

“I’m reading *The Sporting News* two months ago that says something about me being an ‘average’ player. I just tore it out and put it in my wallet... to remind me.”¹⁸⁹⁷

– *Tom Brady*

“Sundays are... that day for Rodney [Harrison] when he has that chip on his shoulder. He has a chip on his shoulder every day, really.”¹⁸⁹⁸

– *Patriots running back Kevin Faulk*

To Patriots players, disrespect is like Brylcreem: “a little dab’ll do ya!” Patriots receiver Troy Brown says, “There are all kinds of things you can use to get motivated.”¹⁸⁹⁹ Watching Patriots players latch onto any tiny irritant they can use to pump themselves up is hilarious. And disrespect is contagious in the Patriots locker room. After Eagles receiver Freddie Mitchell brainlessly tossed out the playful boast that “I got something for you, Harrison, when I meet you” in Super Bowl XXXIX, Patriots safety Rodney Harrison knew those words would fire up his teammates: “It’s not just me against Freddie Mitchell. It’s 53 guys against 53 guys.[So] it’s not just me getting motivated. I’m always on a high level of motivation. I always have something to prove. You get so many other guys... motivated when trash talking starts.”¹⁹⁰⁰

Patriots linebacker Willie McGinest basically stepped forward and declared, “I am Spartacus!” (or, for younger readers, “We are Borg!”):

“We’re all one. He called out our offense and our special teams, he called out everybody. What he doesn’t get is that Rodney is me. He is Bruschi is Vrabel is Seymour. He’s everyone on our team. We’re all one, so if you call out one guy, you call out the whole team. He said what he said, and it upset us.”¹⁹⁰¹

McGinest continued by insulting Mitchell, the only player I recall the Patriots ever disrespecting before a game: “We are not going to go back and forth wasting time commenting on a guy like that who’s been unproductive in his career, who is only [playing] because one of their star players is hurt. So now he gets a little limelight and he starts talking and doing a lot of interviews.”¹⁹⁰²

Freddie Mitchell’s remark made headlines because the Patriots and Eagles were on their best behavior during the two pre-Super Bowl weeks, and everyone but Mitchell seemed to understand that Harrison and his teammates start drooling like Pavlov’s dog the moment any opponent says anything less-than-fawning about any of them. After the controversy erupted, Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb correctly explained, “Everybody is going to take it and turn it to the way that they want it to sound. When it gets back to the [Patriots], all of a sudden, he’s basically challenged their manhood.”¹⁹⁰³

Willie McGinest said, “Rodney is not one of those guys that you want to rile up... You don’t want to get him going. He is already walking around ready to play yesterday. To hear comments like [Freddie’s], it just gets him going.”¹⁹⁰⁴ Indeed!

Harrison's passion came pouring out even while interning as an NFL Europe referee in Spring 2005: "I saw one guy get annihilated, and I almost jumped through the sky. I was pumped up. I was yelling and screaming and [then] I was like, 'Man, what are you doing? Are you officiating or are you a fan?'"¹⁹⁰⁵ Instead of throwing a flag for illegal contact or unnecessary roughness, Harrison was whooping it up like a drunken fan. (Did you expect objectivity from one of the most heavily fined players in NFL history who is, ironically, training to become an NFL ref following his playing career? *Sportsline.com* termed Harrison's career aspirations "Pot, meet kettle.") In Super Bowl XXXIX, Harrison intercepted two passes and held up an Eagle ball-carrier while teammate Randall Gay stripped the ball away. In victory, Harrison's joy was as much for proving his doubters wrong as for winning back-to-back world championships: "It's unbelievable, being that I can't play anymore, that I'm washed up. Everyone has different motivations. With some people it's money. . . . Mine is from people doubting me."¹⁹⁰⁶ If a Patriots opponent kicked dirt into the air, I wouldn't be shocked to watch Rodney Harrison dive to the ground and convince himself his opponent had deliberately kicked dirt in his face. Anything to motivate.

Freddie Mitchell pushed the wrong button on the wrong player at the wrong time, and his teammates paid the price. Harrison is angry when he walks off the field after a *victory*. After beating Tennessee in 2003, Harrison was livid: "Nobody picked us [to win]. Everybody hated us!"¹⁹⁰⁷ Amazingly, Mitchell—more self-obsessed than Cuba Gooding Jr.'s character in *Jerry McGuire*—never understood the consequences of his loose jaw: "I never feel bad for anything I say. It's interesting though how they [the Patriots] blew it up. It's cool. Whatever happens, happens. . . . I'm definitely shocked [by the reaction] but that doesn't bother me at all."¹⁹⁰⁸ He even added, "It's still funny to me."¹⁹⁰⁹

Harrison is hardly the only Patriot who scrounges for scraps of motivational disrespect. Linebacker Willie McGinest explained that the Patriots' fire was raging even before Freddie's remark:

"We don't need people to throw things out there to get us motivated. This is a highly motivated team as it is. . . . We're a highly competitive bunch of guys that push each other, and anytime something comes out, we use it as fuel. It adds fire for us."¹⁹¹⁰

The Patriots are such famous self-deluders that *SportsPickle.com* spoofed them as ticked off being only 3-to-1 preseason favorites to repeat as champions and only seven-point Super Bowl favorites, calling it "total disrespect." In the parody, Willie McGinest took umbrage at *ESPN* for predicting the Patriots would be "almost impossible to dethrone" following their acquisition of Corey Dillon: "What's this 'almost' stuff? It's that type of constant disrespect that motivates this team every week." According to the spoof, Belichick manufactures fake newspaper articles and TV shows to anger his players and bans them from watching sports news—lest they discover that "the media gushes over them incessantly"—and supposedly told his

players that everyone expected them to lose the AFC Championship Game in Pittsburgh (despite being favored on the road against a team that destroyed them in the regular season), afterwards thinking to himself, “I didn’t see one player roll his eyes or do that cough ‘bullsh-t’ thing or be like: ‘Uh, coach, doesn’t everyone think we’re going to beat them fairly easily?’ It was amazing. After a while you have to wonder if these guys are retarded.”¹⁹¹¹ What makes the parody so funny is how close it comes to the truth.

Before the Super Bowl, Freddie Mitchell said his remarks had “been blown way out of proportion.”¹⁹¹² Afterward, he chastised the Patriots! “[I was] being facetious and kidding around. They blew it way out of proportion. [Their overreaction] reminded me of little girls. They’re sensitive. Real, real sensitive.” Mitchell totally misunderstands the Patriots’ psyche. Mitchell thinks they’re the NFL equivalent of the fairy tale princess who complained about a pea underneath her mattress keeping her awake at night. Mitchell doesn’t realize that Harrison found Mitchell’s pea and deliberately placed it under his mattress in the most uncomfortable spot, so he couldn’t sleep. Mitchell should have asked Broncos safety John Lynch about Harrison: “You could walk up to Rodney right now and you could tell him that you think he’s the second-greatest safety of all time. Somehow, Rodney would come away convinced you have disrespected him.”¹⁹¹³ Heck, Freddie could have asked either of the Eagles’ safeties. Brian Dawkins said, “[Rodney]’s a crazy man. That’s my dog. I love the way he plays the game. Almost every play you see him getting into it with somebody, some kind of altercation.”¹⁹¹⁴ And Michael Lewis told reporters, “I love his game... I try to pattern my game after [Rodney]. He is a high intensity guy. He is going to hit you and let you know that he hit you... He’s going to take your head off.”¹⁹¹⁵

Harrison bought a bag of peas and handed out peas to teammates to place under their mattresses, so everyone would be disturbed:

“When you attack me, you are not just attacking me. You are attacking ten other guys on defense as well as any substitutions that come into the game. A lot of guys take that personally because we are such a close-knit group and we are so tight. So it is not like he has to watch out for me. He has to watch out for everyone because everyone is pumped up, and we all take offense to smart comments like that. You are calling out Tedy Bruschi, Willie McGinest, Roman Phifer and all the other guys out there. Remember, you’ve got a trained assassin in Eugene Wilson back there [at free safety].”¹⁹¹⁶

How dumb was Mitchell? Harrison suspects “Maybe he was drinking before he started talking because when you attack me, you attack the whole defense... Normally, most guys who have played long enough in this league wouldn’t attack someone a week before the Super Bowl, especially a guy [like me] who gets riled up because of things like that. Trust me, I don’t need any added motivation. I need some things to calm me down.”¹⁹¹⁷

After the game, Belichick uncharacteristically joined in the Freddie-bashing, calling him “terrible” and saying the Patriots were happy to see him in the game. Freddie responded with characteristic idiocy: “It takes a big man to talk after the game is over.” Mitchell acted like a moron who gleefully pokes a beehive with a stick and then blames the bees for stinging him. If you taunt someone and dare them to fight you, you can’t whine after they knock you unconscious, especially if you said “everything gets settled on the football field”¹⁹¹⁸ before catching just one lousy pass in the biggest game of your life.

Another outspoken Eagles receiver, Terrell Owens, also handed the Patriots motivational ammunition when he called the Patriots defense “very simplistic.”¹⁹¹⁹ (Owens is wrong. Chad Brown—one of the NFL’s smartest and most experienced linebackers, who has played for nine different defensive coordinators—said after three months learning the Patriots defense, “This is difficult. Yes it is. ...It’s a huge challenge... There’s a lot to it. I don’t think it’s an insurmountable obstacle, but it’s going to take a lot of hard work... The complexity of this defense is a huge challenge.”¹⁹²⁰) Owens also challenged Patriots cornerbacks’ virility when he said, “I welcome man-to-man [defense], but Belichick is a smart coach, and I don’t think that is a situation that he is going to want to put his guys in.”¹⁹²¹ (Again, wrong. After the game, Rodney Harrison said the Patriots’ cornerbacks “did a tremendous job considering they were in man-to-man coverage for most of the game.”¹⁹²² On many plays, Owens was single-covered by the undrafted Randall Gay who said, “we were trying to... make it look like we were double-covering him, but we were in the same coverages—man-to-man—every play.”¹⁹²³)

By April 2005, Mitchell was bashing his Eagles teammates. He caught just one pass in the Super Bowl because “You need that rapport [with your quarterback], and it just wasn’t there.”¹⁹²⁴ McNabb threw to him only “to get his ass out of a jam.”¹⁹²⁵ “I can’t throw myself the ball. ...I got more tired doing jumping jacks [waving for the ball] than actually playing.”¹⁹²⁶ Mitchell’s one-catch, 11-yard performance wasn’t his fault: “I did all I could do to win. I can’t ask any more of myself. I feel great.”¹⁹²⁷

Months later, Mitchell still couldn’t comprehend that insulting his opponent had hurt his team: “The media took that like, ‘Oh my god! I can’t believe you said that.’ What’s [Harrison] going to do? Hit me less hard if I didn’t talk about him?”¹⁹²⁸ In Mitchell’s mind, his pathetic teammates had screwed him by not defending him more vigorously after he insanely called out Harrison: “I could have sworn we were playing tennis. They didn’t back me up because they were scared.”¹⁹²⁹ Mitchell refuses to take responsibility for anything. When he strikes out, he literally believes it’s the pitcher’s fault: “I’ve been thrown so many curveballs on 2-0 counts when everyone else is getting damn fastballs down the middle.”¹⁹³⁰ He underperformed in Philadelphia because “Other receivers learn one [position] and just have to perfect

that. It hindered my performance to have so many plays running through my mind.”¹⁹³¹

By Draft Day, the Eagles were shopping Freddie, only to find no interest. So, they released their trouble-making former 1st-round draft pick who averaged a shade over 1½ catches per game as an Eagle, though he would have cost the Eagles only \$540,000 in 2005. Mitchell said “I’m very happy to be out of there” and lashed out at fans: “Fans should have been glad to have a... player that actually cares enough to tell [media people] that they don’t know what they’re talking about.”¹⁹³² Mitchell is the anti-Patriot, and his role in Super Bowl XXXIX proves the wisdom of everything Bill Belichick preaches.

Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb also handed the Patriots bulletin board material by violating the Patriots’ rule of never speaking ill of an upcoming opponent. Seemingly trying to convince himself, McNabb told reporters, “If they were invincible, they wouldn’t have lost two games this year... They were fighting just to have home field advantage... This team is not invincible. This team can be beat.”¹⁹³³ McNabb’s factual and seemingly innocuous words were hardly fighting words... except to the Patriots’ always-eager-to-be-disrespected players. Even the slightest slight turns them into frenzied piranhas. As Willie McGinest puts it, “If somebody is disrespecting you... be humble and handle it on the field. Nobody wins games doing interviews, nobody wins game in articles.”¹⁹³⁴

Belichick is an expert at finding facts that irritate players into passionate preparation. Swears Patriots cornerback Ty Law:

“He’s great at it. Just like he’s a great coach, he’s a great motivator. He knows his X’s and O’s, but he knows how to push those buttons on, you know, as far as the team and as far as individuals. If he knows that we need Rodney [Harrison] to step up and have a good game, he’ll find something about Rodney from another team—whether it be a lineman, whether it be a receiver, a quarterback—he’ll find something to strike a nerve in Rodney. He’ll do a search on Google: ‘whoever and Rodney Harrison’ [and then] come in there and read it to everybody.”¹⁹³⁵

Law shared a personal example:

“[Belichick] found tapes of [a Seattle Seahawks player] ... on TV... that he had to show the whole team about what [that player] said about me, and [Belichick] was like, ‘Uh-oh Ty, he’s gonna kick your ass.’ ... He’ll do that in front of everybody. But I mean we take it all in fun. But you know deep down inside it’s going to strike a little nerve to make you go out there and play better. And that’s just the fun that we have sometimes amongst that team.”¹⁹³⁶

Willie McGinest agrees Belichick “keeps us hungry and ready to go.”¹⁹³⁷ Patriots players respond to such facts with mature preparation.