XXXVIII during a rare appearance as a tight end. Several months later, Vrabel jokingly expressed concern his offensive days had come to an end: “I think when they drafted a tight end in the first round, that pretty much told me that my days as a tight end are numbered.”<sup>506</sup> One of the funniest and most self-deprecating Patriots is new punter Josh Miller. Every time someone pushes a microphone in front of Miller, he makes me laugh: “every time I get dressed, I look at myself, and say, ‘You’re stealing.’ . . . I’ve definitely out-punted my coverage as far as expectations. . . . I married above me. My job’s above me. I’m like that loose tooth that hasn’t fallen yet, so I’m happy.”<sup>507</sup> The former Pittsburgh Steelers punter initiated and fueled rumors about swirling winds in Heinz Field: “it’s amazing how quick [the rumor] went around. It’s not bad at all. . . . the rumors grow, and suddenly we have the Loch Ness monster roaming the field.”<sup>508</sup> He describes his punt in the 2001 AFC Championship Game that the Patriots’ Troy Brown returned for a touchdown as “The worst athlete on the field gave the ball to the best athlete, and I never touched him.”<sup>509</sup> After Miami Dolphins wide receiver/punt returner Wes Welker (who missed his only college extra point attempt) filled in as the Dolphins’ field goal kicker following a game-time injury to their kicker, and Welker kicked a field goal, Miller joked, “That actually put all the kickers and punters back ten years because it makes it look like anybody can do it. . . . They may say, ‘screw kickers and punters; we’re going to go with just the athlete.’”<sup>510</sup> After Miller was told about Tom Brady’s 36-yard punt against the Dolphins in 2003 (that the Patriots successfully downed at the 1-yard line, leading to a Jarvis Green safety), he said, “Well, that’s my point. That’s a shame. You got these returners coming in and kicking field goals; you have quarterbacks punting the ball. Hopefully I get a couple more years in before they’re clever enough to realize they really don’t need us.”<sup>511</sup> Before returning to Pittsburgh to play his former team, Miller was asked about reports he and Steelers coach Bill Cowher never got along: “You don’t stay in a bad marriage for eight years. [Pause] Well, maybe you do. A lot of people don’t. But there were no kids involved. . . . So, he went his way and. . . I mean, I went my way.”<sup>512</sup>

Linebacker Roman Phifer, now in his 14<sup>th</sup> NFL season, complains about “old fart” jokes: “I get all the jokes—18 years, they always want to add years to my career.”<sup>513</sup> While linebacker Roosevelt Colvin, the NFL’s top free agent in the 2002-

2003 offseason, was preparing to take the field for his first preseason game after missing nearly the entire 2003 season with a fractured hip, “Everybody made fun of me. Everybody was like, ‘New dude.’”<sup>514</sup> A week later, Colvin was dishing it out. As Corey Dillon told a crowd of reporters for the millionth time that the team’s upcoming game with his former team (the Cincinnati Bengals, for whom he rushed over 8,000 yards) was “just another game,” Colvin shouted, “Corey Dillon is a liar! Write it!”<sup>515</sup> Dillon joined reporters in a good laugh. When a reporter asked about Tedy Bruschi’s saxophone playing, Willie McGinest saw it as ammunition: “I’ve never heard him play the saxophone, but we’re going to tease him about it now that you told us.”<sup>516</sup> Media-friendly tight end Christian Fauria feeds reporters juicy lines like “There are a lot of [quarterbacks] that come out of college hyped like Tarzan. And they come out and play like Jane.”<sup>517</sup> Because Patriots players tease any teammate who receives outsized media attention, Fauria complains that “Bobby Hamilton [says] that every time I put on my socks there’s a microphone in my face.”<sup>518</sup>

Not even the most senior Patriot, wide receiver Troy Brown, now in his twelfth season with the team, is immune from ridicule. When the coaches asked Brown in 2004 to learn to play nickel back, presumably for emergency situations like when both starting safeties had to leave Super Bowl XXXVIII with injuries, his fellow wide receivers teased him mercilessly: “I’ve been called a little bit of everything, things I can’t repeat. I’ve been called ‘traitor’ and ‘Little Benedict.’”<sup>519</sup>

Nor is the Patriots’ star, Tom Brady, immune, despite his humble, down-to-Earth persona. After a two-page Brady ad appeared in *ESPN the Magazine*, the offensive linemen who protect his pretty-boy face had their fun. Center Dan Koppen: “Little subtle hints and making sure the other guys in here were aware of the photo situation. The slogan of the ad campaign is ‘The way you wear it.’ Whenever you can get a comment here or there using that phrase, there’s no harm in that.”<sup>520</sup> Tight end Christian Fauria: “I still had my doubts [the guy in the photo was Tom]. When I looked closer, it looked like the guy had chest muscles, I thought, ‘No, that can’t be Tom.’”<sup>521</sup> (Brady is also kept humble by his three older sisters and his father, Tom Sr., who teased “Tommy” after *Men’s Health* put Brady on its cover, joking “he was first person in the magazine’s history to be asked to wear a T-shirt over his chest.”<sup>522</sup>)

After the Red Sox lost the first three games of the 2004 American League Championship Series and then won the last four, Patriots players (and even support staff) teased several teammates who grew up cheering for the Yankees. Dan Klecko discovered his name and number on a Red Sox banner above his locker. Asked by a reporter whether his teammates had mocked him for supporting the Yankees, offensive lineman Joe Andruzzi was anticipating a long day: “the day is young.”<sup>523</sup> When a reporter asked Patriots punter Josh Miller about the Sox making the World Series, kicker Adam Vinatieri chimed in with: “You’re asking a guy who’s been here six minutes about the Red Sox?”<sup>524</sup>

Rookie running back Cedric Cobbs says Patriot players genuinely enjoy being together: “The teammates are all great. I can see where they get their togetherness, everyone treats everyone with respect.”<sup>525</sup> You can tell Patriots players love each other by the many nicknames they affectionately give one another: “Chompers” (Tyrone Poole, a reference to his teeth); “Chief” (David Patten); “Moses” (Anthony Pleasant); “O.G.” and “Phife” (Roman Phifer, “O.G.” stands for “old guy”); “Kleck” (Dan Klecko); “Geno” (Eugene Wilson); “Big Sey” (Richard Seymour); “Big Mac” and “Old Man” (Willie McGinest); “Bru” (Tedy Bruschi); and, “Vrabel” (Mike Vrabel).

It’s no accident Patriots players love each other and get along so well. Bill Belichick has repeatedly said something to the effect of “Every year is different. I don’t think you can orchestrate chemistry. You can’t tell people what their relationships are going to be or how they are going to feel about each other.”<sup>526</sup> You indeed cannot compel a particular culture on an organization, yet in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004 a different group of players wearing “Patriots” jerseys has bonded and worked selflessly toward a winning season. Belichick, Pioli, and Patriots scouts can’t dictate culture, but they very effectively create conditions conducive to a healthy culture by bringing together “good,” hard-working, hungry guys who love winning football games. They also wisely bring in a mix of veterans and youngsters. Implementing a rigorous, demanding, and meritocratic training-and-evaluation program staffed by highly skilled coaches ensures that the best players play, but it doesn’t ensure that players enjoy each other, hold one another accountable, help one another improve, and communicate well. Patriots players deserve most of the credit. But coaches also help by ensuring the smooth flow of information and addressing problems early. Belichick admits that:

“In Cleveland, I might also have been a little too ‘football-oriented.’ I felt that so much of the game was determined between the lines [on the field], and a high percentage of my focus is still there. But there are a lot of things that go on outside the white lines that affect the chemistry of the team. I’m trying to be more aware of and sensitive to those.”<sup>527</sup>

Smart hiring is essential to building a strong team culture. Linebacker Mike Vrabel is a perfect example. 2<sup>nd</sup>-year linebacker Tully Banta-Cain says, “Mike’s a pretty outspoken guy. You make a mistake, and he lets you know right away. And I think that was good for me, because I kind of keep things in, and now I’m a little more vocal with the guys, too.”<sup>528</sup> Bill Belichick didn’t need to light a fire under Vrabel. Vrabel played the same leadership role in college, terrorizing any Ohio State football player who failed to give 100%.

The Patriots sign only high-character players. Before the 2004 NFL Draft, most draft boards ranked Ben Troupe as that draft’s second-best tight end (after Kellen Winslow Jr.), but the Patriots instead grabbed Benjamin Watson, in part due to his great character:

“[Watson’s high school coach Jimmy] Wallace almost laughs when NFL scouts and executives call to do background checks. ‘My response is you don’t have to do an FBI check on this young man,’ he said. ‘You most definitely don’t have to drug test him. He’s an awesome kid. Impeccable character.’”<sup>529</sup>

...and his astounding work ethic:

“Watson’s father... recall[ed] how his son came home from a workout in the weight room at school and went to the local gym to lift some more. ‘When we first got here, he couldn’t bench 180 pounds,’ Watson’s father said. ‘He came out doing 450. It was because of hard work. He carried that straight across academically and athletically.’”<sup>530</sup>

Another indication of the Patriots’ emphasis on signing “good guys” is the number of Patriots who spontaneously mention God. I do not intend to equate religiosity with morality because many evils, including 9/11, the Holocaust, and the Crusades, have been perpetrated in the name of religion, and because many agnostics and atheists possess strong moral compasses and behave with great concern for others. But many Patriots’ concern for God appears to reflect concern for leading good lives and for behaving as responsible and caring husbands, fathers, and sons:

- Defensive lineman Richard Seymour: “The man upstairs and my family comes first. [Football]’s a game and something I love to do, but first is God and my family.”<sup>531</sup>
- Cornerback Tyrone Poole: “My situation is God first, then my family, then everything else.”<sup>532</sup>
- Defensive lineman Anthony Pleasant, who retired after the February 2004 Super Bowl, has seriously contemplated attending seminary. There’s a reason teammates call him “Moses.”
- Linebacker Roman Phifer says of his great play and two Super Bowls with the Patriots, “I just give thanks to God.”<sup>533</sup>
- Fullback Fred McCrary: “I believe God works in mysterious ways.”<sup>534</sup>
- Wide receiver Deion Branch after catching 105 yards and a touchdown against the Kansas City Chiefs in his first game back after eight weeks out with an injury: “First of all, I’d like to thank God for blessing me and have the opportunity to come in and play again.”<sup>535</sup>
- Wide receiver David Patten: “every time when you undergo surgery—and especially two surgeries—you really don’t know whether you’re going to come back. That’s totally in the Lord’s hands.”<sup>536</sup>

- Linebacker Roosevelt Colvin: “It’s just a blessing from the Lord that I had the opportunity to [recover from my shattered hip socket] and to be in the place I am now.”<sup>537</sup>
- Wide receiver Bethel Johnson (whose locker has a “Real men love Jesus” sticker on it<sup>538</sup>): “I believe prayer changes things. When you say a little prayer, and calm yourself down, God comes through for you.”<sup>539</sup> Johnson seems to believe he benefits from divine intervention. After catching a 48-yard pass that sealed a victory over the Seattle Seahawks, Johnson said, “I was talking to Him the whole game, and when it was my time He let it happen. I’m grateful.”<sup>540</sup> Many, myself included, would scoff at the idea that God takes sides in football games, but this might seem natural to a player who grew up in Corsicana, Texas, where football and religion intertwine.
- Even running back Corey Dillon, who developed a bad reputation through repeated trouble with the law and his teammates, credits God for mellowing him out: “It took me a long time to get out of the stage of, ‘If you mess with me, I’m going to mess with you.’ It took me a long time to get out of that mold. Just being born again and putting God in my life, it lifted all that anger and that madness, that revenge-type attitude.”<sup>541</sup> Few would place Dillon high on their list of “high character” individuals. But Dillon appears to have genuinely improved himself. Dillon answered a pastor’s 1999 Easter Sunday invitation to the congregation to come up and get baptized, but only after some soul-searching: “I’m thinking about all the dirt I did... and finally I just got up and went up there. Ever since then, I’ve been a totally different person. ... [J]ust getting to know Him, it’s humbled me. It took away a lot of built-up anger I used to have toward certain things. ... Just coming to know Christ saved me from a lot of strife. ... [M]y focus and things I valued back then I don’t value now.”<sup>542</sup> After five games with the Patriots, he says, “God is very good. I just thank Him for giving me an opportunity to be in a different situation. I’m pretty sure he saw my struggles and my tears down there and answered. He put me in a totally different situation and in an organization where things are done the appropriate way. And I’m having fun.”<sup>543</sup>

Patriots safety Rodney Harrison believes religion is one reason the Patriots are “the closest team I’ve been around”:

“We have a lot of Christian guys in this locker room that are helping guys with broken relationships, marriages and stuff like that. Those are things people don’t see behind the scenes that are going on in this locker room. Guys support one another. We have a lot of fun, but there are a lot of positive things going on.”<sup>544</sup>