

to Moss's defense.

"I have a lot of respect for Randy. I think he's one of our best players," Belichick said in the days following Gamble's comments. "If you watch other teams defend him, watch other teams play against him, they think the same way, other than these two guys from Carolina after they lost another game. I guess they don't think that way, but they haven't won a lot of games now.

"You know how I feel about stats. Stats are for losers. Final scores are for winners."

With Moss's Patriots career likely coming to a close after this year, the jury is still out on whether his addition three years ago was a beneficial one. The Patriots won Super Bowls with guys like David Patten, Troy Brown, and Deion Branch at wide receiver. With Moss, they turned into a video game offense in 2007, but that switch in football philosophy has led some to wonder if perhaps Belichick lost some of the focus and approach that led to three Lombardi trophies.

Moss's stats have been eye-popping, but his final score is still in question.

▼ AGING GRACEFULLY?

Moss enters the 2010 season in the final year of his contract, the three-year, \$27 million deal he inked with the Patriots following his historic 2007 season. While one might stand to reason that will mean big things for Moss, age is a major issue when it comes to the team deciding whether or not to re-sign him, never mind the rocky road that labor negotiations promise to provide. Moss turned 33 in February, an age when no receiver has his best years ahead of him. In 1995, at the age of 33, Rice caught 15 touchdown passes and amassed a career-high 1,848 yards for the 49ers, remarkable numbers for a guy at any age.

But Rice never again caught more than nine touchdown passes in a season. At the age of 34, Marvin Harrison had his last productive season as an elite

receiver, the same age as Cris Carter when Moss's former teammate last led the NFL in touchdowns. Point is, the Patriots signing Moss to another contract—other than the unlikelihood of a one-year deal—is a foolhardy prospect.

There are also the injury factors to consider. Moss was plagued with a bad back during the 2009 season, then over the winter it was reported that he also suffered a separated shoulder, an injury that he supposedly played two-thirds of the season with. Of course, the natural question there is, was everyone too hard on Moss for his midseason performance given his physical condition?

Short answer: maybe. Moss's reputation has followed him so ferociously that even that has to come into some question. Did the Patriots, who treat injury reports like they are the map to the Ark of the Covenant, leak that information after the season in order to file an excuse for Moss, or was it a negotiating ploy? Take your pick.

Moss, for one, sees the writing on the wall, telling the media at a charity golf tournament in February that he figured this would be his final season in New England because the Patriots "don't pay." This coming from the team's top-paid player was something of a hoot. Still, one need only look as far as this past offseason and wonder why the team wasn't in on making a move for receivers like

Anquan Boldin or Brandon Marshall, instead choosing to ink veterans like Patten (who wasn't even in the league in 2009) and Torry Holt. Moss may have one more highly productive season in him. Do those guys?

Welker's return from ACL surgery is perhaps the most important question for the Patriots offense, but beyond 2010, where does Brady look in order to spread the field so that Welker can be the force he has been in his three seasons in New England? And if the season is cancelled in 2011, like many believe is possible, why exactly would the team sink millions of dollars into players who will only be a year older come 2012? Moss will be 35. If

"Ever since his rookie season with the Vikings in 1998, the enigmatic wide receiver has been criticized for losing focus for much of his time, despite being one of football's most dominant offensive forces."

Randy Moss Career										
Year	Tm	G	GS	Rec	Yds	Y/R	TD	Lng	R/G	Y/G
8 yrs	MIN	113	108	587	9316	15.9	92	82	5.2	82.4
4 yrs	NWE	52	51	259	3904	15.1	50	76	5	75.1
2 yrs	OAK	29	28	102	1558	15.3	11	79	3.5	53.7
1 yr	TEN	8	4	6	80	13.3	0	26	0.8	10
Career		202	191	954	14858	15.6	153	82	4.7	73.6

some saw a slow in his step in 2009, in two years his assumed inability to stretch the defense will bring with it an entirely new set of accusations and criticisms.

► BEHIND THE MASK

It was the final regular season game at Gillette Stadium, and Moss had just caught his third touchdown pass in what would eventually become a 35–7 rout of the Jacksonville Jaguars. The Patriots clinched the AFC East title, incidentally the last game New England has won to date.

Moss was just two weeks removed from the Carolina game, his first game in front of the home crowd since many of them booed his performance against the Panthers. Performance breeds forgiveness though, and those same fans were now back on Moss's side.

As the touchdown was reviewed by officials on the field, the stadium JumboTron caught sight of a fan in the stands donning a lifelike Randy Moss mask. The fan caught wind of his larger-than-life image hovering over the sellout crowd, and he milked it, motioning his arms outward like Moss's signature touchdown celebration prompting raucous cheers from the sellout crowd.

Moss, on the sideline, caught it too, and played along, going back-and-forth, move-for-move to the delight of the crowd. It served as a rare interaction between player and fan, one that resulted in the loudest cheers Route 1 had seen all season.

In the days following, after he had already become an online sensation, we discovered the masked man was Josiah Shumaker, a 12-year-old boy from New London, CT, attending his first-ever game in Foxboro. Shumaker had just purchased the mask in the Patriots Pro Shop that morning. Had he not, imagine, we would have been denied one of the most fun moments of the 2009 season. “



Honestly, everyone loves to see this.

Photo: Elsa/Getty Images Sport