

Why Bill Belichick's Genius Can't Be Replicated

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Steven Senne/Associated Press

By Jeff Benedict

Mr. Benedict is the author of “The Dynasty,” about the New England Patriots.

When Robert Kraft traded a first-round draft pick to the New York Jets in 2000 in exchange for the right to hire Bill Belichick, N.F.L. insiders considered it “an awfully steep price,” as one put it, and a journalist mocked him for being “snookered.”

Convinced that Belichick was a coaching savant, Kraft ignored the naysayers.

Belichick also knew what critics were saying. He had an undistinguished record as a head coach, and Kraft was a relatively new owner of a franchise that had never won a championship.

Hours before Belichick's first game as head coach of the New England Patriots on Sept. 3, 2000, he gave Kraft a gift: a vintage print of Ted Williams and Babe Ruth. On a nondescript card, Belichick scribbled, "Thanks for giving me the opportunity to coach your team. Let's hope we will be as successful as these two fellas."

Kraft framed the print and the card and hung them on his office wall, where they remained for the past 24 years.

The unusual durability of the Belichick-Kraft marriage was rooted in mutual respect and a series of unconventional decisions early on in their partnership.

On Thursday, Belichick and Kraft appeared together to announce the end of their unprecedented collaboration. Together, they built a dynasty, resulting in nine Super Bowl appearances and six championships. They stand alone as the most successful coach and the most successful owner in the history of the N.F.L. Belichick's words on that card appear prophetic. And Kraft's trade to get Belichick looks as lopsided as when the Red Sox traded Babe Ruth to the Yankees.

The genius of Belichick rests in his powers of concentration and his rare ability to identify talent and groom overlooked players into champions. He is a master teacher who helped groom Tom Brady into an elite quarterback and provided the framework for him to flourish into the greatest player of all time.

As the Patriots' head coach, Belichick was peerless when it came to preparation, often behaving more like a general than a coach. Tactical in his approach, he turned scouting his opponents — and exploiting their weaknesses — into an art form. He was dispassionate when it came to personnel decisions, unafraid to trade or cut even his favorite players when he felt it was in the best interest of the team. And his mantra — "Do your job" — was something he instilled in his players through example.

Coaches throughout the N.F.L. and the college ranks emulate Belichick. Corporate executives have looked to learn from his coaching approach. But he is a rare breed whose methods were so organic to his personality that they are hard to replicate.

Through it all, Belichick and Kraft always knew where each other stood. Belichick operated with the security of working for a results-driven owner who put a premium on continuity. Even when they bid each other farewell, they stood side by side, a manifestation of unity and a mutual understanding that their partnership had run its course. They were “two fellas,” in Belichick’s phrase, who had accomplished the unthinkable together: They became as successful as Williams and Ruth.

In Belichick’s second season in New England he made the boldest decision of his career when he benched his star quarterback, Drew Bledsoe, after an injury and replaced him with Tom Brady, an overlooked and unproven player whom Belichick had chosen with the 199th pick in the N.F.L. draft.

For Belichick, the controversial move was fraught with risk. Bledsoe was the face of the franchise, and he enjoyed a close personal relationship with Kraft. If Belichick’s decision backfired, he’d probably be out of a job.

For Kraft, the stakes were just as high. He’d just given Bledsoe a \$103 million contract, making him the highest-paid player in the league. But when Bledsoe urged him to exercise his prerogative to intervene, Kraft refrained.

At the end of that season, Brady quarterbacked the Patriots to their first Super Bowl victory, and Bledsoe was traded.

“So much thanks for the opportunity to be the head coach here for 24 years,” Belichick said at the news conference announcing his departure. “We had a vision of building a championship football team here. That’s exceeded my wildest dreams and expectations.”

“What Bill accomplished with us, in my opinion, will never be replicated,” Kraft said.

Keeping Belichick and Brady together for 20 years was Kraft’s greatest singular achievement. Rupert Murdoch once told me that if Kraft had chosen politics over sports, he could have gone down in history as one of America’s greatest diplomats. Behind the scenes, he was the bridge between his two stars, enabling them to shine and coexist for all those years.

The marriage may be over, but it’s no surprise that Belichick, like Brady, has pledged that he is a Patriot for life.

That’s the Patriot way.

Jeff Benedict is the executive producer of the docuseries “The Dynasty: New England Patriots,” streaming on Apple TV.