

A NOTE FROM HOWARD BRYANT

This might come as a total shock, but when I was a kid, my favorite thing about playing football was . . . fear.

In a lot of ways, I loved being afraid. My friends and I used to play football, or when we had too many kids for that, a game called “pig pile,” where one person carried the football and all the other players chased and tried to tackle him. When he was finally brought to the ground, he would toss the ball up in the air and some other brave soul would pick it up and run for as long as possible before *he* was tackled.

When I was the one being chased, every second was filled with the fear of being taken down hard to the ground.

But here’s the part that made being afraid fun. Are you ready? It was laughing at the fear!

I know that might seem odd, so let me explain: We all know the goal of football is to score touchdowns

and prevent the other team from scoring. Defenses love trying to intimidate offenses. I played running back, wide receiver, and even quarterback sometimes. I remember how big some of the other kids were. I remember how they would stand on the other side of the line and try to scare me.

You are a dead man if you touch that ball. I'm gonna squash you like a bug . . .

The quarterback would hand me the ball and I would see the defense race toward me, charging and snarling. Here they came, trying to make good on their promises to indeed squash me like a bug, and the fear would kick in.

So I ran.

And I dodged.

And I spun.

And I realized that I was *fast!* I would score a touchdown and the guys who told me I was a dead man would get mad because not only was I very much alive, but my team was winning and theirs was losing!

So yeah, big kids were stronger than me, but I was faster. Even so, sometimes I got hit, and they would smile and talk trash while I was down (*Who's smiling now?*), but I always got up. What started as an exer-

cise in fear turned into a little game of me betting that I could be faster than everyone. And, when necessary, proving I could take a hit and still get back up.

These were the challenges of football. Speed against strength. Fear against courage. I loved it all. And it was just as much fun to watch on TV as it was to play, for so many reasons.

I loved the NFL uniforms, particularly the helmets. I grew up in Boston and the original Patriots logo was the hardest logo in sports to draw. Believe me—I tried a lot.

Most of all, I loved the competition, the way the Steelers, Dolphins, Raiders, Vikings, and Cowboys ruled the game and always seemed to end up having to beat each other to get to the Super Bowl. My childhood team, the Patriots, could never beat those other guys, but I rooted for them just the same.

I rooted for players because I loved how they moved, how the really fast guys would just break away from defenders after a long reception, reach the end zone, and dance in celebration. The Dallas Cowboys became my adoptive team because I loved the great quarterback Roger Staubach and running back Tony Dorsett. Later, I couldn't help but admire the historic

San Francisco 49ers dynasty of the 1980s, the way their innovative offense and always-cool quarterback Joe Montana seemed unstoppable whenever a game was on the line.

The game has continued to change over the years. When I was a kid, I used to come home from playing football with my shirt ripped and my clothing covered in dirt and grass stains. My friends and I played tackle with no helmets, and even if you banged heads with another kid, people just told us to “shake it off.” Today we know that the players are so strong that getting hit and tackled that many times hurts not just the body but the brain. There is no such thing as a minor injury to the brain. Because we understand more about these injury risks, because the game is potentially so dangerous, many parents no longer let their kids play football the way I used to. So while I still enjoy watching the game on TV, more than anything these days I hope that the skilled people playing it remain safe.

Other shifts in attitude have taken place, as well. Some of the sport’s traditions are no longer acceptable in today’s society. For example, even though “Redskins” is still the nickname of the Washington

football team, I do not use that word in this book because I consider it to be offensive to all people of Native American descent, as well as demeaning to the people using the term. Throughout the book, therefore, I refer to the team as “Washington.”

This is a book not only of football legends—but of the legend of pro football. It is this country’s most popular sport. While the game has been played since the late 1800s, for the sake of this book we begin when two rival leagues, the National Football League and the American Football League, became one in 1970. The only exception to this rule can be found in the Timeline of Football’s Key Moments at the end of the book, which includes older events that were too important to leave out. Above all else, though, this book is a tribute to the Super Bowl, which began as a little-watched championship between the two leagues in 1967, only to evolve into the most popular sporting event in America. And it continues to evolve—2016 marks the first Super Bowl that will be numbered with Arabic numerals (i.e. “Super Bowl 50”) instead of Roman numerals (“Super Bowl L”), which have been in use since the first Super Bowl.

Through the lens of the Super Bowl, this book is

about the rise of dynasties and the fall of giants. If the book had been written thirty years ago, for instance, the Miami Dolphins would've been a really big part of it and the Patriots wouldn't have been mentioned at all, because back then Miami was so good . . . and the Patriots? The Patriots were gum on the bottom of your shoe, stepped on by everyone.

Times change, and now the Patriots are one of the great franchises in history. Miami, meanwhile, hasn't been to a Super Bowl since 1984 and hasn't won one since 1973.

In the NFL, it's all about the Super Bowl.

SUPER BOWL XLII

A GIANT UPSET

NEW YORK GIANTS VS. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

For decades, Boston and New York have served as battlegrounds for rivalries across all the major sports. There is no greater feud in American sports than the Yankees–Red Sox rivalry. This sense of fierce competition between the two cities even predates professional sports, going all the way back to the Revolutionary War, when Boston and New York competed to become the economic center of the newly formed nation. But sports have served to intensify the rivalry to new heights. The longstanding fight between the Red Sox and Yankees has fueled mutual hatred among players and fans on both sides.

The same is true for the Celtics and Knicks, as well as the Bruins and Rangers.

The Patriots–Jets rivalry has been the major Boston–New York slugfest in the NFL. The divisional foes have faced off when both teams were at their best. They’ve also had a habit of either stealing each other’s players or going after the same free agents.

The Patriots and the Giants had never exactly been rivals. They shared no special history or bad blood. They had never met in the Super Bowl and they only played each other every four years. The Giants, weirdly, even had a lot of old fans in New England, because before the AFL was founded in 1960, they were the closest pro football team to Boston.

In the 2007 season, however, that all changed. After putting on one of the greatest Super Bowls of all time, a rivalry between the Patriots and Giants was instantly born.

It all started the year before, in the AFC Championship Game between the Patriots and the Colts. About half-way through the game, the Patriots led 21–3 and appeared to be headed to their fourth Super Bowl in six years. The success of the 2006 Patriots was surprising, because they weren’t as great a team as they’d been in

2004. The current squad was weak defensively, especially in the middle of the field, and its wide receivers were substandard. Still, up 18 points, it appeared they were good enough to get to the Super Bowl.

Then the Colts woke up. All of a sudden, the Patriots' weaknesses on both offense and defense were exposed. Peyton Manning led a furious charge against his greatest rivals and beat the Patriots in a 38–34 thriller. The Colts advanced to the Super Bowl, and Manning won his first (and only) Lombardi Trophy over Chicago.

Talk about dominoes! It was bad enough to blow a lead that would have put them in the Super Bowl, but to lose to Manning and then see him win it all was too much for New England to handle.

So, the Patriots did something they never did: They went out and spent enough cash to form the best team money could buy. They signed Randy Moss, one of the greatest wide receivers of all time. Many people think Moss was the second-best receiver ever to play, behind the great Jerry Rice of San Francisco. Moss was tall and fast and had great hands. He was the kind of offensive weapon that Tom Brady had never had the opportunity to play alongside.

To make sure defenses didn't focus solely on Moss,

the Patriots also acquired Wes Welker, a shifty possession receiver who was tough and fearless. If Welker and Moss weren't enough, the Patriots then signed another lightning-fast pass-catcher, Donté Stallworth.

It was a way to address a dirty little secret that had bothered Patriots fans and Brady for years: As talented a quarterback as Tom Brady was, unlike the other all-time greats, he never had a top wide receiver to target. Brady's childhood idol, Joe Montana, had Jerry Rice. Terry Bradshaw had Lynn Swann. Troy Aikman had Michael Irvin.

Now that Brady had Moss, why, the Patriots might not lose a single game . . .

. . . and after the first eight weeks of the season, they were undefeated.

If that wasn't impressive enough, they had scored at least 34 points in every game! The offense was unstoppable. If the defense focused on Moss, Brady would throw to Welker. If they focused on Welker, Moss might be open deep. If they shut down Welker and Moss, Brady would throw to Stallworth or running back Kevin Faulk or Jabar Gaffney, the fourth wide receiver.

When they beat Washington 52-7 to go 8-0, the

talk started: Maybe this would be the first team since the 1972 Dolphins to go unbeaten. The next week, they slipped by Peyton Manning and the Colts, 24–20, despite scoring their lowest total of the season. But in their next matchup, they poured on the points, crushing Buffalo 56–10, the second time they’d scored 50 points in the season.

The pressure mounted, but the Patriots kept winning, beating Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and escaping Baltimore 27–24, in a game they probably should have lost.

On the last day of the season, they went to New York to play the Giants. In a hard-fought game, the Patriots trailed 21–16 at the half. The Giants, led by Peyton Manning’s little brother Eli at quarterback, gave the Patriots all they could handle. The Giants led 28–16 before Moss caught a 65-yard touchdown pass from Brady. A few drives later, the Patriots finally regained a lead. The Patriots held on to win 38–35, but the Giants knew they could play with the first team in NFL history to go unbeaten in a sixteen-game regular season. The Dolphins went 14–0 before the season was extended. The Patriots’ off-season spending spree had clearly paid off.

The playoffs were a struggle because of the pressure of winning and remaining undefeated, but the Patriots kept on track, beating Jacksonville 31–20 and then San Diego 21–12 in the AFC title game. They had reached the Super Bowl. The Patriots were 18-0, and one more game remained. One last game to achieve complete perfection.

The only team that really gave them problems in the NFC was the Giants, but the Giants were a long shot to even make it to the Super Bowl. After a 6-2 start, they'd struggled in the second half of the regular season, finishing 10-6, squeaking into the playoffs by earning a wild card spot. In fact, the Giants had played so unevenly there was a rumor that Tom Coughlin, the Giants coach, would be fired at the end of the season.

But New York went on the road, first to Tampa Bay, where they beat the Buccaneers 24–14. Then they went to play against division rival Dallas, and upset the favored Cowboys 21–17. And once more, they went on the road to Green Bay, “Title Town”, to play the Packers in the NFC title game.

The Packers were clear favorites. They were at home, and the weather was freezing. Green Bay loved

to play in the cold, mostly because their opponents weren't used to the frigid conditions.

No matter—the Giants won again—this time in overtime.

That meant that the Patriots would play the Giants, the team that had nearly shattered their perfection in the final week of the regular season, for the chance to go undefeated, a perfect 19-0.

The Giants were unafraid. In fact, they were so confident, Michael Strahan, the Hall of Fame defensive end, predicted the high-scoring Patriots wouldn't even score 20 points.

From the start, something was different about this game. The Giants' defensive front line dominated the game. Brady couldn't find any space to throw. He also seemed to be moving poorly on an injured leg. Strahan and fellow defensive ends Osi Umenyiora and Justin Tuck were all over him. The Patriots couldn't run the ball either against New York's line. The game was not the lights-out, high-scoring affair people predicted it would be.

At halftime, the Patriots led 7-3. 7-3? This was the team that had scored 30 points in thirteen out of eighteen games!

Neither team scored in the third quarter. The game was being played exactly the way the Giants were hoping it would go down.

On their first drive of the fourth quarter, the Giants came out firing. Manning hurled a 45-yard pass to his tight end Kevin Boss. Then, with eleven minutes left, the Giants scored their first touchdown of the game on a 5-yard pass to David Tyree, his first of the season. The Giants led 10–7 with eleven minutes to go.

Could this be happening? The Patriots were favored by 12.5 points to win, but they still hadn't cracked double digits!

Brady got the ball back with 7:54 left, on his 20-yard line, down 10–7.

These are the championship moments, and Brady was the guy you wanted out on the field with the season on the line.

He wasted no time. On the first play, Brady hit Welker for 5 yards and then Moss for 10. Laurence Maroney, the running back, ran for 9 more. Then, like a machine, Brady completed passes to Welker, Faulk, Welker, Moss, and Welker again. Suddenly the Patriots were at the Giants' 6-yard line with 2:49 to go.

If Brady felt the pressure of the big stage, he didn't

show it. Two plays later, he hit Moss for the go-ahead touchdown. The Patriots led 14–10 with 2:42 left.

Two minutes and forty-two seconds away from an undefeated season.

Manning took the ball from the Giants' 17-yard line, 83 yards away from victory. It was touchdown or bust; a field goal wouldn't cut it. The Patriots' defense needed to keep the Giants out of the end zone.

On the Giants' sideline, Strahan encouraged his team. "Seventeen–fourteen! Seventeen–fourteen! That's the final score," he said to his teammates. "One touchdown and we're world champions. If you believe it, it will happen!"

Manning immediately moved the ball, finding the Giants' all-time leading receiver, Amani Toomer, twice. The second catch came on third and 10, but was good for only 9 yards. The Giants were forced to go for it on fourth down with the season on the line. On fourth and 1, the bruising running back Brandon Jacobs plowed forward with a 2-yard run. The Giants were still alive.

With 1:20 left on the clock, the Giants near mid-field, Manning dropped back and threw a long pass intended for David Tyree, but the ball sailed right

toward Patriots cornerback Asante Samuel for what looked like a sure interception. The Giants were finished. The undefeated season was going to happen . . .

Until the ball bounced off Samuel's hand, incomplete.

On third and 5, Manning was caught by Patriots defensive end Adalius Thomas. Thomas held his jersey, but Manning scrambled free to his right and threw a desperation pass down the middle of the field to Tyree.

The ball floated in the air. Fans across the country held their breath.

Tyree jumped and grabbed the ball with one hand, but New England safety Rodney Harrison had him covered, so Tyree lodged the ball between his right hand and his helmet! He had caught the ball with his helmet!

It was one of the greatest catches, if not *the* greatest catch, in Super Bowl history.

Fifty-nine seconds left. Following the remarkable 32-yard gain, the ball was on the New England 24.

Manning found wide receiver Steve Smith (not the same Steve Smith who played for Carolina) on the right sideline for 12 more yards.

Forty-five seconds left.

First down. Manning dropped back, looked to his left for Burress, who was wide open in the end zone.

FOURTH DOWN

The ball went up in the air. Burress came down with it. Touchdown!

Strahan's predictions came true: The Giants held the Patriots to under 20 points, and the final score was 17–14 Giants. The Patriots' season-long dominance of the entire league ended on the final drive of the season, when a guy caught a ball with his helmet and the Giants, who'd barely made the playoffs, pulled off one of the greatest upsets in Super Bowl history. Eli Manning, long overshadowed by his big brother Peyton, proved that he could hang with—and beat—the best the league had to offer. Not only that, but he sealed his reputation as the guy you wanted on the field with the game on the line in the fourth quarter. When all was said and done, one sideline experienced a sense of bitter defeat. On the other, players were filled with the best feeling in the world. Improbably, David had taken down Goliath. The Giants were champions.