

The Rich Get Richer

by MARK GREY 3.26.09

Every sports fan is familiar with the old saying "buying into the system." This saying has become one of the many over-used clichés that we all expect to hear from our star players, right up there with "give 110 percent" and "what's best for the team." While every team would love to have all of its players buy into the system, one team has taken the notion to a whole different level. In New England, Coach Bill Belichick doesn't just have his players buying into the system, he has the rest of the NFL buying into it as well. After already winning more than any other team this decade, the best team in the NFL is getting even better.

While most coaches and General Managers would have patted themselves on the back for putting together an 11 win season after losing 11 players, including the franchise quarterback, the Patriots aren't most teams. This offseason, Belichick made it a point to make sure his team improved on both sides of the ball. After the Pats had trouble in their secondary last season, they quickly added veteran cornerbacks Leigh Bodden and Shawn Springs. When Fred Taylor, the NFL's 16th leading rusher of all time, became a free agent, he quickly found his way to New England to add some extra depth to the backfield. When Donte Stallworth left the Pats after their magical 16-0 season, he left a void at the wide receiver spot opposite Randy Moss and the Pats made sure to fill that void by bringing in Joey Galloway, one of the best deep threat wide outs in the game. When you take a team that won 11 games the previous year, add arguably the best quarterback in the league, some more offensive weapons, and depth on defense, is it any wonder the Pats are the early favorite to win it all next year?

So how is it that the Patriots are able to assemble such a collection of talent and still remain under the cap? Simple. Players all across the NFL want to be Patriots. Any time a big name free agent releases his list of teams for whom he would like to play, the Pats always seem to make the list. When players request to be traded, the Patriots always seem to be one of the teams they are willing to be traded to. In a day and age where the top talent always goes to the top bidder, the Pats have found a way to make players accept less money to play. When I spoke with one agent he told me, "it's something about New England. Everyone wants to go there. When I tell my clients the Patriots called, it's like -- they get all excited." Another former player told me, "you just really get the feeling it's all about winning there." In a world of professional sports, Belichick and the Patriots have created a recruiting mystic that is normally seen only on the collegiate level. When the pros hear that Belichick wants you, it's almost like when high school kids hear that "Coach K called." See, even kids who grew up hating Duke want to hear what coach K has to say.

The secret that sets the Patriots apart is that they have a proven system that works and comes with guarantees. The two biggest elements that every free agent worries about are winning and money...and not always in that order. One thing about New England is that players know that if they perform well in their jobs, they will get both. New England isn't known for breaking the bank to sign players, but if you perform in New England, someone will break the bank to get you. Matt Cassel rode the bench in New England for years, but when he got his chance, he was ready. Next season, he'll cash in to the tune of 14 million. Stallworth spent one year as a Patriot and then signed with the Cleveland Browns for 5 million a year. The fact that the Patriots offer players the stage to showcase what they can do when used in the right way is the reason that players like Leigh Bodden are willing to sign one year deals below market value. Throw in a chance to win a Super Bowl and going to the Pats is a no brainer for young free agents.

The one group of free agents who seem to find the Patriots most attractive is the veterans who simply want to win. These are the guys who have already collected their individual achievements and the only thing left to add is a Super Bowl ring. When you get players like Junior Seau, Fred Taylor, and Joey Galloway, guys who bring years of experience, it only makes the younger players that much better. Throw in players like Randy Moss and LaMont Jordan, players who know what it's like to play for organizations like the Raiders and have no desire to go back to that life, and the question is: who doesn't want to play for the Patriots? While Belichick gets a lot of slack for his no nonsense approach, it's that consistence that his players respect and love. Jordan told me, "with Belichick, you know that anything less than your best is unacceptable." He also told me that another thing about Belichick is that you'll always know where you stand. For so many of these players who have been around the block and know the politics of the game, it is refreshing to know that what matters most is that you can do your job on the field. Belichick has taken players known as cancers, like Moss and former running back Corey Dillon, and gotten nothing but excellence from them. For a superstar on the back end of his career looking to add a ring to his resume, very few places look as attractive as New England.

Now, as if the Patriots dynasty wasn't looking strong enough already after a rare down year (if you can call 11 wins a down year), it looks like they are reloading. The Pats are expecting their leader Tom Brady to be back at full strength with two of the fastest, deepest targets in the game, and arguably the game's quickest target underneath. Not only will the Pats also return last year's defensive rookie of the year in Jerod Mayo, they also hold four picks in the first two rounds of next month's draft. As if all of that wasn't enough for teams across the NFL to worry about, it got worse last week when a former defensive player of the year said he wanted out of Carolina. That's right, Julius

Peppers said he was looking for a new team to call home...and guess which team was at the top of his list. Any way you look at it, if you were a free agent, could you really go wrong with New England? After all, what's the worst that can happen … you'll win?