# The Pursuit of Perfection

*Proving that a coach really does matter, Bill Belichick keeps the Patriots from winning a nation's love*

**by Bob Latham**

As of press time, the New England Patriots have won more games—18—than any other NFL team in a single season. After completing an undefeated regular season, the Patriots are the odds-on favorite to win the Super Bowl and eclipse the 1972 Miami Dolphins' 17–0 perfect season with an even more impressive 19–0 run. But unlike those 1972 Dolphins—and the Green Bay Packers of the 1960s, the Boston Celtics of the 1950s and 1960s, the Chicago Bulls of the 1990s and most other American sports dynasties—the Patriots don't seem to have the overwhelming support of the sporting public as a result of this feat. I have been struggling to figure out why.

It certainly is not because Americans are anti-dynasty. Despite the "all men (and sports teams) are created equal" fervor that led to the founding of this country 232 years ago, we Americans still take a certain comfort in dynasties. In the political world, we elect presidents with the familiar last names of Adams, Roosevelt, Kennedy and Bush. In the sports world, we like to know who is truly at the top of the heap, and the masses turn out to see them.

But we also have a certain idea in our heads of what a dynasty should look like. And having seen football dynasties in the past, we even have a particular idea of what the leading figures in that dynasty should look like. When you are placing yourself among the greatest teams in the history of the sport, it's not enough to be just a "good quarterback" or a "good coach," as it would be if you were with simply a highly successful team. Rather, the bar gets raised to the level where the great historical figures in that sport have placed it. So, let's deconstruct the Patriots with that in mind.

Certainly, the league MVP, Tom Brady, is everything you would want in a football dynasty quarterback. He is Joe Montana and Joe Namath rolled into one person—the cool, calm, good-looking, workmanlike general on the field with a trail of supermodels off the field. Even if you aren't a Patriots fan, it is easy to root for Tom Brady, a late bloomer who has blossomed into one of the greatest quarterbacks in the sport.

Similarly, the Patriots' defense is very much like the 1972 Dolphins' "no-name defense" (though the names of the "no-names" are now well-known). The Patriots' defense is greater than the sum of its parts but at the same time does bring well-deserved recognition to the talent of those parts. The fact that they place the team above individual accolades also makes them easy to root for. So, there is no disconnect between the Patriots' defense and what we would perceive as a defense for the ages.

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Not even Randy Moss—who this year broke Jerry Rice's record for touchdown receptions in a season, and whose background is spotted with controversies related to such things as illegal drugs, traffic incidents and violence allegations—is the focal point for those wanting to see a Patriots defeat. Every dynastic team needs a story of redemption. The fact that Moss now has some maturity to go along with his prodigious talent, coupled with America's infatuation with an outlaw-turned-icon story, makes him a net plus for Patriot fandom.

No, the character in the Patriots' drama that does not match the central casting version is the coach. Bill Belichick simply doesn't fit the mold of what we want in a football dynasty coach. Can you picture there someday being a "Bill Belichick Trophy" awarded to the AFC Conference champion or the Super Bowl champion similar to the Vince Lombardi and George Halas Trophies? Lombardi, Halas, 1972 Dolphins coach Don Shula and San Francisco's Bill Walsh had character and countenances you could picture being chiseled onto Mount Rushmore. Belichick? Not so much. If Lombardi, Halas, Walsh, Shula and Belichick rushed the Delta House at Faber College, it would likely be Belichick who would be sent to the ancillary room with Mohammed, Jugdish, Sydney and Clayton—though he would no doubt find a way to spy on the real party through the walls.

Belichick as a coach suffers from what keeps many good players in any sport from being perceived as "great" players: He has no signature move, moment or innovation. His "moments" have often had tarnish associated with them—"Spygate," which cost his team their first round draft pick next year; his departure from the Jets to the Patriots, which was also punished by the NFL; and his undistinguished run as head coach of the Cleveland Browns. He hasn't brought about innovation like Walsh or Halas. Dressed in a hooded sweatshirt on game days, he hasn't cut the figure of Lombardi on the sidelines. (The legendary voice of NFL Films, John Facenda, once said: "Lombardi. A certain magic still lingers in the very name. It speaks of duels in the snow and cold November mud.")

If the Patriots do win it all this year, it is still unlikely that any magic will linger in the name "Belichick" and he might be even better remembered by his nickname "Belicheat." How that affects the Patriots' legacy, only time will tell. But right now, it is most certainly the biggest reason for any lack of public support for Patriot perfection. ■

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