

Chapter 4

TWO SUPER BOWL VICTORIES IN THREE SEASONS

“We better start learning from [the Patriots] because they’ll beat everybody forever. . . . They’ve done a great job of building the roster. They’ve done a great job convincing all the players on the roster of their importance and when guys have a chance to step in play, they produce. That’s where we’re all trying to get to, but they’ve just done it a lot better than the rest of us.”³⁰⁵

– *Buffalo Bills general manager Tom Donahoe*

This chapter summarizes the Patriots’ 2001, 2002, and 2003 seasons. (Volume 2 will analyze the 2004 season.) To understand why general managers like Buffalo’s Tom Donahoe and the New York Giants’ Ernie Accorsi (who says “They’ve made tremendously sound [personnel] judgments and they’ve coached the heck out of them”³⁰⁶) so fear the Patriots, we need to appreciate the magnitude of the team’s accomplishments.

2001

“We’ve got a whole team full of underdogs, and now we’re the top dogs.”³⁰⁷

– *Tom Brady, after winning Super Bowl XXXVI*

“[Super Bowl XXXVI] was an extraordinary demonstration of the power of ‘team,’ because there is no way the Patriots should be this good. They just believe they are, and for them, that has been enough.”³⁰⁸

– *Paul Attner, The Sporting News*

As the 2001 NFL season kicked off, the New England Patriots were coming off a 5-11 season and considered 75-1 shots to win Super Bowl XXXVI.³⁰⁹ They were a “dead-end bunch of players—waiver-wire alumni, discards, has-beens and wannabes.”³¹⁰ The team lost three of its first four games, but by December 2001, *Boston Globe* sportswriter Ron Borges was writing that “Bill Belichick [should be] AFC Coach of the Year [because] no coach in pro football has done so much with so little this season.”³¹¹ Buffalo Bills general manager Tom Donahoe concurred: “I don’t even know how you could consider anyone else as Coach of the Year. What Bill has done there is pretty incredible, really. . . . [H]e’s taken a relatively average team, and gotten everyone to play hard. That’s a lot easier said than done in this league.”³¹²

“Relatively average team” was an overstatement. The Patriots’ \$49.6 million payroll was second-lowest in the NFL and \$14 million below the league average.³¹³ After spending \$85 million, nearly twice as much, the Denver Broncos finished 8-8 and didn’t even make the playoffs. Bill Belichick wasn’t just winning... he was winning with both hands tied behind his back!

Making the playoffs was but the beginning of the 2001 Patriots’ Cinderella season. Oblivious to the accolades, the Patriots hadn’t impressed themselves by more than doubling their win total from the previous season: “We’re headed in a positive direction, [but] we haven’t won a damn thing yet. That’s the bottom line.”³¹⁴

The “Snow Bowl” / “Tuck Rule” Game

“The [Jets last week] treated [Raiders receivers Jerry Rice and Tim Brown] like Hall of Famers—they hardly hit them. When I’m out there, I’m not going to see numbers or credentials. If they come into my territory, they are going to get hit. We’re going for a championship, and they’re in our way.”³¹⁵

— *Patriots safety Lawyer Milloy before the Raiders playoff game*

On January 19, 2002, the Patriots took the field against the Oakland Raiders with a trip to the AFC Championship Game on the line. The “Snow Bowl” had drama, controversy and snow... tons and tons of snow. It became an instant classic for several reasons. First, did I mention they were playing in a blizzard? Second, with the Patriots losing 13-10 and just 1:43 left in the game, Tom Brady dropped back to pass, unaware that Raiders cornerback Charles Woodson was rumbling toward his backside on a blitz. Pow! Woodson slammed into Brady and the ball popped loose. Another Raider pounced on the loose ball. The Patriots’ season was finished, done, dead. *Hasta la vista*, baby. But wait! The officials are reviewing the play. What’s going on? The referee ruled it “Not a fumble”!?!? Patriots’ ball again!?!? Wow!!!!

(You can re-live the moment via the dramatic *Raider’s Radio Broadcasting Network* live audio broadcast at www.cryan.com/patriots/.)

Third, Patriots kicker Adam Vinatieri lined up for a game-tying 45-yard field goal with the Patriots’ season on the line. That in itself is a huge challenge for any kicker. But the four inches of fresh snow covering the grass made it treacherous for Vinatieri to plant his non-kicking foot and take a big swing with his other leg. But Adam somehow managed to squeeze the ball just over the crossbar during a raging snow storm with 27 seconds remaining. It was arguably the greatest kick in NFL history, given the Arctic conditions, playoff atmosphere, and season-ending stakes. Even great kickers Gary Anderson, Morten Andersen, and John Kasay were astounded. Cleveland Browns kicker Phil Dawson calls it “the greatest kick I’ve ever seen.”³¹⁶ Not even Vinatieri himself was sure his kick had enough distance: “We were pushing the envelope a little bit there. I was hoping as I kicked it... Once I saw it was long enough, it was time to be happy.”³¹⁷ A month later, Patriots running back

Antowain Smith joked, after Vinatieri kicked a walk-off Super Bowl game-winner, “If he can kick it through snow, I know that he can kick it through confetti.”³¹⁸

Fourth, in overtime, the Patriots won the coin toss, marched downfield on 8-for-8 passing by Tom Brady, and Vinatieri kicked the game-winner. The “waiver wire team” with the league’s second-lowest payroll had beaten the Raiders, a super team that would dominate the AFC in 2002 and go to the Super Bowl.

Democrats will admit George Bush won the 2000 election before Raiders fans will admit the Patriots beat them in the “Snow Bowl.” Why? The 2001 “Snow Bowl” has another nickname: “the Tuck Rule Game.” Referee Walt Coleman initially ruled that Tom Brady had fumbled the ball and the Raiders had recovered. But Coleman saw only Brady’s backside. After replay official Rex Stuart ordered a review, Coleman re-watched the play from other angles and knew instantly that his initial ruling had been wrong. Coleman shocked viewers by invoking “the tuck rule,” a then-obscure-but-now-infamous rule that applies only when a quarterback starts throwing the ball, changes his mind and decides not to throw the ball, starts pulling the ball back in toward his body but has not yet tucked the ball back under his arm. In such a circumstance, the “tuck rule” states that a ball knocked loose is an incomplete pass, not a fumble. Consequently, the “fumble” was ruled an incomplete pass and the Patriots retained possession.

Coleman has steadfastly insisted that invoking the tuck rule was an obvious decision. After the game, Coleman said, “When I got over to the replay monitor and looked at it, it was obvious that [Brady’s] arm was coming forward. He was trying to tuck the ball and they just knocked it out of his hand.”³¹⁹ More than a year later, he said, “From an officiating standpoint that call was easy for me.”³²⁰ Controversy persisted more than two years later when he said, “At the monitor, I was able to see the play from the front angle, which allowed me to see the arm motion. And I had a lot of people ask me how could I make that call, but that’s because they don’t know the rule book.”³²¹ As despised as the rule is, the league has never since changed it, and the league has explicitly and repeatedly maintained that Coleman’s final ruling was correct. Director of officiating Mike Pereira went out of his way to explain the rule and why Coleman’s ruling was correct. The rule may be dumb (though no one since has ever proposed a more popular alternative), but the ruling was correct, given the rule.

The Patriots caught a lucky break, but due to the rule, not the ruling. Experts agree. *ESPN* NFL expert John Clayton explains: “The tape showed that Brady’s arm was still moving down as he decided not to pass but to tuck the ball in. Coleman made the correct interpretation of the rule, calling it a downward passing motion and calling the play an incomplete pass and not a fumble.”³²² Joel Buchsbaum said, “if you go by the rules as they are written, the referees made the right call. Obviously, it was an unfair call, but it was the right call.”³²³

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The facts notwithstanding, immediately after the game, Oakland cornerback Charles Woodson was livid, swearing “It’s bull----. I thought it was a bull---- call. It never should have been overturned.”³²⁴ Raiders receiver Jerry Rice said, “I feel like we had one taken away from us.”³²⁵ And Brady was smiling like a murderer acquitted by a jury: “I wasn’t sure. Yeah, I was throwing the ball. How do you like that?”³²⁶ It’s likely neither Woodson nor Brady knew the relatively obscure rule. But the Raiders have steadfastly refused to accept that the rule was applied appropriately. One month later, Raiders owner Al Davis said, “I had no idea Walt Coleman was from France,”³²⁷ referring to the French skating judge, Marie-Reine Le Gougne, who traded votes with Russia during the 2002 Winter Olympics. More than a half a year later, the Raiders were still steamed enough to protest the call by walking out of a preseason talk by referees to explain the new season’s rule changes. Ironically, peer pressure to walk out on the NFL officials was so intense that even Raiders defensive back Terrance Shaw, who had won the Super Bowl as a Patriot six months earlier, walked out!!! (Shaw’s motives were slightly different from his irate teammates’: “I was hungry. And [the officials] didn’t have anything to say. I was told everybody’s got to [walk out]. It’s a team thing.”³²⁸)

Oakland fans will always believe they were robbed... to which Patriots fans will always point to referee Ben Dreith’s December 18, 1976 phantom “rushing the passer” penalty on Patriot nose tackle Ray “Sugar Bear” Hamilton, which everyone involved (except Ben Dreith) admits was a truly atrocious ruling and unfairly knocked the Patriots out of a playoff game they had just won after forcing the Raiders to punt, had Dreith not called the phantom penalty. That penalty “even shocked Raiders QB Ken Stabler, who allegedly had been roughed. Stabler will tell you to this day that Hamilton did nothing wrong on the play.”³²⁹ Moments earlier, the Patriots had just been robbed by a non-call on their preceding drive: “Steve Grogan’s pass hit [tight end Russ Francis] right in the chest for what would have been a first down, but the ball fell to the ground because (Oakland linebacker) Phil Villapiano had Russ’s hands pinned. But there was no call.”³³⁰ Those 1976 Raiders had lost just one game all season: a 48-17 trouncing by the New England Patriots on October 3. The Raiders went on to easy victories over the Steelers, 24-7 in the AFC Championship Game, and Vikings, 32-14 in the Super Bowl, denying the Patriots a championship title they felt was rightfully theirs. Patriots fans have never forgotten. Raiders fans will never forget “the Tuck Rule Game.”

The Ketchup Stadium game

“[We] were playing at home and [we] kind of expected to win and, when [we] didn’t, it hurt a little more. Everybody was looking forward to the Super Bowl.”³³¹

– *Pittsburgh Steelers receiver Hines Ward*

The Patriots then traveled to Heinz Field in Pittsburgh to battle the supremely confident 14-3 Steelers in an AFC Championship Game few believed the Patriots deserved to play in. Patriots players fed off the disrespect they received from the Steelers and the media. Patriots defensive lineman Anthony Pleasant said afterward, "Any time a team runs off at the mouth, you want to take it to them."³³² When the media asked Bill Belichick before the game whether Las Vegas, which favored the Steelers by a whopping 9½ points, was disrespecting the Patriots, Belichick underscored the depth of Vegas' disrespect: "The spread is the same as when Pittsburgh played 1-12 Detroit a few weeks ago."³³³ But Belichick secretly harbored confidence. Bill's dad Steve says "Even I was surprised" when his son asked him on the Wednesday before the game, "When are you going to [the Super Bowl in] New Orleans?"³³⁴ One reason for Belichick's confidence: the Patriots had discovered how Steelers receivers were lining up differently for different plays.³³⁵ The Patriots jumped out to a 21-3 lead and held on for a 24-17 win. The Patriots' "waiver wire team" had stunned the Steelers on their home turf in Pittsburgh.

NFL "experts" like *NFL Insider's* Vic Carucci busily ate their words:

"I was among the legions of preseason prognosticators that had this team finishing dead last in the AFC East. I was among the many doomsayers who assumed their season was over after an 0-2 start and the loss of Drew Bledsoe to severe internal injuries after a fierce collision with Jets linebacker Mo Lewis. I said, 'Tom Who?' when Tom Brady took Bledsoe's place."³³⁶

David slays Goliath in Super Bowl XXXVI

As surprising as upsetting Oakland and shocking Pittsburgh were, those games were pure prelude to what is arguably the greatest upset in Super Bowl history. The 2001 St. Louis Rams were 16-2, scored an amazing 503 points while surrendering only 273 during the regular season, and then outscored their playoff opponents 74-41. Before the Super Bowl, most everyone already dubbed the Rams a "dynasty" because they were supposedly "invincible" and obviously headed to their second Super Bowl victory in three seasons:

"A trillion words have been written and spoken down here in devout testimony to the overpowering greatness of the St. Louis Rams. The best offense ever. A stout defense. The best combination runner-receiver in the game, perhaps in the history of the game. Speed everywhere. . . . a team that, on paper, can be beaten only by cosmic intervention or by quietly slipping an extra man or two on the field when the officials aren't looking."³³⁷

Patriots fans feared a repeat of Super Bowl XX (January 26, 1986) when the Chicago Bears steamrolled the Pats 46-10. The media and most of the football world expected a rout. Bill Belichick had a different opinion. Steve Belichick says his son