

derives from that objective. The Patriots would hire a three-eyed midget with a wooden leg, six fingers and glow-in-the-dark hair if he played well and was a good teammate:

“Whether [a cornerback]’s 6’2” and covers [a receiver] or 5’9” and covers him... if they’re covered, the quarterback’s not going to throw to him. If they’re not covered, it doesn’t make any difference how tall, short, fast [he is or] how many pushups he does.”⁷²⁸

– *Bill Belichick*

“If he’s 290 [pounds] and runs fast and can open his hips and drop [into pass coverage], hey he could be a *good* linebacker!”

– *Romeo Crennel, asked “Is there a size where you won’t even attempt to convert a [college defensive end to linebacker]? 290?”*

“The scheme is [for our inside linebackers] to go up, take on guards, shed them and make tackles. Whatever niche you have—TJ [Ted Johnson] had that hard-nosed mentality—you have to get that job done. There’s many different ways. You can beat guys to a spot, give guys a flipper, head-butt a guy, hands a guy. It all depends on what your strength is.”⁷²⁹

– *Patriots special teamer and reserve linebacker/safety Don Davis*

“Whether [a receiver gets open] because he’s strong and he pushes off [the defender] and he creates separation or whether he does it with quickness, whether he does it with technique or whatever it is, if the quarterback sees an open receiver, he’s going to be happy and he’ll throw him the ball.”⁷³⁰

– *Bill Belichick*

Bill Belichick makes every decision based on what he believes gives his team the best chance to win football games:

“I have to make decisions in the best interest of the football team. I can’t answer to any one particular constituency, like the linebackers or the cornerbacks. I have to make a decision. Whether the players understand that or respect that, I don’t know. I hope they do. I think they do.”⁷³¹

It is human nature to allow sentiment to sway decisions. Many coaches would have paid Joe Andruzzi, David Patten and Ty Law—integral members of three Super Bowl-winning teams—to stay on for a fourth Super Bowl run. Many coaches would never have cut fan favorite Troy Brown and risked losing him to the Saints. But Bill Belichick is not your ordinary coach. Belichick suppresses his humanity and makes personnel decisions as a robot might. As he says, “I just want to improve our team and make it as good as it can possibly be. That’s what I try to do this year and every year.”⁷³² If your singular focus is winning, you must release aging, overpaid players, no matter how unpopular doing so is. As much as David Patten contributed to three Super Bowl-winning teams, he is not quite the player he once was, and he was not

worth to the Patriots the \$13 million—including \$3.5 mil. signing bonus—the Redskins are paying him over the next five years. Early in Super Bowl XXXIX, Patten appeared shell-shocked. Tom Brady threw a pass that Patten might have caught by diving low instead of remaining upright and staring at the Eagle defender about to smash him. Had Patten gone low—instead of attempt a standing basket catch—he might have caught the ball and avoided the wallop he actually received. His mistake thrilled Eagles players, who shouted excitedly to one another on the sideline. Defensive tackle Paul Grasmanis screamed: “They don’t want to come across the middle no more!” Linebacker Jeremiah Trotter was thrilled: “He’s scared. He’s scared!” In KC Joyner’s analysis of all NFL wide receivers, Patten ranked “85th, or 3rd worst among qualifying receivers,” though Joyner said Brady underthrew Patten many times.⁷³³ The Patriots expect their receivers to catch passes, so Belichick decided Patten was not worth the money he expected as a free agent and Redskins coach Joe Gibbs was on the phone with Patten a moment after the midnight start of free agency.

Set goals and move toward them

“[Belichick] keeps putting goals up there for you. You never want to stay the same. You want to keep going up... Even after a victory like today [locking up the AFC East championship], the goal now is to maintain the No. 1 seed and beat a Jacksonville squad that’s on the rise.”⁷³⁴

– *Former Patriots offensive lineman Damien Woody*

“The team has goals. Just as much as any individual player goal, there is also a team goal of trying to win Super Bowls, which is most important. Anyone that chooses to play on the Patriots realizes that goal supersedes any other individual player goal.”⁷³⁵

– *Tom Brady*

Bill Belichick’s Patriots are masters at setting goals: individual goals, unit goals, and team goals. Short-term goals, medium-term goals and long-term goals. Coaches and players seize every possible “hook” to motivate themselves to push harder. Every Patriots coach and player maintains in his mind a continually updated copy of the table below and uses it for motivation. The following are all actual goals:

	Individual	Unit	Team
Short term	“Gain at least four yards on this (and every) run” (Corey Dillon)	“Block this field goal attempt” (special teams)	“Score first in this game” (Belichick challenge before every game)
Medium term	“In 2004, break Ray Clayborn’s record of 36 interceptions as a Patriot” (Ty Law)	“Don’t surrender any sacks” (offensive line)	“Play as well after Thanksgiving as the 2001 Patriots” (2003 Patriots)

Long term	“Study the great players at my position and become the NFL’s best player at my position” (Richard Seymour)	“Return two punts for touchdowns this season” (special teams)	“Repeat as Super Bowl champion” (2004 Patriots)
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Patriots coaches have their own goals. Eric Mangini is working to tailor his coaching to particular players’ needs and learning styles. And in the summer of 2004, offensive coordinator Charlie Weis sat down with Bill Belichick to devise a plan for becoming a college head coach: “It was time to lay out a plan. I had no idea what jobs might open up, but the example we used when talking about this was Notre Dame.”⁷³⁶ That’s smart planning!

Short-term goals

“I don’t think of repeating. It’s such a long road. I think of trying to get this team to play well in Week 1.”⁷³⁷

– *Bill Belichick, 2002*

“Take it one play at a time. . . I just look forward to that one play and then the next play and the next play.”⁷³⁸

– *Patriots backup linebacker Tully Banta-Cain*

“You can’t look too far ahead or look in the past. Just live for the moment, man. Right now. Enjoy what each day brings.”⁷³⁹

– *Patriots receiver Troy Brown*

Short-term goals are fundamental because only short-term goals are actionable. “Win the game” and “Win the Super Bowl” fail to tell players what to do. They are useful only insofar as they motivate players to accomplish substantive short-term goals. So, every long-term goal must be disaggregated into a sequence of short-term goals. Tom Brady says, “The [goal] is to make an improvement on a daily basis.”⁷⁴⁰ Left tackle Matt Light equates practice with improvement: “That’s my plan: go out there and get better.”⁷⁴¹ Former Patriots offensive coordinator Charlie Weis says each player sets a bar for himself at each practice. The next practice, “There’s two ways you can go.”⁷⁴² As Notre Dame’s new head coach, Weis huddles up his players and has them each reach a hand into the middle and shout “1-2-3-Get better!” to emphasize that each player should strive to elevate his play each practice. That’s a clear objective with a short time horizon and rapid feedback. Weis uses incremental goals to motivate himself for the tedious task of recruiting high schoolers to Notre Dame, something he traveled school to school doing from April 28th through May 27th, never once returning home:

“I have a passion for recruiting, as much as I like to coach. . . because I look at recruiting like a game with wins and losses and setbacks and small steps.

When you go after a guy and you don't get him, sometimes it's a setback, and sometimes it feels like you just got punched in the mouth."⁷⁴³

Weis' comment raises another point: short-term goals create challenges and provide rapid feedback. A steady stream of short-term feedback motivates far more effectively than a distant goal. Belichick advises against worrying about the future because, as he told Bryant University students, "No matter where you think you'll be in the future... it's going to change. So my advice is to look at the short term and explore something you can put all your passion into."⁷⁴⁴ Special teams captain Larry Izzo broke into the NFL because his first special teams coach (Mike Westhoff) gave him daily goals:

"Throughout camp he was always very supportive and motivated me as far as what I needed to do... to show [up] every day on film and do something every day that sets [me] apart from the rest of the guys. Having him there telling me that every day really kept me going, and throughout camp [head coach] Jimmy [Johnson] took notice. I had some good practices consistently and made plays. From the early part of camp, I moved up the depth chart."⁷⁴⁵

The father of management science, Peter Drucker, says success is impossible without short-term goals: "Achievement is never possible except against specific, limited, clearly defined targets... Only if targets are defined can resources be allocated to their attainment, priorities and deadlines set, and somebody be held accountable for results."⁷⁴⁶ Setting goals focuses players' preparation on essential tasks and creates a sense of urgency that spurs players to constantly improve, prepare, and perform. New Patriots—like free agent defensive lineman Keith Traylor in 2004—immediately sense their new team's goal-focused intensity:

"The feeling I get here is the urgency to [win the Super Bowl] again. We don't want to do it like the year they won it and [the next season] went 9-7 and didn't make the playoffs. Now it's the urgency of, 'Let's do it again.'"⁷⁴⁷

The kind of "overachieving" player the Patriots seek tends to constantly challenge himself with short-term goals without prodding from coaches. 2005 Patriots draftee Ellis Hobbs, for example, was working toward a goal in his first mini-camp, just one week after being drafted: "I'm not going to learn everything right away, but I want to move ahead at a faster pace than they expect. You wouldn't get picked at this level if you didn't have talent. The thing I stress the most is knowledge of the game, because that's what puts you ahead of everyone else."⁷⁴⁸

Patriot running back Corey Dillon has long set a goal for himself of gaining at least four yards on each carry. Anything extra is great, but four yards is his minimum standard. Dillon set this reasonable stretch goal before joining the Patriots, and his achievement focus helped him become a Patriot.

Belichick believes players must be continually challenged with short- and medium-term goals because "Win the Super Bowl" is too remote, hypothetical and

intangible to prevent the deadly *mañana* syndrome. Belichick believes his 2002 Patriots were so overconfident that they were unchastened even by defeats:

“When you [become] overconfident, another team will usually come along and put everything in perspective in a hurry. But whenever players or coaches start to take the attitude of, ‘We’ll be there when it counts, don’t worry about things, there’s no urgency,’ it usually doesn’t get straightened out, and when you try to, it doesn’t happen.”⁷⁴⁹

You must make the playoffs to win the Super Bowl. And you must win many games to make the playoffs. And you must have a good team at the end of training camp to win games. And you must have well-conditioned athletes at the start of training camp to have a productive training camp. Therefore, a coach must chop long-term objectives into a long chain of short- and medium-term objectives and motivate his players and assistants to achieve those shorter-term goals without which the ultimate long-term goal is unattainable. As Charlie Weis said after his new Notre Dame team’s first spring practice, “right now our intention is to go out tomorrow and get an improvement over where we were today.”⁷⁵⁰

While many teams preach “one game at a time,” Belichick preaches “one game at a time, one week at a time, one practice at a time, and one play at a time.”⁷⁵¹ To help players stay focused every minute of every game, Belichick divides each game into mini-games. To focus players’ minds on performing well early in games rather than worrying just about the final score, Belichick emphasizes scoring first. Every week, Belichick presents his team a list of keys to winning that week’s game. Almost every week, his list includes “score first.”⁷⁵² Tom Brady says, “Playing from a lead is critical when you’re playing a good team.”⁷⁵³

Belichick’s emphasis on scoring first is smart because playing well early is as important as playing well late. 70% of NFL games in 2003 were won by whichever team scored first, and teams that scored twice before their opponent scored won 84% of the time.⁷⁵⁴ Elias Sports Bureau says that over the past five seasons, teams with a 3-0 lead won 59% of games, teams with a 7-0 lead won 71% of the time, teams with a 10-0 lead won 82% of games and teams with a 14-0 lead won 87% of the time.⁷⁵⁵

Conversely, falling behind in a game affects players’ attitudes and coaches’ play-calling strategies. More often than not, a team that digs itself into an early hole digs itself in deeper as the game progresses. In 2003, 70% of NFL interceptions were thrown by teams that were losing at the time.⁷⁵⁶

The Patriots’ NFL-record 21-game winning streak is well known. Less well known is that the 2003-2004 Patriots shattered the NFL record for consecutive games scoring first. The previous record, 15 straight, was held by the 1978 Dolphins. The 2003-2004 Patriots scored first in an astonishing 23 straight games! The NFL does not count the Patriots’ three playoff wins, so the NFL record book says the Patriots scored first in 20 straight games, five more than the previous record.