



Leigh Bodden was rewarded for his performance with a four-year, \$22 million deal in the offseason.

Bodden signed a one-year contract with New England for short money before the 2009 season, and earned a new deal with a 55-tackle, five-interception, 17-pass breakup performance, proving that he was the corner the team needed after struggling to find Asante Samuel's replacement. Those numbers are similar to the ones the 6'1", 195-pound Bodden put up in 2007, his final season in Cleveland, where he was coached by former New England defensive coordinator Romeo Crennel.

The smart money is on Darius Butler to start on the left side opposite Bodden. One of four second-round picks for New England last year, Butler started five games as a rookie and pulled in three interceptions, the first of which came against

Tennessee, just hours after he learned of the death of friend and former UConn teammate Jasper Howard. Butler's play at times seemed uneven, though that is hardly rare for a rookie. But, there are several interesting players on the depth chart behind Bodden and Butler.

Jonathan Wilhite is, at best, an average nickel back, but with top-flight wideouts Santonio Holmes and Brandon Marshall now in the AFC East to boost the receiving corps of the Jets and Dolphins respectively, an average nickel isn't going to cut it. Word is that Wilhite is a favorite of Bill Belichick's, where fellow 2008 draftee Terrence Wheatley isn't. Wheatley, a former second-round pick, played in just five games last season, though there are some within the Pats' organization who believe he is better than Wilhite, who played in 14 games with eight starts.

In the mix as well is Devin McCourty, the 27th overall pick this April out of Rutgers. Scouts say McCourty plays well in zone coverage, which the Patriots generally favor, but more often than not, his skills as a special-teamer are mentioned as a strength first. Many are predicting McCourty will be in the mix at nickel, and the fact that he played for Belichick confidante Greg Schiano at Rutgers works in his favor.

The Pats also have Kyle Arrington, who tied for the team lead in special teams tackles last year, despite playing just nine games, and undrafted rookie Terrence Johnson at the position.

New England has numerous interesting options at safety as well.

Brandon Meriweather made his first Pro Bowl last year as a reserve, though there was a midseason lull in his play. He started every game for the first time and posted career highs in tackles and picks. While Meriweather is an emerging player at his position, in the locker room he tends to be more of a follower than a leader; he learned at the knee of Rodney Harrison his first two seasons, but he initially struggled without Harrison to lean on every day last year.

James Sanders should be alongside Meriweather for every game, as he should have been for every game last year. But Sanders saw his defensive snaps plummet in favor of Brandon McGowan. McGowan can make bone-crunching hits and loves to throw his body around, but can be undisciplined and takes risks. Sanders, the most tenured member of the New England backfield—he has been with the team since it made him a fourth-round pick in 2005—is not spectacular, but he is as steady as they come on the field, and is a quiet but highly respected presence off it. It is not a coincidence that the secondary started to play better when he was finally reinserted into the starting lineup in Week 14 after essentially riding the pine for 11 games (though to be fair he was slowed by a shoulder injury for a couple of weeks in October).

In several ways, McGowan is a bit of a wild card. He boasts that he likes to play "reckless," throwing himself all over the field. But his recklessness sometimes goes into the territory of ill advised. With his size and aggressive nature, he could be used in the "big nickel" role Harrison played in his final seasons, a safety/linebacker hybrid position.

It will be interesting to see the growth Patrick Chung shows from his first season to his second. The Patriots' first draft pick last year (though in the second round)—Chung was lauded by Belichick before his rookie year for his ability to make on-field adjustments and snap judgments on the field with Oregon, quarterbacking the Ducks' defense.

He did start one game last year, but snaps were harder to come by once Sanders returned to his starting spot.

Bret Lockett, who played on special teams before heading to injured reserve in December, is on the roster at defensive back, as are Sergio Brown and Ross Ventrone, both undrafted rookies.

► COACHING/ATTITUDE

Though currently his title is a nebulous "defensive coach," it is widely believed Corwin Brown will be working with the defensive backs—and he may be the most important addition this unit has this season. First, Brown, unlike nearly every member of the New England coaching staff, has experience playing in the NFL. He was a fourth-round pick of the Patriots in 1993, and enjoyed an eight-year career as a passionate player who had the nickname "Cornflakes" for his playing style.

Second, he has considerable high-level coaching experience, having most recently served as associate head coach and defensive coordinator at Notre Dame. He also coached the defensive backs with the Jets under Herm Edwards from 2004–06 and began his coaching in 2001 with Virginia.

In other words, Brown is the anti-Josh Boyer.

Boyer was promoted to defensive backs coach before the 2009 season after a lengthier-than-most three-year stint as a low-level defensive assistant. Before coming to New England (he had served as a graduate assistant at Kent State under now-departed defensive coordinator Dean Pees), Boyer coached at Bryant University and the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology.

More than his lack of experience—Belichick has had other coaches on his staff become successes with backgrounds at obscure outposts—the weakness seems to be Boyer's approach. According to his players, his favorite words are "let me ask Bill (Belichick)" and he simply isn't a strong presence. He doesn't value input from players and is not

Safety James Sanders is the most prepared and respected member of the Patriots' secondary.



his ninth NFL start, was given all day in the pocket and completed 29 of 52 passes for 335 yards, the first 300-yard passing day of his career, in leading his team back from a two-touchdown deficit.

This season's schedule is a potentially scary one for New England in general, but taking a look at the quarterbacks they'll face over 16 games ups the fear factor: the Patriots will welcome Carson Palmer, Peyton Manning, Aaron Rodgers, and possibly Brett Favre to Gillette Stadium; on the road, they will be up against Philip Rivers and probably Ben Roethlisberger.

So the need to apply pressure is underscored, and the challenge facing the secondary is clear.

► PERSONNEL

While there aren't any superstars roaming the backfield for New England, it is arguably the deepest unit on the team: there is a mix of young and veteran players, proven playmakers and emerging talents, and though many questioned the necessity of doing so, given the other areas of need on the roster, a first-round draft pick has been added to the bunch.

And not to be overlooked is the addition of Corwin Brown to help coach them all.

Aside from signing nose tackle Vince Wilfork to a five-year contract extension, the best offseason roster move the Patriots made was re-signing cornerback Leigh Bodden.

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