

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

(14-5-0)

Head Coach: Bill Belichick

There are several very good franchises in the NFL, but you would be hard-pressed to find any organization that is run with more intelligence and more class than the New England Patriots. The combination of Robert Kraft as the Owner and Bill Belichick as the Head Coach has not only brought remarkable success to this once struggling franchise, but this organization has been nothing but class for the last several years. Kraft and the rest of the New England front office once again proved us right this past spring with the tragic drowning death of backup defensive lineman Marquise Hill. The Patriots handled this sad situation with nothing but class and dignity, and the best example of that was on the team website where this organization replaced their own Home Page with a special tribute to Marquise Hill. And it wasn't just the "class" that was on display this past spring, but the intelligence was also very evident as the Patriots not only signed what might have been the best free agent available in Pro Bowl linebacker Adalius Thomas, but New England also engineered a blockbuster trade that brought disgruntled, but immensely talented wide receiver Randy Moss to town! The 2006 Patriots won 14 games, including impressive playoff victories over the New York Jets and the powerful San Diego Chargers, and their loss to Indianapolis in the AFC Championship Game came in a contest which could have truly gone either

way. The Colts went on to win the Super Bowl with relative ease, and the Patriots came within about 40 seconds of beating Indy in an incredible 38-34 game that highlighted the absolute greatness of both teams. So in essence, the Patriots came within about 40 seconds of winning the Super Bowl since they would have undoubtedly beaten the Chicago Bears as easily, or easier, than the Colts did! And now we head into the 2007 season, and the Colts have lost several valuable players to free agency, while the Patriots have clearly improved themselves at several positions. That could mean that the Super Bowl trophy could be headed back to the Boston area for the fourth time this decade!

OFFENSE: The Patriots had a couple poor offensive showings last year where they just couldn't get anything going for one reason or another, but for the most part, this offense was very productive in 2006. Overall, the Pats averaged 336 yards per game to rank 11th in the NFL in total offense. And no team was more balanced than New England a year ago as this club finished 12th in passing and 12th in rushing, which is pretty remarkable! The 12th place finish, however, was the worst finish for the New England passing attack in quite some time, mainly because superstar quarterback Tom Brady was forced to work with an inexperienced, and relatively weak cast of wide receivers. That will NOT be the case in 2007, but more on that situation later! Despite playing with a weak group of wideouts last year, Brady managed to complete 319 of 516 passes (62%) for 3,529 yards and 24 touchdowns against 12 interceptions. The passing yardage and touchdown total were the lowest for Brady since his rookie year when he came out of nowhere to replace an injured Drew Bledsoe and lead the Patriots to their first ever Super Bowl title. Of course, even in what some have foolishly called a "down" year for Brady, he was still among the NFL leaders in virtually every major quarterback category. Forget the numbers for a second and just come to grips with the fact that Brady is either the best quarterback in the league, or a close second behind Peyton Manning depending on your perspective. Brady has won more Super Bowls than Manning, but it's hard to argue against Peyton's numbers. Either way, there is no doubt that the quarterback position is in safer than safe hands when Tom Brady is on the field for New England. And we also have a high opinion of young second string quarterback Matt Cassel, who has played extremely well for the Patriots in his pre-season appearances over his first two sea-

sons in the league. The third QB last year was ancient vet Vinny Testaverde, but he will almost surely retire, so the Patriots will need to add another quarterback at some point. However, it's possible that Vinny might come back for another year, though he remains officially an unsigned free agent as we went to press.

There's MASSIVE news at wide receiver where the Patriots pulled off one of the biggest trades of this past off-season when they acquired former All-Pro Randy Moss from the Oakland Raiders. Moss has languished in Oakland the past two seasons, plagued by injuries and indifference as he played on the worst team in the league, but playing for a guy like Bill Belichick, we may finally see the REAL Randy Moss who used to be the top wideout in the NFL. And thanks to Belichick, we may even see Moss minus the hideous attitude! And the best part about this is that it only took a FOURTH ROUND DRAFT CHOICE to get Moss from the Raiders AND he even agreed to take a massive pay cut just so he could pursue a Super Bowl ring with New England! Now we've killed Moss for his bad attitude over the years, but he has seemed like a brand new man since he found out about the trade to New England, and maybe he's finally become a grownup at age 30! Moss was limited to just 42 receptions a year ago, but when healthy and motivated for the Vikings, he had as many as 111 catches and 17 touchdowns in one season! And he produced an amazing 90 touchdowns in his seven-year stay in Minnesota! And to make things even more interesting, the Patriots also signed explosive free agent Donte Stallworth (Eagles) to start alongside Moss, and traded for another very productive wide receiver in speedy Wes Welker from the Miami Dolphins! Stallworth played just 11 games for Philly due to injuries last year, but still managed to catch 38 passes for 725 yards and five scores, averaging an impressive 19 yards per reception, while Welker enjoyed a breakout year for the Dolphins with 67 catches for 687 yards despite coming off the bench all year. With Moss and Stallworth in the starting lineup, and Welker in the slot as the third wideout, this group looks VERY potent this season. And the Patriots still have 2006 leading pass catcher Reche Caldwell, who a year ago hauled in 61 passes for 760 yards and four TDs. They also have solid vet Jabar Gaffney, who was a late-season pickup a year ago who really helped New England during their post-season games. And Belichick will also have aging vet Troy Brown who had 43 catches a year ago, not to mention promising free agent signee Kelley

New England Patriots 2007 Schedule Pre-Season

Aug 10	at Tampa Bay
Aug 17	Tennessee
Aug 24	at Carolina
Aug 30	N.Y. Giants

Regular Season

Sep 9	at N.Y. Jets
Sep 16	San Diego
Sep 23	Buffalo
Oct 1	at Cincinnati
Oct 7	Cleveland
Oct 14	at Dallas
Oct 21	at Miami
Oct 28	Washington
Nov 4	at Indianapolis
Nov 11	BYE
Nov 18	at Buffalo
Nov 25	Philadelphia
Dec 3	at Baltimore
Dec 9	Pittsburgh
Dec 16	N.Y. Jets
Dec 23	Miami
Dec 29	at N.Y. Giants

2006 PATRIOTS TEAM STATS

	NE	Opp.
TOTAL FIRST DOWNS	330	264
Rushing	121	67
Passing	181	164
Penalty	28	33
3rd Down: Made/Att	96/226	75/209
3rd Down Pct.	42.5	35.9
4th Down: Made/Att	16/20	3/11
4th Down Pct.	80.0	27.3
POSSESSION AVG.	31:35	28:25
TOTAL NET YARDS	5369	4710
Avg. Per Game	335.6	294.4
Total Plays	1055	950
Avg. Per Play	5.1	5.0
NET YARDS RUSHING	1969	1507
Avg. Per Game	123.1	94.2
Total Rushes	499	388
NET YARDS PASSING	3400	3203
Avg. Per Game	212.5	200.2
Sacked/Yards Lost	29/190	44/281
Gross Yards	3590	3484
Att./Completions	527/326	518/294
Completion Pct.	61.9	56.8
Had Intercepted	12	22
PUNTS/AVERAGE	69/41.3	79/41.6
NET PUNTING AVG.	69/34.6	79/34.4
PENALTIES/YARDS	98/940	102/918
FUMBLES/BALL LOST	27/15	24/13
TOUCHDOWNS	46	24
Rushing	20	11
Passing	25	10
Returns	1	3

**2006 NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS RESULTS
(SUR: 14-5 PSR: 11-7-1 O-U: 8-11)**

S.10	BUFF	L	-9'	19-17	u41
S.17	NY Jets	W	-6'	24-17	o37
S.24	DENVER	L	-6'	7-17	u38'
O.01	Cincinnati	W	+6'	38-13	o46'
O.08	MIAMI	W	-9'	20-10	u36'
O.15	BYE				
O.22	Buffalo	W	-5'	28-6	u37
O.30	Minn.	W	-1'	31-7	u39
N.05	INDY	L	-3'	20-27	u48'
N.12	NY JETS	L	-10'	14-17	u38
N.19	Gr. Bay	W	-5'	35-0	u45
N.26	CHIC.	P	-4'	17-13	u37'
D.03	DETROIT	L	-13'	28-21	o41
D.10	Miami	L	-3'	0-21	u37
D.17	HOU.	W	-12'	40-7	o37'
D.24	J'ville	W	+3'	24-21	o37
D.31	Tenn.	W	+3'	40-23	o41
J.07	NY JETS	W	-9'	37-16	o38'
J.14	S. Diego	W	+4'	24-21	u46'
J.21	Indy	L	+3'	34-38	o47'

Washington (Bengals). The only potential question mark here is the health status of talented second-year man Chad Jackson, who suffered a severe knee injury as a rookie and may not be ready for the start of the 2006 campaign. But even without Jackson, the talent and depth here is just insane!

The Patriots will go with more one-back sets this year, which means they'll have two tight ends in the starting lineup, one of whom will definitely be talented former first round draft pick Ben Watson, who in 2006 caught a career-high 49 passes for 643 yards and three TDs despite missing three full games with a knee injury. The Pats have parted ways with former first rounder Daniel Graham (Broncos), but they quickly signed an ideal replacement in veteran free agent Kyle Brady (Jaguars), who will be the powerhouse blocker to compliment the pass-catcher Watson. If the 35 year old

Brady proves too old to start, this club also has promising second-year man Dave Thomas who showed a lot of promise as a rookie. They also have another promising young tight end in Garrett Mills, so this team is just loaded here as well.

And the talent parade continues at running back where New England has decided to make a full commitment to immensely talented second-year player Laurence Maroney, who ran for 745 yards and six TDs despite having to share time as the starting running back. Maroney looked so good that the Patriots opted to cut former Pro Bowler Corey Dillon, who ran for a team-high 812 yards and 13 TDs a year ago. Dillon had lost a step in terms of foot speed, but he was still a solid starting back, so his release had more to do with money and making room for Maroney than New England thinking Dillon was completely washed up. As we went to press, Dillon had not signed with any other team and he spent the spring joking with reporters about how his kids will see him more and his Golf game will get a lot better, which means he's sounding like a guy who may retire even though he looks like he can still play. So look for Maroney to run for some BIG totals this year, though the Patriots do have some decent reserve RBs even without Dillon thanks to the return of third down specialist Kevin Faulk and the free agent addition of solid vet Sammy Morris (Dolphins), who ran for 400 yards for Miami off the bench in 2006. If and when the Patriots decide to use a fullback, the role will be filled by solid vet Heath Evans, who can even play running back if necessary.

Up front, the Patriots have no Pro Bowl caliber players, but overall, this group is fairly solid. The veteran leader of this unit is left tackle Matt Light, who still has some trouble with really athletic speed rushers, but for the most part he remains an above average NFL left tackle. Youngster Logan Mankins looks to be a rising star at left guard and he made a lot of progress in his second season in the league after being the team's first round draft pick in 2005, while center Dan Koppen is another rock solid player in the middle of the line. Koppen is a lot more valuable than people realize, but that should have been evident last year when the running game was so much better than it had been in 2005 when Koppen missed much of the season due to injury. Things are not as good on the right side where neither RG Steve Neal or RT Nick Kaczur is overly impressive, but the Patriots have been able to get away with having some questionable offensive linemen throughout the entire Bill Belichick era, so the lack of talent on the right side does not appear to be a major problem. The Patriots have won three Super Bowls this decade without the benefit of a

Pro Bowl offensive lineman, which is a real credit to QB Tom Brady and this coaching staff. Former starter Russ Hochstein is a valuable O-line reserve who can play guard or tackle, but after that, the depth in this area gets somewhat suspect. Second-year man Ryan O'Callaghan started several games as a 2006 rookie in place of an injured Nick Kaczur at right tackle, but he looked somewhat overmatched and needs to get a lot better if he hopes to be a long term solution here. Other players who are battling for reserve roles along the offensive line include Gene Mruzckowski, Wesley Britt, Billy Yates and Brian Barthelmes. And the New England front office seems to recognize that the reserve corps is quite shaky since they used three late round draft picks on offensive linemen, hoping to find a "diamond in the rough" among the threesome of Clint Oldenburg (Colorado State), Mike Elgin (Iowa) and Corey Hilliard (Oklahoma State). Of those three, we think Oldenburg has a chance to be a potential sleeper as a former tight end who may have the footwork and athletic ability to play tackle, even at this level.

DEFENSE: The Patriots are not the strongest defensive team in the NFL, but this unit is still very solid as New England gave up just 294 yards per game a year ago to rank sixth in the league in that category. Coach Belichick has always worked wonders with his defensive units, and he'll head into the 2007 campaign with even more weapons as New England made some good personnel moves over the off-season. One place where they made no major changes is along the defensive line where the Patriots have an outstanding three-man starting unit of Richard Seymour, Ty Warren and Vince Wilfork, plus a fantastic backup in Jarvis Green. Seymour was actually the only New England defensive player to earn a Pro Bowl invite a year ago as he racked up 40 tackles and four sacks, which are modest numbers which do not tell the whole story of what a great player Seymour has been for the Patriots. Seymour will again start at defensive end along with Warren, the latter of whom is coming off the finest year of his career. Warren posted 84 tackles and 7.5 QB sacks in 2006, and you could make a pretty good case that HE was the most valuable defensive lineman for the Patriots instead of Seymour last season. Unfortunately, Pro Bowl invites tend to be based on reputation, so Warren was left at home and Seymour was invited to Hawaii, although he sat out the game due to injury. And while Seymour and Warren are outstanding on the flanks, the Patriots are also in superb shape at nose guard where massive Vince Wilfork is a stout run defender who really clogs things up in the middle. Wilfork had 50 tackles and one sack last season and he's a vastly under-

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rated player. Key D-line reserve Jarvis Green was awesome off the bench in 2006 as he racked up 33 tackles and a career-high 7.5 QB sacks off the bench. The depth in this area did take a hit during the off-season with the drowning death of talented youngster Marquise Hill, so the Patriots will need to get some more production out of players like Mike Wright, Santonio Thomas and Lekevin Smith. Wright was a very pleasant surprise in 2006 as he came off the bench to register 32 tackles and one sack, which is pretty good bench production for a guy who was an undrafted free agent when he came to the Patriots at the start of the 2005 campaign. New England also added another promising player up front in 2007 fourth round draft pick Kareem Brown (Miami, Fla.), who never put up big numbers in college because he was used as part of a four-man rotation at defensive tackle for the Hurricanes, but looks to be a very talented long range prospect.

The linebacker position is critical in New England's 3-4 defensive scheme, and that's just fine for Patriot fans as this club is absolutely loaded at linebacker this season. Aging vets Tedy Bruschi and Mike Vrabel will again start at inside linebacker, while the Patriots are equally loaded at outside linebacker where Rosevelt Colvin and free agent signee Adalius Thomas (Ravens) give this team a ferocious outside pass rushing combo. Bruschi continued his amazing comeback from a stroke he suffered a few years ago, and in 2006 he paced this club with 124 tackles, adding two sacks, an interception and two fumble recoveries. Vrabel is coming off another excellent season in which he racked up 89 tackles, 4.5 QB sacks, three interceptions and three forced fumbles! The only knock on Bruschi (34) and Vrabel (32) is their age and the fact that they've played a LOT of football over the course of their respective careers, but they certainly looked pretty darn good in 2006! At outside linebacker, Colvin is coming off a terrific year in which he registered 53 tackles and a team-leading 8.5 QB sacks, but

New England Patriots 2007 Veteran Roster

NO.	NAME	POS.	HT	WT	D.O.B.	EXP.	COLLEGE
52	Alexander, Eric	ILB	6-02	240	02/8/1982	3	Louisiana State
23	Andrews, Willie	FS	5-10	195	11/2/1983	2	Baylor
32	Baker, Rashad	FS	5-10	198	02/22/1982	4	Tennessee
	Barthelmes, Brian	C	6-06	296	01/28/1983	1	Virginia
	Baughner, Danny	P	5-10	199	01/24/1984	1	Arizona
80	Brady, Kyle	TE	6-06	280	01/14/1972	13	Penn State
12	Brady, Tom	QB	6-04	225	08/3/1977	7	Michigan
65	Britt, Wesley	T	6-08	320	11/21/1981	2	Alabama
54	Bruschi, Tedy	ILB	6-01	247	06/9/1973	12	Arizona
87	Caldwell, Reche	WR	6-00	210	03/28/1979	6	Florida
16	Cassel, Matt	QB	6-04	225	05/11/1982	2	Southern California
13	Childress, Brandon	WR	5-10	185	03/31/1982	1	Ohio State
59	Colvin, Rosevelt	OLB	6-03	250	09/5/1977	8	Purdue
44	Evans, Heath	RB	6-00	250	12/30/1978	7	Auburn
33	Faulk, Kevin	RB	5-08	202	06/5/1976	9	Louisiana State
10	Gaffney, Jabar	WR	6-01	205	12/1/1980	6	Florida
21	Gay, Randall	CB	5-11	190	05/5/1982	4	Louisiana State
3	Gostkowski, Stephen	K	6-01	210	01/28/1984	2	Memphis
97	Green, Jarvis	DE	6-03	285	01/12/1979	6	Louisiana State
37	Harrison, Rodney	SS	6-01	220	12/15/1972	14	Western Illinois
25	Hawkins, Artrell	SS	5-10	195	11/24/1975	10	Cincinnati
	Hill, Quadtrine	RB	6-02	233	11/18/1982	1	Miami
27	Hobbs, Ellis	CB	5-09	190	05/16/1983	3	Iowa State
71	Hochstein, Russ	C	6-04	305	10/7/1977	6	Nebraska
53	Izzo, Larry	ILB	5-10	228	09/26/1974	11	Rice
17	Jackson, Chad	WR	6-01	215	03/6/1985	2	Florida
20	Jackson, Eddie	CB	6-00	200	12/19/1980	4	Arkansas
20	James, Tory	CB	6-02	192	05/18/1973	11	Louisiana State
16	Jones, C.J.	WR	5-11	195	09/20/1980	1	Iowa
77	Kaczur, Nick	T	6-04	315	07/28/1979	3	Toledo
19	Kight, Kelvin	WR	6-00	213	07/2/1982	2	Florida
67	Koppen, Dan	C	6-02	296	09/12/1979	5	Boston College
45	Kranchick, Matt	TE	6-07	260	12/13/1979	3	Penn State
72	Light, Matt	T	6-04	305	06/23/1978	7	Purdue
70	Mankins, Logan	G	6-04	310	03/10/1982	3	Fresno State
39	Maroney, Laurence	RB	5-11	220	02/5/1985	2	Minnesota
46	Mays, Corey	LB	6-01	245	11/27/1983	2	Notre Dame
8	Miller, Josh	P	6-04	225	07/14/1970	12	Arizona
45	Mills, Garrett	TE	6-01	235	10/12/1983	1	Tulsa
24	Mitchell, Mel	SS	6-01	225	02/10/1979	4	Western Kentucky
77	Moore, Rashad	DT	6-03	325	03/16/1979	4	Tennessee
31	Morris, Sammy	FB	6-00	218	03/23/1977	8	Texas Tech
18	Moss, Randy	WR	6-04	210	02/13/1977	10	Marshall
64	Mruczkowski, Gene	G	6-02	305	06/6/1980	3	Purdue
61	Neal, Steve	G	6-04	305	10/9/1976	5	Cal St.-Bakersfield
68	O'Callaghan, Ryan	T	6-07	330	07/19/1983	2	California
66	Paxton, Lonie	LS	6-02	260	03/13/1978	8	Sacramento State
22	Samuel, Asante	CB	5-10	185	01/6/1981	5	Central Florida
36	Sanders, James	FS	5-10	210	11/11/1983	3	Fresno State
30	Scott, Chad	CB	6-01	205	09/6/1974	10	Maryland
55	Seau, Junior	ILB	6-03	248	01/19/1969	18	Southern California
93	Seymour, Richard	DE	6-06	310	10/6/1979	7	Georgia
81	Smith, Jonathan	WR	5-10	194	11/28/1981	3	Georgia Tech
97	Smith, Kenny	DT	6-04	289	09/8/1977	4	Alabama
90	Smith, Le Kevin	NT	6-01	308	07/21/1982	2	Nebraska
31	Spann, Antwain	CB	6-00	190	02/22/1983	2	Louisiana-Lafayette
18	Stallworth, Donte'	WR	6-00	196	11/10/1980	6	Tennessee
96	Thomas, Adalius	OLB	6-02	270	08/18/1977	8	Southern Mississippi
86	Thomas, David	TE	6-03	248	05/10/1985	2	Texas
92	Thomas, Santonio	DT	6-04	305	07/2/1981	1	Miami
50	Vrabel, Mike	OLB	6-04	261	08/14/1975	11	Ohio State
94	Warren, Ty	DE	6-05	300	02/6/1981	5	Texas A&M
87	Washington, Kelley	WR	6-03	218	08/21/1979	5	Tennessee
84	Watson, Benjamin	TE	6-03	255	12/18/1980	3	Georgia
83	Welker, Wes	WR	5-09	185	03/1/1981	4	Texas Tech
75	Wilfork, Vince	NT	6-02	325	11/4/1981	4	Miami
9	Williams, Gemara	CB	5-08	185	04/30/1983	1	Buffalo, N.Y.
26	Wilson, Eugene	FS	5-10	195	08/17/1980	5	Illinois
58	Woods, Pierre	OLB	6-05	250	01/6/1982	2	Michigan
99	Wright, Mike	DE	6-04	295	03/1/1982	3	Cincinnati
74	Yates, Billy	G	6-02	305	04/15/1980	4	Texas A&M

New England Patriots 2007 Rookie Roster

RD	SEL#	NAME	POS	HT	WT	COLLEGE
1	24	Meriweather, Brandon	FS	5-11	192	Miami (Fla.)
4	127	Brown, Kareem	DT	6-4	290	Miami (Fla.)
5	171	Oldenburg, Clint	OT	6-5	296	Colorado State
6	180	Rogers, Justin	OLB	6-3	252	SMU
6	202	Richardson, Mike	CB	5-11	189	Notre Dame
6	208	Hairston, Justise	RB	6-2	220	Central Connecticut
6	209	Hilliard, Corey	OT	6-5	318	Oklahoma State
7	211	Lua, Oscar	ILB	6-0	238	Southern Cal
7	247	Elgin, Mike	G	6-3	282	Iowa

Colvin will likely be overshadowed this season by the arrival of high profile free agent Adalius Thomas, who was one of the top five players to hit the free agent market this past off-season. Thomas was a Pro Bowler for Baltimore last year as he rolled up 83 tackles and 11 QB sacks, and this guy is simply one of the most explosive, big-play defenders in the league. If needed, Thomas can also move up and play defensive end at times, so he's just a very valuable player for the Patriots. Thomas replaces Tully Banta-Cain (49ers), who left as a free agent, plus the Patriots also dumped veteran backups Barry Gardner and Don Davis, but the reserve cast here is still fairly solid. Aging former Pro Bowler Junior Seau and special teams standout Larry Izzo give the Patriots two excellent backup linebackers, plus further depth here comes from Pierre Woods, Eric Alexander and Corey Mays. The Patriots have also added two rookie linebackers in the late rounds of the 2007 draft in the duo of sixth rounder Justin Rogers (SMU) and seventh rounder Oscar Lua (USC).

If the Patriots have a weakness, which they don't, it is likely in the secondary where the starting quartet is solid, but the depth is somewhat suspect. The best coverage guy for New England is young cornerback Asante Samuel, who is coming off a breakout season in which he tied for the NFL lead with 10 interceptions. Samuel can occasionally get burned because of his aggressiveness, but he's one of the better cover corners in the NFL and the Patriots need him in the lineup. And that's where there is a potential problem as New England placed the "franchise player tag" on Samuel during the off-season, which basically means that he'll get a large salary this year, but become a free agent at the end of the 2007 season. Samuel is demanding a long term contract extension for BIG money, and he has even threatened to hold out if the Patriots don't work out a long term deal for the kind of money he could have secure on the open market if he hadn't been "franchised" during the off-season. At the other CB post, youngster Ellis Hobbs is a bit short and can occasionally be exploited, but he made a lot of progress in 2006 and seems to be adequate as a number two cornerback. The leader of the secondary remains aging strong safety Rodney Harrison, who missed

six games with a knee injury last season and needs to prove that he can bounce all the way back at age 35. Harrison is one of the toughest and most determined players in the NFL, and even with limited foot speed at this late stage of his career, he was an above average strong safety in 2006 before he got injured. At free safety, solid vet Eugene Wilson will be trying to bounce back from an injury-plagued 2006 season where a groin injury forced him to miss all but four contests. Wilson should have no trouble bouncing back, but just in case, the Patriots spent their first round draft pick on Brandon Meriweather (Miami, Fla.), a talented athlete who played both cornerback and free safety during the course of a standout college career. Meriweather is a good looking player, but he probably lacks the coverage skills to play cornerback and may not be physically tough enough to play safety, so we feel he's best-suited to come off the bench even over the long term. However, it appears that the Patriots want him to be the free safety here in the years to come, so perhaps Wilson will be moved to strong safety when Harrison eventually retires. For now, Meriweather will play a key reserve role along with solid but unspectacular returnees like Chad Scott, Randall Gay, James Sanders and Artrell Hawkins. Sanders started several games at safety a year ago with all of the injuries there, but is definitely better suited to bring off the bench. Scott, Gay and Hawkins have all played a lot at cornerback in the past, but all three could be jumped over on the depth chart this year in favor of free agent pickup Tory James (Bengals), who was once a Pro Bowler early in his career with Denver. At age 34, James has slipped quite a bit in terms of his coverage skills, but he should be a valuable reserve for New England as the nickel or dime back this season. Two veteran players who won't be back this year are reserve DBs Tebucky Jones and Ray Mickens, both of whom were cut during the off-season.

The kicking game looked pretty suspect heading into last season as the Patriots had a rookie placekicker and a somewhat unsettled situation at punter, but things turned out better than expected as rookie kicker Stephen Gostkowski did a nice job and the punting was adequate despite a host of injuries at that position. Gostkowski had the unenviable task of trying to replace the leg-

endary Adam Vinatieri last year, and despite some early struggles, he ended up scoring 103 points, converting 20 of 26 field goal attempts in 2006. Gostkowski certainly looks to be a "keeper" for the Patriots even if he's not the second coming of the All-Pro Vinatieri. Punter Josh Miller battled injuries last season which forced the Patriots to replace him for two different stints, but he'll be the only punter in training camp this fall. Miller averaged 43 yards per boot in 2006 and he's been a fairly reliable performer over the course of his NFL career. The return game is also a major positive for New England as they have three above average return specialists in Laurence Maroney, Kevin Faulk and Ellis Hobbs, but the Patriots have a potential problem in terms of their kickoff coverage which was surprisingly awful in 2006.

GAMEPLAN CONCLUSION: There is no sense beating around the bush in our analysis of the New England Patriots this year as it is painfully obvious that this club is the team to beat in the 2007 Super Bowl chase. The Patriots were a terrific club last year when they went 14-5 and came within a play or two of beating the Indianapolis Colts and playing in the Super Bowl, and this franchise has done nothing but get better during the off-season. The New England offense was successful last season despite an alarming lack of playmakers at wide receiver, and now it's scary to think about what Tom Brady might accomplish in 2007 as the Patriots have added several explosive wideouts, including former All-Pro Randy Moss who has been rescued from his exile in Oakland. If Moss can stay motivated and out of trouble, which has obviously been a HUGE problem for this clown in the past, then the New England offense could turn out to be the best in the entire NFL this season. With a suddenly deep and talented corps of wide receivers, and an emerging star at tight end in Ben Watson, the New England passing game will be downright awesome this year. And the Patriots will just as productive on the ground provided that talented second-year running back Laurence Maroney can stay healthy. On defense, this group has some age issues with players like Tedy Bruschi, Rodney Harrison and to a lesser extent Mike Vrabel, but the talent level is better than it's been since New England's last Super Bowl victory, and this defense should be very tough in 2007. We look for New England to win 13 to 15 games this season and head into the playoffs as the team to beat in the AFC. And when you consider that the AFC is now FAR stronger than the NFC, the Patriots are definitely the favorite to win this year's Super Bowl.