

Chapter 3

GOOD PLAYERS... GREAT TEAM

“Let’s face it, this isn’t Joe Montana with Jerry Rice and John Taylor out there. It’s just a tough bunch of guys who step up and make plays.”²³³

– *Patriots offensive coordinator Charlie Weis*

“They may not be the most talented at every position, but as a team, they were the most talented. I think that’s even more significant. I think they set a great standard. Not only for themselves, but for everyone, what team is about.”²³⁴

– *New York Jets running back Curtis Martin*

On November 22, 2001, *Boston Globe* writer Ron Borges made the seemingly indisputable remark that “this Patriot team isn’t going to win two Super Bowls any time soon.”²³⁵ Fans, reporters, and most NFL insiders agreed the Patriots “obviously” lacked sufficient talent to win a championship, let alone two. All were stunned when the Patriots became world champions just 73 days later. When the Patriots emerged victorious from a second Super Bowl 728 days after their first, NFL experts knew their “talent” measuring devices were broken, but they were clueless how to recalibrate them. The Patriots obviously possessed “talent” that no one could detect.

The Patriots’ roster is full of good-but-not-great players who maximize their collective potential through healthy competition, selfless teamwork, meticulous preparation, mistake avoidance, smart decisions, dedication to organizational success, *etc.* Patriots coaches’ performance-enhancing training and brilliant game plans would accomplish nothing without outstanding individual and collective effort within the organizational framework by players possessing solid football abilities. The Patriots’ success formula was clear to *ESPN*’s Len Pasquarelli even before the magical 2001 Patriots secured a playoff spot: “[Belichick] has fashioned a roster of modestly talented players into a club that wins by playing physically on both sides of the ball and heeding the details many other teams simply take for granted.”²³⁶

Belichick preached “collective performance” to players in June 2001 by naming thirty first-time Pro Bowl players from the 2000 season and telling his players that “all were on playoff teams in 2000. They didn’t make it because every single scheme and game plan revolved around these individuals but because their teams embraced a program, chemistry gained momentum and they won. Almost seven of every 10 Pro Bowlers came off playoff rosters.”²³⁷

Though the Patriots' "talent" level rose impressively from 2001 to 2003, new Patriots were no less tough, prepared, smart, selfless, or football-loving. Such players are "talented" in less visible traits often ignored by NFL observers. A classic example is linebacker Tedy Bruschi. When Belichick and Al Groh convinced then-Patriots head coach Bill Parcells to draft Bruschi late in Round 3 of the 1996 NFL Draft, nine months before the Patriots played the Packers in Super Bowl XXXI, they didn't even know what position Bruschi could play (because Bruschi had been a defensive lineman in college but was too small to be an NFL lineman). But Bruschi had such football passion and productivity (tying the NCAA sack record) that he was catnip to Belichick and Groh. Belichick remembers the draft room discussion: "We're taking him, we're taking a good football player. We don't know what we're going to do with him exactly, but we'll find something."²³⁸ Groh had fallen in love with Bruschi while watching his own son play in a college All-Star game:

"Everyone from the West team gravitated toward Tedy. They had only been together four or five days, but here was this bunch of All-Stars, looking to this guy as their leader. The second thing was his unbridled enthusiasm for the game. It was hard to miss. He performed in their practice like he was in the middle of a playoff game. ... Anyone who has ever watched Tedy walks away saying, 'There's something about that guy.'"²³⁹

STAR TEAM LACKS STARS

"I asked two personnel directors, 'Who would you double-team on the Patriots roster?' After a long pause, both said no one."²⁴⁰

— *Pat Kirwan, NFL.com*

"It's not about talent, it's about how the team plays. That's the litmus. Let's see how we play. Let's see how we coach. What the team looks like on paper doesn't mean a thing."²⁴¹

— *Bill Belichick*

After outperforming all 30 or 31¹ other professional football teams twice in three seasons, the New England Patriots are the NFL's best team of the early 21st Century. In 2003, the Patriots not only won the Super Bowl (going 3-0 in the playoffs) but also had an undefeated (4-0) preseason in which they scored twice as many points as they gave up, had the NFL's best regular season record (14-2), and surrendered fewer regular season points than any other team (238, versus a league-wide average of 333.3). The 2003 and 2004 Patriots combined to string together 21 straight wins, the longest-ever NFL winning streak.

The 2003 Patriots beat Miami on a humid 84° day and again on a 28° day following a blizzard that dumped 30 inches (2½ feet) of snow on Foxboro. They beat the Jets at 71° and at 30°. They beat Philadelphia at 82°, yet won four more games in

¹There are now 32 NFL teams, but the Houston Texans weren't yet competing in 2001.

sub-33° temperatures: Dallas (33°), Indianapolis (32°), Jacksonville (25°), and Tennessee (2°; -11° wind chill²⁴²). They beat the Giants and Browns in the rain. They beat Jacksonville and Indianapolis in the snow. They won on a foggy 35° Monday night in Denver, where it's hard to breathe and the ball carries farther. They beat Houston, Indianapolis, and Carolina in windless, temperature-controlled domed stadiums. No matter the conditions, there was no beating the 2003 Patriots after the first month.

Despite these achievements, experts see few of the league's "best" or "most talented" players on the Patriots' roster. The NFL players, coaches, and fans who vote for the 43-man AFC Pro Bowl team saw only two top players on either the 2001 or 2003 Patriots:

- In 2001, the Patriots triumphed over the AFC's three other conference semifinal teams, each of which had either five Pro Bowlers (Oakland Raiders) or six (Baltimore Ravens; Pittsburgh Steelers). Only two Patriots, Tom Brady and Lawyer Milloy, were voted onto the AFC Pro Bowl team (though Troy Brown and Ty Law were added as injury replacements). Though the Denver Broncos finished 8-8 and missed the playoffs, six Broncos (seven including replacements) made the 2001 Pro Bowl.²⁴³
- In 2003, the Kansas City Chiefs and Baltimore Ravens each had eight players on the AFC Pro Bowl roster, yet both teams were knocked out of the playoffs in their opening-round games. The Patriots again won the Super Bowl, but only cornerback Ty Law and defensive lineman Richard Seymour were selected for the Pro Bowl (though Willie McGinest was added as an injury replacement).

Bill Belichick couldn't care less. He doesn't believe in "individual achievement" in a football context, let alone care about it: "Our goals this year are about what our team can accomplish this year."²⁴⁴ And he has convinced his players to focus on collective goals too. In his low-key-but-mesmerizing speech to the team before Super Bowl XXXVIII, Belichick placed the Patriots' first Super Bowl trophy on a table and said, "What this trophy stands for is the team. Not the guy who leads the league in punting. Not the guy with 15 sacks. It's about the team."²⁴⁵

UNPRECEDENTED DISRESPECT

The 2001 and 2003 Patriots are the only Super Bowl winners ever to have just two players selected for the Pro Bowl. For each season since the AFL and NFL merged in 1970 (Super Bowl V), I have calculated how many players each Super Bowl participant sent to that season's Pro Bowl. (I ignore the pre-merger seasons because each league had two Pro Bowl rosters.) Perhaps most astonishingly, 33 of the 34 Super Bowl *losers* had more than two Pro Bowl players! Only the 2000 New York Giants, who were crushed by the Baltimore Ravens 34-7 in Super Bowl XXXV,

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had just two. The disrespect shown to the 2001 and 2003 Patriots players is unprecedented in NFL history:

<i>Season</i>	<i>Super Bowl winner</i>	<i>Pro Bowl players</i>	<i>Super Bowl loser</i>	<i>Pro Bowl players</i>
1970	Baltimore Colts	3	Dallas Cowboys	3
1971	Dallas Cowboys	7	Miami Dolphins	7
1972	Miami Dolphins	9	Washington Redskins	5
1973	Miami Dolphins	11	Minnesota Vikings	7
1974	Pittsburgh Steelers	5	Minnesota Vikings	7
1975	Pittsburgh Steelers	11	Dallas Cowboys	3
1976	Oakland Raiders	6	Minnesota Vikings	8
1977	Dallas Cowboys	7	Denver Broncos	5
1978	Pittsburgh Steelers	10	Dallas Cowboys	9
1979	Pittsburgh Steelers	10	Los Angeles Rams	5
1980	Oakland Raiders	5	Philadelphia Eagles	3
1981	San Francisco 49ers	6	Cincinnati Bengals	5
1982	Washington Redskins	4	Miami Dolphins	4
1983	Los Angeles Raiders	8	Washington Redskins	6
1984	San Francisco 49ers	10	Miami Dolphins	7
1985	Chicago Bears	9	New England Patriots	8
1986	New York Giants	7	Denver Broncos	6
1987	Washington Redskins	3	Denver Broncos	3
1988	San Francisco 49ers	5	Cincinnati Bengals	9
1989	San Francisco 49ers	6	Denver Broncos	4
1990	New York Giants	6	Buffalo Bills	10
1991	Washington Redskins	7	Buffalo Bills	8
1992	Dallas Cowboys	6	Buffalo Bills	11
1993	Dallas Cowboys	11	Buffalo Bills	7
1994	San Francisco 49ers	10	San Diego Chargers	3
1995	Dallas Cowboys	9	Pittsburgh Steelers	6
1996	Green Bay Packers	5	New England Patriots	6
1997	Denver Broncos	5	Green Bay Packers	7
1998	Denver Broncos	9	Atlanta Falcons	5
1999	St. Louis Rams	6	Tennessee Titans	4
2000	Baltimore Ravens	5	New York Giants	2
2001	New England Patriots	2	St. Louis Rams	5
2002	Tampa Bay Buccaneers	5	Oakland Raiders	5
2003	New England Patriots	2	Carolina Panthers	3
Average	Excluding 2001 & 2003	7.06	All Years	5.76

Note: Pro Bowl rosters exclude injury replacement players. Source (1997-2003): www.supernfl.com/ProBowl.html
 Source (1996 and earlier): www.pro-football-reference.com/misc/pbindex.htm

Since Super Bowl V, the average Super Bowl loser has had 5.76 Pro Bowlers, and the average winner (excluding Belichick's two Patriots teams) has had 7.06 Pro Bowlers. Even the Patriots' two Super Bowl-losing teams had many more Pro Bowlers (eight in 1985; six in 1996). The NFL players, coaches and fans who vote for the Pro Bowl have sent a clear message: the Patriots may be a great team, but they're not a collection of great individual talent. The Patriots are winning without stars, something no other champion has ever done.

Patriots players have admitted as much. Basking in the glory of his first Super Bowl win, Patriots linebacker Mike Vrabel said, "On paper you may not look as

talented or as fast or as strong as your opponent, but if you get guys to buy into a system and fight to the bitter end, you can accomplish incredible things.”²⁴⁶

In mid-December 2003, Patriots players and coaches answered repeated media questions concerning Pro Bowl voting by saying they weren’t concerned, both because they were completely focused on team success and because team success leads to personal recognition. Bill Belichick: “I can tell you where [Pro Bowl] players come from. The teams that are winning. If you want to be in the Pro Bowl, winning will get you there quicker than anything else.”²⁴⁷ Middle linebacker Tedy Bruschi: “Individual accolades come with team success, and that’s all I focus on.”²⁴⁸ Veteran fullback Larry Centers: “As you get older, you realize individual honors come as a result of team play. Teams that play well send more guys to the Pro Bowl.”²⁴⁹

Historically, winning teams have indeed placed more players on Pro Bowl rosters. Belichick’s Patriots are the two glaring anomalies. An argument can be made that the 14-5 (11-5 in the regular season) Patriots of 2001 needed more luck than the average Super Bowl champion and did not “deserve” the typical 7.06 Pro Bowl berths. Since the 1980 Oakland Raiders won the Super Bowl with a 14-5 (11-5 regular season) record, only the 13-6 (10-6 regular season) 1988 San Francisco 49ers have won the Super Bowl with five or more losses. But even these “weak” Super Bowl champions each had five Pro Bowlers.

Setting aside 2001, the 17-2 Patriots of 2003 were as dominant as any team since the 18-1 1985 Chicago Bears (9 Pro Bowlers). Of the seventeen most recent Super Bowl victors, only the 1989 San Francisco 49ers (6 Pro Bowlers), 1991 Washington Redskins (7 Pro Bowlers), and 1998 Denver Broncos (9 Pro Bowlers) have gone 17-2, and no team has done better. To have only two Pro Bowlers after such a dominating season is completely without parallel. In the chart below, the 2001 and 2003 Patriots are the two dots with just two Pro Bowl players. The trend line predicts that the 2001 Patriots “should” have had at least five Pro Bowl players and the 2003 Patriots “should” have had at least seven. Excluding the two Patriots Super Bowl victories, the trendline is higher, predicting the 2001 Patriots “should” have had six Pro Bowlers and the 2003 Patriots “should” have had nearly eight.