

Chapter 2

A CHAMPIONSHIP ORGANIZATION

“Other guys say they want to be a Pro Bowl caliber player. . . . But I want to be considered a championship caliber player because that is what sports is all about, winning championships.”⁹⁷

– *Patriots linebacker Tedy Bruschi*

“You can tell just walking in here, it’s a great organization.”⁹⁸

– *New Patriot wide receiver Kevin Kasper, in his first days with the team*

During player introductions preceding their first Super Bowl victory, the Patriots broke with tradition. They burst onto the field *en masse* as “The New England Patriots” rather than emerge one-by-one as individual players receiving individual fanfare. This was no coaching gimmick: “The players wanted to do it that way; they wanted to come out as a team. We’ve been doing it since October.”⁹⁹ Defensive lineman Richard Seymour explained the players’ thinking: “We’re not a team of individuals; we do things as a team, so it was appropriate for us to go out together.”¹⁰⁰ The Patriots’ decision to forgo individual glory symbolized their unity and epitomized their formula for victory. According to Bill Belichick, “That’s the reason we won. Because we played the game as a team.”¹⁰¹

The Patriots don’t have the most talented players. Since the AFL-NFL merger, the average Super Bowl champion has placed seven players on its conference’s Pro Bowl roster, that honors the conference’s best players each season. Almost insultingly, the 2001 and 2003 Patriots championship teams each had just two Pro Bowl honorees. The Patriots have won two of the past three Super Bowls not with the best individuals but with the best team. Scott Pioli and Bill Belichick understand the difference: “Our job isn’t to assemble the best players, it’s to put together the best team.”¹⁰² Games are not won on paper or in “Fantasy Football” leagues. Games are not won based on individual player statistics or Vegas odds. Games are won when eleven men coordinate their actions on a football field and outscore the eleven men on the other side of the ball. When reporters asked Belichick for his response to being eight-point underdogs in the 2001 AFC Championship Game, Belichick explained: “This game will be decided in 60 minutes of football, well maybe more, you never know.”¹⁰³

Pre-salary cap dynasties (like the Dolphins, Steelers and Cowboys) had the luxury of collecting standout players who could dominate their opponents in one-on-one matchups. In the salary cap era, “talent” is much more evenly distributed across

teams, so the Patriots necessarily use a different approach... training their good, solid players to play a cohesive, coordinated, cooperative, consistent brand of football. After his Buffalo Bills became the Patriots' 18th consecutive victim, head coach Mike Mularkey said, "the ball was coming out of [Brady's] hands really before the receiver was coming out of the break. He was throwing some timing routes very well."¹⁰⁴ Throwing a pass to a location in space to an intended receiver running in a different direction requires trust and understanding that develops only through intense, dedicated practice. Belichick's Patriots out-prepare their opponents. Phil Simms noted the team's blue-collar blueprint even before its first Super Bowl victory:

"Do you think football's not the ultimate team game? Think it's not about teamwork and what the coaches do to help you? Just look at the New England Patriots. ...I give the New England coaching staff a lot of credit—a lot of credit. ...It's hard to look at [Patriots players] and pinpoint who the stars are—how they're getting it done, why they're getting it done."¹⁰⁵

Management Secrets of the New England Patriots explains "how they're getting it done [and] why they're getting it done." The Patriots haven't achieved greatness with unknown players by accident. They built a great organization. The Patriots win because their selflessness and intense preparation enable them to perform their collective best on game day. Belichick-style preparation systematically covers every aspect of winning football games: opponent analysis, clock management, strength and conditioning, strategy and tactics, situational practice, two-minute drills, advance planning for inevitable injuries, matching player talents and skills to roles, recognizing what the opponent is doing, forcing and avoiding turnovers, managing emotions, preventing penalties, avoiding trouble on and off the field, substituting players smoothly, *etc.*

HUMBLE OWNER

The Patriots' unified collective performance encompasses not only players and coaches but also executives, scouts and owners. No analysis of the Patriots' success would be complete without noting that Patriots owner Robert Kraft entrusts all football decisions to his football professionals. For teams lacking humble owners, Super Bowls are virtually unattainable. Though Bob Kraft is in the 99th-percentile of football fans in his knowledge of the game, he's smart and humble enough to know he'll never know as much as the football professionals he pays to make football decisions. So Kraft doesn't interfere with, for example, player personnel because he recognizes that "there is a philosophy of the kind of player that fits here."¹⁰⁶

It's no coincidence that the Arizona Cardinals: 1) Have lost nearly twice as many games (103) as they've won (57) over the past decade; and, 2) Have a president and four VPs with the last name "Bidwill." (During the 2003 NFL Draft, the Baltimore Ravens were prepared to trade their 2nd-round pick and their 2004 1st-

round pick for the Patriots' 1st-round pick if Kyle Boller, the quarterback they wanted, were still available after the Cardinals made their back-to-back selections. After the deal went through, Patriots director of football research Ernie Adams exclaimed, "Thank God for the Cardinals. When you need them to f--- it up, they f--- it up."¹⁰⁷)

A related non-coincidence is that: 1) Carolina Panthers owner Jerry Richardson stays out of football management; and, 2) Richardson's Panthers nearly beat the Patriots in the 2003 Super Bowl. Given that Richardson shares with only George Halas the distinction of having been both an NFL player and owner, you might expect him to be an activist owner. You would be wrong: "I don't [get] involved in football matters. We have personnel people and coaches for that... I think I can count only five times in our history when I addressed a coach over something that miffed me."¹⁰⁸

Kraft deserves tremendous credit for evolving from a hands-on owner into an observer of football operations. Before the 1996 NFL Draft, Kraft overruled then-head coach Bill Parcells' preference for a defensive player over wide receiver Terry Glenn. In 1998, Kraft was criticized for "alighting from his limousine to scout a potential draft pick and later, after all but clicking the stopwatch himself, evaluating for reporters the player's ability as a cornerback."¹⁰⁹ Even the Dallas Cowboys, who won three Super Bowls in the '90s, illustrate the destructive power owners can have. Owner Jerry Jones' passion for winning and obsession with football operations prevented him from allowing coach Jimmy Johnson to coach and wrecked what might have been a decade-long dynasty. It is a paradox that recurs endlessly throughout professional sports. After many losing seasons, Jones eventually swallowed his pride and wisely handed true control to Bill Parcells who brought the Cowboys back to the playoffs in just his first season.

Like his friend Jerry Jones, Bob Kraft learned through painful experience to focus squarely on his implicit role as "chairman of the board" of Patriots football operations. Kraft describes his NFL education:

"When I bought the team, I was a kid with peach fuzz who hadn't shaved. And I got nicks and scrapes. It's nice to learn how to shave on someone else's beard but I had to shave on my own—using Gillette products of course. ... [Y]ou have to get knocked around and see for yourself first hand. It's an intoxicating business and you can get seduced by it. ... My involvement in the trenches was something I would change."¹¹⁰

Now, Belichick is CEO. As chairman, Kraft appoints the best people and asks them tough, probing questions but never forces his answers on them. VP of player personnel Scott Pioli really appreciates Kraft's trust: "I'm thankful Robert allows us to do what we do. He understands what we have going here. We've got an owner that asks questions—but doesn't question us."¹¹¹ By serving his football professionals as a sounding board, business advisor, and devil's advocate, Kraft complements rather

than undermines them. They, in turn, are completely honest and forthright with Kraft because they know he trusts their professional judgment, as Belichick explains: “Robert has gone above and beyond [giving us the tools to win]. He provides support as well as genuine friendship. Robert’s the owner—the boss, but also a good friend.”¹¹² Because Kraft had listened carefully to Belichick and bought into Belichick’s principles for building a successful football organization, Kraft patiently ignored the naysayers as the Patriots lost fourteen of their first twenty games under Belichick: “People were calling me dumb and calling for me to fire him, but I believed in him. The reason I brought him here is because I thought he had a system which was bigger than any one player.”¹¹³ And Kraft’s trust in his executives kept him from panicking, as many fans did, when they released long-time star Lawyer Milloy: “I trust Bill’s judgment to do things that are right for the team. He explained to me what he was doing and we supported him. Did I feel bad as a fan? Absolutely.”¹¹⁴

TOM BRADY: CONSUMMATE LEADER

“This guy’s the best quarterback in the league right now, and one of the best ever to play.”¹¹⁵

– *Carolina Panthers safety Mike Minter*

“We all felt that if Tom had the ball at the end, we would win [the Super Bowl]. He just gave us that kind of confidence.”¹¹⁶

– *Patriots running back Antowain Smith*

“If I had to pick one quarterback to win one game for me, I’d take Brady.”¹¹⁷

– *Troy Aikman, who quarterbacked the Cowboys to victory in Super Bowls XXVII, XXVIII, and XXX*

“Men want to be like him and women want to be with him. We’re not jealous of him. We just want his life. Just for one day. Everybody wants to be Tom Brady.”¹¹⁸

– *Patriots tight end Christian Fauria*

“[As a rookie, Brady] had moxie and he had character and he had that competitive fire. He had all of the qualities that allow you to develop into [a great quarterback], but there are a lot of people that have thrown abilities away [and] never reached their potential. Who knows what his potential is as a football player, but using his brain, I mean he is already right at the top of the league as far as being able to handle [the mental challenges].”¹¹⁹

– *Patriots offensive coordinator Charlie Weis*

The Patriots’ 6th-round draft pick in 2000, Tom Brady, was a lonely bachelor. Girls laughed when he said he played for the Patriots, and he was forced to wait in line at nightclubs like everyone else. But Brady was supremely confident,

telling Patriots owner Robert Kraft “Drafting me was the best decision the Patriots ever made.”¹²⁰ Brady immediately went to work proving his bold statement. As the fourth-string quarterback, Tom Brady prepared each week as if he were the starter. Wide receiver David Patten joined the Patriots before Brady’s second season and quickly noticed Brady teaching teammates how to play better: “Tom carried himself like this was his team. I thought, ‘If he’s this confident as a backup, I can only imagine how he’d be running the show.’”¹²¹ When Drew Bledsoe was injured in Week 2 and Brady stepped in, even sportswriters were wondering “Who’s Tom Brady?”¹²² Brady began his career by throwing 162 passes without an interception, a new NFL record.

Two Super Bowl MVP trophies later, Brady walks on water, and his toughest challenge is fending off fans, including millions of female admirers. He bought Lawyer Milloy’s house when Milloy left for Buffalo because “his own house is under siege—by panting female fans! They leave cookies, flowers, candy, soup, pictures, marriage proposals and thongs.”¹²³

Bill Belichick regularly praises players on teams he’s about to compete against but seldom brags about his own players. Asked to compare then-onetime Super Bowl MVP Tom Brady with the legendary Joe Montana, Belichick said, “They’re both right-handed quarterbacks. You’re talking about Joe Montana. The guy is a Hall of Fame quarterback. He’s won however many Super Bowls he’s won.”¹²⁴ So it was very revealing when Belichick, basking in his team’s second Super Bowl win, answered David Letterman’s question of whether he would want Tom Brady or Joe Montana in a pressure game with “Tom Brady, Phil Simms, Bert Jones.”¹²⁵ Belichick now places Brady at the summit of his quarterback pantheon because:

“He’s got a lot of elements of a combination of guys. He has a charisma and a presence like Bert Jones. He has a work ethic and a sense of purpose like a Phil Simms. Simms was one of the hardest workers on the team in terms of lifting weights and all of the offseason stuff that the quarterbacks don’t always do. Tom is like that.”¹²⁶

Brady listens, learns, and improves himself better than anyone Belichick ever coached: “You point him in the right direction and he runs with it.”¹²⁷ Belichick says this is essential: “I don’t know how you get any better if you can’t take coaching. If you can’t take constructive criticism, how do you improve?”¹²⁸

Tom Brady is fiercely competitive and never surrenders. In high school, Brady’s freshman football team lost all nine of its games, but Brady still couldn’t get on the field as the quarterback. He stuck with the sport. The defining moment in Brady’s life came at the University of Michigan. Furious about playing backup to future NFL quarterback Brian Griese, Brady nearly transferred to another school where he could be the starter. Instead, Brady impressed the hell out of Michigan head coach Lloyd Carr: