

The convenience of the comparison dates nearly three decades now, to that January afternoon in 1982 when Tom Brady squeezed between his parents in their seats at Candlestick Park, and cried when his hero made a memory that football still remembers by a simple phrase some 28 years later. A boy of not even four and a half, he was there when Dwight Clark made “The Catch,” winning the NFC Championship Game on a desperate connection from Joe Montana, the superstar who Brady came to idolize growing up a 49ers fan, and to whom Brady’s own career in quarterbacking has been most often paralleled.

Both were overlooked through the early rounds of the NFL Draft, but each took over a team that had lost at least ten games the previous year and won a Super Bowl in his first full season as a starter. Both proved capable of the gaudy numbers that get rewarded with Pro Bowl trips, but each built his reputation based more on winning than on wowing. Both were always efficient, effective, and reliable in their execution, but each had a calming coolness that made him even better with the game on the line.

But if the Patriots are to keep winning at the rate New England’s fans have come to expect over the last decade—and these days that means championships—Brady

will need to continue the comparison one step further. To a level of lucrative longevity that no other has managed to match. With his titles coming in Super Bowls XVI, XIX, XXIII, and XXIV, Montana stands as the only quarterback of the Super Bowl Era to be crowned again at least seven seasons after first hoisting football’s holy grail. In a span of nine seasons he won four rings, including three in an eight-year stretch with Bill Walsh on the San Francisco sidelines that also set a record in terms of title span for a coach and quarterback combination.

And that’s where history becomes concerning for the Patriots. When festivities kick off at Gillette Stadium in September, Brady and Bill Belichick will begin their tenth season as a tandem, and thereby the tenth season in a sparkling span that started with the tent folding in on top of the Greatest Show on Turf, then later delivered two more Lombardis for the trophy case.

Additionally, it’ll signify the first time since that 2001 campaign (and just the second since 1996) that the Patriots enter a season without a playoff win in either of the two previous years, so history, at least, leaves New England to face a rather dire reality.

Its dynasty is dead.

Photo on previous page: Harry How/Getty Images Photo this page: Roberto Schmidt/AFP/

Are we really closing in on ten full years since Tom Brady emerged from Drew Bledsoe’s sizable shadow and became one of the great stories in Boston sports history?

Now there’s no shame in that, really. The NFL is a league built to evolve. To bring new teams and new towns to power, to move and to morph before even the most successful of winners can adapt its ways. That’s why teams so often struggle the season after losing a Super Bowl, and why the Dallas Cowboys followed an historic stretch of three titles in four years by going more than a decade without winning a playoff game. The league wants rising to power to be easier than retaining it, and so even two members of the sport’s all time royalty are bound to fall from the ruling class at some point.

Just don’t expect either to take his deposition lying down.

As much as Belichick may respect and revere the game’s history, neither the coach nor his quarterback has allowed himself to be defined by it. Otherwise, Belichick would still be the coach known for overseeing the collapse of the original Cleveland Browns. Brady would be as anonymous as the 199th player taken in most every other draft. And the Patriots would still be yet another sad-sack American Football League franchise, capable of occasional competitiveness but ultimately struggling just to sustain viability in its local market, let alone its long-term success.

They’ve already rewritten their history a few times during Bob Kraft’s tenure as the team’s owner, and now they’ll endeavor to take on the limits of tradition once again. Forty-four years of evidence suggests it isn’t likely. And it certainly won’t be easy. But, even by four and a half, Brady had seen more miraculous events play out on the football field, so the quarterback doesn’t simply claim he’s confident the dynasty can continue. He says it stands to get stronger still.

“Hell yeah I think that,” Brady said in January, his enthusiasm noteworthy because just minutes earlier New England had been bounced from the playoffs with a heart-sinking, gut-busting, 33–14 home loss to Baltimore. “I mean, we have Mr. Kraft [and] what he’s been able to do for the franchise, and Coach Belichick who is probably the greatest coach of all time, and some great core leaders that we still have. We’ve got a lot of youth that are really good players and work hard.

“I certainly don’t think because we lose a couple of games this year that all of a sudden everything is over.”

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It’s almost hard to believe that it’s been about a decade since everything started for Belichick and Brady, since Jets linebacker Mo Lewis gave the coach a convenient opportunity to swap a quarterback who spent his offseasons in Montana for one who spent his offseasons trying to be like Montana. But the company they keep within the annals of the game speaks to just how long it’s been, and makes it hard to dismiss them with absolution in the future.

Photo Bottom-left: George Gokovich/Getty Images Photo Top-right: Focus on Sport/Getty Images

Belichick Basics

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