

“That doesn’t mean anything. There is an opportunity but there are still some free agents out there. And this team is always making moves. You never know who could come in. There’s nothing I can do about that. I’m just trying to make this team in whatever role I can. Whatever they want me to do, I’ll do it. Backup tackle. Swing guard. Whatever.”¹⁷⁹⁴

Patriot players also believe competition enables them to learn more from their teammates. Was long-time Patriot running back Kevin Faulk disappointed that star Corey Dillon joined the team, likely reducing Faulk’s playing time? Not at all:

“He’s a great addition to our offense and to our team. He’s a Pro Bowl back, it just makes us that much better. When you see him working and you see his work ethic, you can see why he’s that type of football player. I’m really looking forward to working with him. Anytime you can get out there and work with a Pro Bowl back, maybe pick up some things and he can pick up some things from me, it’s only going to make you a better player.”¹⁷⁹⁵

Competition never ends. After becoming the first undrafted rookie to make the Patriots’ opening day 53-man roster since 2001, cornerback Randall Gay wasn’t rushing out to buy a house: “It’s harder to stay here than to get here. I now know I’ve got to work twice as hard because there’ll also be somebody trying to take what I’ve got.”¹⁷⁹⁶

“COMPETITION” NEED NOT BE A DIRTY WORD

“I like a challenge this time of year [during training camp]. That’s what keeps you going after 10, 11, 12 years. The competition is good, and it’s going to be good during the season when you’ve got somebody going down [with an injury] and somebody can step in who’s just as good.”¹⁷⁹⁷

– *New Patriot and 12-year NFL veteran defensive lineman Keith Traylor*

“It’s a great group of guys here, especially the receivers. Everybody is helpful, there’s no jealousy.”¹⁷⁹⁸

– *Patriots rookie wide receiver P.K. Sam*

Many assume “competition” is zero-sum: if I win, you lose, and vice-versa. Patriots players see things very differently. To them, competition is good. Competition is fun. Competition strengthens both the team and each individual. Healthy competition pushes each player to maximize his potential. Each player embraces competition because he wants to win and understands that having multiple talented players at each position gives coaches flexibility to overcome injuries, exploit advantageous matchups against different types of opponents, and rotate players in and out of the game to keep players fresh. (Making a regular practice of rotating

players is especially beneficial when playing in oppressive heat and/or humidity, like the 100° Arizona weather during the 2004 Patriots-Cardinals game. The Patriots even rotated seven offensive linemen in and out of that game with no noticeable performance degradation.) Also, even if a player doesn't earn a spot on the Patriots' roster, competition should have helped him become a better football player and increased his chances of eventually landing an NFL job, as Belichick makes clear: "we have had players that we released go on to play for other teams. We have also had players who we released, that we brought back and have played well on our team."¹⁷⁹⁹

Backup safety and special teams player Shawn Mayer is a good example. During the critical final minutes of Super Bowl XXXVIII, Mayer was on the field at safety after both of the Patriots' starting safeties were injured. Mayer had been waived by the Patriots earlier that season... not once but twice!

Patriots VP of player personnel Scott Pioli (who was voted "class clown" by his 1983 high school classmates) appreciates the value of tough love because he lived it:

"I was a bit of a cutup in high school, kind of a knucklehead when I got to Central [Connecticut State University]. By far the one person who had the biggest effect on me was [high school football coach] Frank Leonard. If not for him, I'd probably be back in Washingtonville flipping pizzas. He straightened my life out. He was a coach. He was a friend. He was a nasty SOB and one of the most caring people I ever met. He... taught me about second chances."¹⁸⁰⁰

Players who respond to competition by striving daily to improve themselves are more likely to be chosen for the final Patriots team and more likely to become successful NFL football players. Consequently, the Patriots use competition as a central organizing principle that energizes and motivates and strengthens, not merely as a device for choosing the final roster or deciding who will start each game. A few examples of how the Patriots use competition in almost everything they do:

- Inside linebackers coach Pepper Johnson lines up the linebackers and chucks footballs at them as hard as he can. If a player drops a ball, he must do ten pushups. If Johnson makes a bad throw or each player catches the ball, Johnson does ten pushups. Everyone enjoys the drill so much that even "the offensive coaches were standing around gleefully watching it."¹⁸⁰¹ Players even egg Johnson on, claiming he isn't throwing hard enough.
- During the Friday intra-team scrimmage preceding Super Bowl XXXVIII, Tom Brady swore he would throw a touchdown pass over safety Rodney Harrison's head, and Harrison swore he would intercept Brady. They laid down a wager: two first-class round-trip tickets anywhere in the world. When Harrison picked off Brady during that practice, Brady said, "It ruined my weekend."¹⁸⁰² That might be

slight hyperbole. I suspect winning the Super Bowl and being named MVP provided some consolation.

- Even “Scout Team” players (whose job it is to simulate the team’s upcoming opponent) compete for “playing time” on the Scout Team! In preparing for a 2001 regular season game against the St. Louis Rams (whom the Patriots would defeat in the Super Bowl later that season), Bill Belichick brought in former NFL quarterback Joe Theismann (who led the Redskins to victory in Super Bowl XVII) to simulate Rams quarterback Kurt Warner. Theismann took turns throwing passes for the Scout Team with Patriots backups Drew Bledsoe and Damon Huard. The three Scout Team quarterbacks didn’t throw a predetermined number of passes. They competed. Each quarterback stayed in until they threw an incompletion, at which time one of the others replaced them.¹⁸⁰³

Finally, competition can be a lot of fun. During their 2001 Super Bowl run, competitive dominoes games were the locker room rage with guys yelling “slap the domino, motherf---er” at each other.¹⁸⁰⁴ Backgammon is also popular. Patriots players were even trash-talking with each other before the charity bingo event “Troy Brown Celebrity Bingo” because “We’re all competitive. When we play something, we play to win.”¹⁸⁰⁵ The pressure was too intense for offensive lineman Matt Light who attended but chose not to participate because “I’m not very good. It doesn’t make me feel too good when I lose.”¹⁸⁰⁶ Troy Brown was flexing his mouth muscles: “Oh yeah. I’m one of the best. Rosevelt Colvin says he’s the best but we’ll see. Just concentrate on the numbers you want to be called and... use the right color marker.”¹⁸⁰⁷

DON’T BE A BAD GUY, MAKE THE SYSTEM THE “BAD GUY”

“If he cut me, I’m sure there’d be a good reason.”¹⁸⁰⁸

– *Cornerback Antonio Langham, who played for Belichick in Cleveland and New England*

Though Belichick doesn’t slap guys on the back or go out for drinks with the team after games, he’s also no longer a whip-cracking, foul-mouthed disciplinarian (though he *was* during his first years in Cleveland when he tried to emulate Bill Parcells without Parcells’ endearing *je ne sais quoi*... a serious mistake Belichick has since acknowledged and corrected). Belichick relies on competition and mature, dedicated players to police and discipline themselves. He doesn’t have time to be a disciplinarian or a babysitter or a parent. He has instead implemented an egalitarian system that automates disciplining for him.

A MERITOCRACY REQUIRES METRICS

By definition, a “meritocracy” requires objective assignment of merit and demerit. You can’t treat everyone fairly if you’re playing favorites. And you can’t choose winners and losers unless you know a winner when you see one. The only way to run a meritocracy is through careful, honest assessment of each player/worker’s productivity.

The Patriots film everything, even rookie camp practices: “All the coaches were around, and they filmed each and every practice session.”¹⁸⁰⁹ And the coaches watch all the films, multiple times. Coaches watch each film individually and again collectively. And they don’t relax in comfy chairs with soda and buttered popcorn. They constantly “rewind” (everything’s now digitized) and re-watch because they assign each player a grade on each play. Assistant coach Pepper Johnson explains:

“after I view the entire [game] tape, I grade my guys. . . .By [9:00 the morning after game day], all the coaches should have graded their players. For example, I will give plus and minus grades for each inside linebacker on each play. Then each one ends up with a score. We keep count of how many plays each played [and] how many tackles they made, how many they missed, if they knocked down a pass, picked up a fumble. Each defensive coach has to be ready to talk about his players individually with... the defensive coordinator. Then we watch the tapes again as a unit, and talk about every single play.”¹⁸¹⁰

Because Belichick attends practices and watches and re-watches practice and game film and knows precisely what he’s seeing (after spending decades breaking down film), he doesn’t have to guess about a guy’s effort or talent. He knows. As Baltimore Ravens VP Kevin Byrne, who worked for Belichick in Cleveland, said during Belichick’s first year as Patriots head coach, “One thing [players will] learn up there is [Belichick] sees everything, and he knows more than you think he knows.”¹⁸¹¹

The entire staff constantly and intensively monitors and assesses player performance. And coaches constantly tell each player precisely what they think of his performance. No one is ever stunned to learn the Patriots have released him. Bill Belichick despises grade inflation and never offers false praise because he believes doing so harms players:

“I am not going to tell a kid, if I don’t think he can play for us or play in the league, ‘I think you should spend the next two or three years of your life training for something that in my opinion I don’t think is realistic.’ If he wants to do it, he can do it but really if I think it is time for him to move on, I will tell him it is time for him to move on and do something else. That doesn’t mean that he has to do it, but I would tell him that as an honest

opinion. He can do whatever he wants with it. If it were different, then I would tell him differently.”¹⁸¹²

Conversely, Belichick will stand up for you if his evaluation indicates you're good enough for the NFL but not quite good enough to make the Patriots' roster. Chad Lee was an undrafted linebacker who survived the Patriots' 2003 training camp until the final round of cuts:

“Pioli and New England coach Bill Belichick thanked Lee for his effort, commended him on his ability to move from inside linebacker to outside linebacker in a matter of weeks and wished him well... Lee said Belichick and Pioli made it a point to tell him he didn't make the team because the Patriots had better linebackers and not because he performed poorly. They said he could use them as a reference.”¹⁸¹³

Belichick doesn't play favorites. Star quarterback Tom Brady admires the fact that he receives no special exemptions or privileges because he's a two-time Super Bowl MVP:

“[Belichick] treats everyone the same way. He expects out of the first year guys the same thing he expects out of the ten year vets: that you come out and practice, you know what to do, you show up on time, and you have a good attitude. ...It's nice to know that... you are going to get that same toughness out of every player you play with.”¹⁸¹⁴

Consequently, players know that lobbying or sucking up to coaches is a waste of time. As Sean Mayer put it, “You have no control over what they do and whom they pick. You just go out there and try to play your [butt] off.”¹⁸¹⁵

Finally, Bill Belichick and his assistants refuse to prejudge any player based on reputation or past performance. What a player did last season is ancient history. Patriots coaches even heavily discount how a player is currently performing if fall roster decisions are weeks or months away. Asked in June 2004 to comment on veteran cornerback Terrell Buckley's belief that he had improved, Belichick said: “Well, we'll find out. I'm glad he feels that way... but how you feel you are in June is one thing, and how you actually play in the fall is another story. ... [T]he proof will be in the performance in the fall.”¹⁸¹⁶

What role will Corey Dillon, the most talented running back ever to wear a Patriots uniform (except perhaps Curtis Martin), play in 2004? “That will be determined by what he is able to do and how effective[ly] he is able to do it.”¹⁸¹⁷ The Patriots are a true meritocracy because they tape every moment of every practice and Patriots coaches skillfully and precisely evaluate each player's performance on every play of every practice by watching and re-watching film. As Belichick says, “I've attended all the practices this year. I've watched the tapes of them. I don't sleep during those film sessions.”¹⁸¹⁸ But coaches wisely use their evaluations weeks and