

## Chapter 7

# MENTALITY

“They play well for 60 minutes. They don’t let up at 58 minutes or 59 minutes.”<sup>1221</sup>

– *Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning on the Patriots*

“We [get] in some situations, man, but we come through.”<sup>1222</sup>

– *Patriots running back Corey Dillon*

“We won one game fifteen times in a row.”<sup>1223</sup>

– *Bill Belichick, after winning Super Bowl XXXVIII*

Since December 24, 2000, Belichick’s Patriots have led thirty-two games at the end of the third quarter. They won all thirty-two of those games. 32-0! They also won two of three games that were tied after three quarters and snatched victory from the jaws of defeat in four more games they were losing at the end of the third quarter.<sup>1224</sup> In a league where 48.4% of games in 2003 were decided by seven points or less,<sup>1225</sup> the Patriots’ mental edge translates into victories.

The Patriots’ ability to hold a lead and to come from behind to win games derives from mental preparation and exceptional physical conditioning, both Belichick trademarks. CBS analyst and former Super Bowl-winning Giants quarterback Phil Simms says, “It’s like they just wear other teams out. It’s like their opponents eventually just say, ‘Hey, OK, here, you can take it.’”<sup>1226</sup> Patriots tight end Christian Fauria says: “It’s kind of like a boxer. He gets in the ring, not really sure what he can do. The guy gives him his best punches, and he’s like, ‘I can stand up to this guy. Let me do my thing.’ Nobody ever panics.”<sup>1227</sup>

Patriots are mentally tougher than average NFL players because toughness is a top criterion in personnel decisions and because the Patriots’ tough guys push one another to be even tougher. Patriots embrace physicality and take pride in self-discipline and grittiness. Mental strength helps Patriots overcome disappointments, push past pain and weariness during rough-and-tumble games, and relentlessly challenge one another to grow and improve throughout the season and offseason.

This chapter details the sources of the Patriots’ mental strength.

## **“THE SHORT TERM IS WHAT IT’S ALL ABOUT”**

“We weren’t thinking Super Bowl [in early 2001]. We were thinking, ‘Let’s win a game.’”<sup>1228</sup>

– *Bill Belichick*

“What streak? We’re just trying to win a game.”<sup>1229</sup>

– *Bill Belichick, on the team’s 17-game winning streak*

“I’m just sick of talking about the streak. When people ask, I change the subject.”<sup>1230</sup>

– *Patriots tight end Christian Fauria*

Bill Belichick preaches that “The short term is what it’s all about.”<sup>1231</sup> Patriots players know they can’t win Week 9’s game in Week 6, they can’t clinch a playoff spot in Week 6, and they can’t win the Super Bowl in Week 6. All they can do in Week 6 is everything possible to win their Week 6 game, so that’s what they focus on. Belichick believes instilling a sense of urgency in his players is essential. He agrees more with R.E.M. (“The only thing to fear is fearlessness”) than FDR (“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”). When the 2002 Patriots were struggling following a 2001 Super Bowl season, several players told the media they needed to recapture their swagger. Belichick disagreed epithetically: “We didn’t have a ‘swagger’ last year. What we had was a sense of urgency about playing well, being smart, and capitalizing on every opportunity and situation that came our way. . . . It wasn’t about a f---- swagger. You can take that swagger and shove it right up your a--.”<sup>1232</sup>

## Live in the present

“We’ve experienced the success we’ve experienced by . . . not focusing on the big picture but [instead] focusing on what’s in front of [us].”<sup>1233</sup>

– *Patriots linebacker Tedy Bruschi*

“You just have to win one game a week.”<sup>1234</sup>

– *Tom Brady*

The Patriots are neither historians nor futurists. “Right now” permeates every aspect of Bill Belichick’s coaching. As obvious as staying focused on the present sounds, players and teams often lose sight of the here-and-now, instead worrying about events beyond their current control.

Most NFL coaches preach “one game at a time,” but the entire Patriots organization lives and breathes what many consider a trite platitude. Every game is the most important of the Patriots’ season because players and coaches adopt a *Crosby, Stills & Nash* mindset: “if you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.” Explains Belichick:

“What matters to me is . . . what we can do this week. We’re playing one game [this week]. The ones that we have played don’t matter. The ones down the road, that will all take care of itself in due time. There’s nothing we

can do about any of those right now. ...It doesn’t really get any bigger than than this.”<sup>1235</sup>

Each week, players study and prepare diligently for their upcoming opponent. After winning 14 consecutive games, Patriots middle linebacker Tedy Bruschi didn’t view the accomplishment as “a streak.” He corrected a reporter before the Super Bowl: “It’s all about attitude. *You* say 14 straight. We say one straight.”<sup>1236</sup> After the win, Bruschi insisted, “We didn’t win 15 in a row, we won one in a row 15 times.”<sup>1237</sup> Tom Brady made the obvious, but profound, comment that “You can’t win all those games in one week.”<sup>1238</sup>

As the Patriots prepared for their 17<sup>th</sup>-consecutive victory, there must have been lots of excitement about being tantalizingly close to the all-time record, right? Adam Vinatieri: “Honestly, no. There really isn’t. Coach Belichick is pretty good at nipping that really quick before anybody talks about that stuff. One game at a time, and it’s a long season.”<sup>1239</sup> Safety Rodney Harrison actually beat Belichick at his game of pithy, apparently meaningless tautologies when he said, “Last year’s last year.”<sup>1240</sup> Though the Patriots had won the championship game of the 2003 season and their 2004 season opener, the only “streak” Bill Belichick admitted to was the Patriots’ three-game preseason losing streak. Players like linebacker Willie McGinest love their coach’s logic: “The streak was last year.”<sup>1241</sup> The next week, before facing the Buffalo Bills, Belichick said, “a streak of one division win is what I’m looking for.”<sup>1242</sup> Not until the Patriots broke the NFL-record 18-game winning streak did Belichick even acknowledge the streak. He says he “told the team they should be proud of what they accomplished, something that no other team in pro football has done.”<sup>1243</sup> Players followed their coach’s lead: “Him acknowledging it, I think that gives us a little green light to acknowledge it a little bit—but, at the same time, not to dwell on it, to get ready for next week.”<sup>1244</sup> Linebacker Mike Vrabel says players celebrated their collective achievement in the locker room: “Bill acknowledged it. Everybody kind of shook each other’s hands. And we clapped. For each other.”<sup>1245</sup>

The Patriots have a philosophy more valuable than “one game at a time.” They train and perform “one day at a time” and even “one play at a time” because, as Belichick says, “Football is a lot of short-term goals”<sup>1246</sup> and “Each play is a game within itself.”<sup>1247</sup> A Patriot player told Phil Simms that his teammates “don’t think about winning and losing; they just keep playing hard.”<sup>1248</sup> Looking ahead is useless because you can’t win two games at once... let alone fifteen. Even if you could, the objective is not fifteen straight. The objective is winning a championship. And the best way to win a championship is to always focus on winning your upcoming game. After winning 14 in a row to earn a spot in Super Bowl XXXVIII, Brady pointed out, “To win 14 in a row, that’s unbelievable. Still, the goal really hasn’t been achieved. Winning 14 in a row is great, but if there’s not a 15th, then it’s all for naught.”<sup>1249</sup> After winning 17 straight, linebacker Tedy Bruschi said, “You try not to focus on things you did last year. You move on and realize that we’ve won two games this year and try to

make it three.”<sup>1250</sup> After winning 19 straight, Bruschi said, “The formula for how we got here was simple: focusing on practices, focusing on opponents, step by step.”<sup>1251</sup>

Bill Belichick keeps himself, his coaches, and his players focused on their upcoming game. He looks ahead only during the preseason, when everything Belichick does is preparation for the first meaningful game: “Right now, I’m thinking about this week’s game and the opener against Indianapolis. That’s long-term for me.”<sup>1252</sup>

## Don’t look backwards

“If you look back instead of forward, people are going to track you down and beat you. Then we’ll all feel like crap.”<sup>1253</sup>

– *Tom Brady*

“I’m not answering any more questions about winning a world championship. We don’t care about last year. It’s this year and that’s what we are focused on. We are not going to be complacent and we are not going to be content. It’s all about what are we going to do this year.”<sup>1254</sup>

– *Patriots safety Rodney Harrison*

No matter how your team performed last season, on opening day, every team has zero wins and zero losses. And, no matter how your team performed last week or what your opponent’s record is, at kickoff the score is 0-0 and winning requires outscoring your opponent over the next sixty minutes. Nothing else matters. Patriots defensive lineman Richard Seymour: “The past is the past. It’s all about what have you done for me lately and what can you do for me now? [Our opponent’s] past history and our past history doesn’t matter.”<sup>1255</sup> With the team’s winning streak at 18 games, Tom Brady said any Patriot dwelling on the team’s streak was inviting trouble: “Anyone who is thinking about last year or our first three games is not doing this team any justice and doesn’t deserve a spot in this locker room if (they) start thinking about stuff that makes absolutely no difference in a game.”<sup>1256</sup>

The same holds true even for a team entering the 2003 AFC Championship Game on a 13-game winning streak, as Belichick soberly reminded his players. He warned that if they played against Indianapolis as they had in their first playoff win against Tennessee that their season would be over.

Belichick says, “We’re not really in the reflection business.”<sup>1257</sup> The Patriots seldom look backwards, even during the offseason, because they know how meaningless the past is to winning their next game. Just days after winning Super Bowl XXXVIII, wide receiver David Patten skipped the victory parade and instead hit the team’s gym at 6:30 a.m. because “Those things are fine, but I don’t get caught up in them. I don’t really need that.”<sup>1258</sup> Backup quarterback Rohan Davey missed the White House visit because he was busy leading the Berlin Thunder in NFL Europe. Was he disappointed?

“I’m not missing anything. We win another championship in a year or two and I’ll get to visit the White House then... Right now, I’d rather be here getting the experience that it takes to become a quarterback rather than visiting Bush. It would have been a good experience but this is the kind of experience I need right now.”<sup>1259</sup>

Bill Belichick celebrated the Patriots’ first-ever Super Bowl victory in 2002, but not for long: “Because of the playoffs and Super Bowl, we are a month behind in preparation. We have to find a way to squeeze four months (of preparation) into three months. It’s going to be difficult.”<sup>1260</sup> Asked in 2004 whether he had taken time to reflect on his team’s achievements, Belichick said “We had a parade last year, you may have seen that one, so we took care of it then,”<sup>1261</sup> as if Super Bowl victory parades are necessary evils, like Kiwanis Club or Rotary Club speeches that keep Bob Kraft and the Patriots’ public relations staff off his back.

Have Patriots players watched the slick *3 Games to Glory II* double-DVD set commemorating their 2003 season? Few players have watched it even once!

- Tom Brady: “Haven’t watched it. I know the outcome.”
- Ty Warren: “It’s still in the wrapper.”
- Matt Light: “I’ve never seen any of either one.”
- Mike Vrabel: “I got a lot going on. That’s a lot of time for me to sit. I could watch golf for that long, but no I haven’t watched it.”
- Rodney Harrison: “After it was all over and done with I wanted to leave it like that and I want to stay focused and not become complacent. My goal is to go back.”
- Adam Vinatieri: “Maybe in 15 years when my kids start talking to me, I’ll tell them to sit down and I’ll show them a few things when I’m old, fat and gray.”<sup>1262</sup>

Patriots center Dan Koppen refuses even to utter the word “Super Bowl”: “I don’t say [Super Bowl] any more.”<sup>1263</sup>

It’s easy to get trapped by the trappings of success. But Patriots know that reminiscing about past glory distracts and demotivates. Winners stay hungry and humble. Linebacker Mike Vrabel was flabbergasted just to be asked how history would judge his Patriots team:

“History? That’s not a factor around here. The only history I worry about is what I did on the last play. And 30 seconds later, that’s a memory, too. Uh-uh. I’ll worry about history when I’m sitting in a rocker somewhere.”<sup>1264</sup>

The message is so clear in the clubhouse that new Patriots catch on immediately. Before running back Corey Dillon returned to Cincinnati to play his former Bengals teammates, he swore “It’s just another preseason game... I’m