

Patriots problems too big to overcome this season Corey Dillon rushes past Walter Payton into record books

by Alan Greenberg
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FOXBOROM, Mass. - With their season halfway over and their hopes of earning a postseason berth all but dashed, all the Patriots can do now is play hard the rest of the season and prove that although they're not good, they're not amateurs, either.

The Patriots (2-6) have weak spots that no one on the roster can make strong, and coach Bill Belichick's success during the off-season - free agency and the draft - is much more important than anything his team does on game day the rest of the season.

After a 6-2 start in 1999, the Patriots skidded to a 2-6 finish under the fired Pete Carroll, so they're 4-12 under two administrations since Nov. 1.

Under Belichick and his staff, the Patriots are a much more serious, disciplined group. They rarely commit the false start and offsides penalties that were their signature problem under Carroll. In the earsplitting noise of the Chiefs' Arrowhead Stadium last season, the Patriots had five such penalties in the first quarter. In the earsplitting noise of the Colts' RCA Dome Sunday, they had none the entire game.

Under coordinator Charlie Weiss, the Patriots offense is much more imaginative than it was under Ernie Zampese. But without a receiver capable of replacing Shawn Jefferson (lost to the Falcons in free agency), or a tight end more productive than

1999's declining Ben Coates, imagination only carries a team so far.

And when the line is patchwork, depending on an aged, postsurgery Bruce Armstrong (35) and journeymen starting guards who didn't even come aboard until after training camp, Drew Bledsoe's best hope to avoiding crushing hits and sacks is a great running back. The Patriots don't have one of those, either. On offense, this team needs a lot of help.

Except for Bledsoe, whose contract must be restructured to free up money to sign quality free agents, all the Patriots' big money players are on defense. And while Willie McGinest, Ted Johnson, Chris Slade, Ty Law and Lawyer Milloy are the defense's core players, no one is a superstar who can wreck an offense, or why else would Peyton Manning and the Colts have averaged nearly 10 yards a play against them Sunday?

The Patriots don't have a dominant defensive lineman to rush the passer and cave in the pocket. And they don't have a cornerback opposite Law or a free safety alongside Milloy who has earned Belichick's confidence, so he rotates Tebucky Jones, Antonio Langham, Otis Smith and Larry Whigham like middle inning relief pitchers.

Owing mostly to their questionable pass rush and secondary, the Patriots have given up more points than any team in their division. And quality depth is so lacking that when starting defensive linemen Chad Eaton and Brandon Mitchell missed the Jets game two weeks ago because of in-

juries, Curtis Martin ran wild. After holding every opposing running back to under 100 yards in the first six games, the Patriots have now yielded more than 100 in back-to-back games.

The Patriots veterans all understand that they needed the no-nonsense attitude that Belichick has brought and the intense preparation he demands.

But the players respect Belichick the way students respect a good, strict teacher, and for them, his methods are not in question. The most impressive thing about the first half of this season is that although the record is a disaster, the Patriots have continued to play hard and don't seem to have lost any faith in their new leader. They're smitten with his knowledge and strategy, not his personality.

But while good game plans and few turnovers have kept the Patriots close in every game this season except the Oct. 15 Jets debacle, they can't hope to be serious contenders until the talent is upgraded. Although Belichick has never publicly uttered the word "rebuilding" since he was hired in late January, that's exactly what is going on behind the public facade of early season optimists such as Bledsoe, who insist that these Patriots have enough talent to win.

When the Patriots' top draft choice Adrian Klemm comes off the physically unable to perform list, there will be 24 players wearing Patriots uniforms who weren't wearing them when last season ended. That's nearly half the 53-man roster, and you can

bet it'll be a lot more than that when the Patriots start playing for real next season. Be assured that unlike some new CEOs, Belichick isn't cleaning house just to do it.

Why are the Patriots in dire straits?

Add the compensation they were awarded for losing Bill Parcells and Martin to the Jets with their normal picks, and over the last four years the Patriots have had more draft choices in the first three rounds than any team in the NFL. But the fired Bobby Griener and his lieutenants botched that golden opportunity to restock the shelves, so the Patriots' core players are the same ones who led them to the Super Bowl four years ago. Instead of a solid new core, there's mostly worms.

On the field, things may get better soon, because after this bye week the schedule gets a lot easier. Besides two games with the Bills, who are the only other AFC East team with a losing record, the Patriots also play the Bengals, Browns and Bears.

Those three sad sacks are a combined 4-19, and two of them are missing their starting quarterbacks. So a 5-3 finish and a 7-9 season might not be unrealistic. What would be is believing that a November-December winning streak means the Patriots are a lot better than they looked in September and October. They're not. And they won't be appreciably better next season unless they can use free agency and the draft to bring in some players who make big plays, not just big money.

by Lynn Zinser
October 23, 2000
Knight-Ridder Tribune

Among those surprised that Corey Dillon broke Walter Payton's single-game NFL rushing record, don't count his Bengals teammates.

"I see him every day and every time he touches the ball in practice, he takes it 60 yards," said Bengals tight end Tony McGee. "If you work hard, you get your window of opportunity. His window was today."

Dillon, though, had less of a grasp on his own accomplishment. He could barely believe he rushed for 278 yards. He couldn't picture himself on a list with players like Payton and Jim Brown. Dillon only had 323 yards in six games heading into Sunday's 31-21 victory over the Broncos. He just wanted the Bengals to win a game. He had no illusions about setting records.

"Right now I'm still in shock," Dillon said. "Maybe when I sit down after the season it will hit me, but now I don't know what to tell you. I really don't."

Payton gained 275 yards rushing against the Vikings in 1977.

Sure, Dillon is talented. He broke Brown's rookie single-game rushing record with a 246-yard performance in 1997. He's a 6-foot-1, 225-pound bundle of power. He's rushed for more than 1,100 yards in each of his first three seasons.

But he plays for the Bengals, one of the worst offensive teams in the NFL. Cincinnati has been shut out three times in seven games this season. Heading into Sunday, Dillon was averaging a career-low 3.5 yards-per-carry.



His teammates, however, all wanted to talk about how hard he's worked. Even as the season spiraled to a disastrous 0-6 start, Dillon showed up every day with the same resolve. Even after he suffered the worst game of his career - 4 rushing yards against Baltimore on Sept. 24 - he didn't let his frustration get the best of him.

Dillon has an explanation for this turn of events. It had nothing to do with him.

"Getting 4 yards against Baltimore, I don't think it could get any worse," Dillon said. "I'd never experienced like that in my life. From 4 yards to 278. The Lord's very good. He's very, very good to me."

Dillon was also quick to credit his teammates' blocking. On several of his long runs, Dillon broke tackles. On others, he was untouched. He said his linemen will get a treat this week.

"I might blow a game check on 'em this week," Dillon said. "I'm taking everybody out. They're all a part of this!"

The Broncos defenders also contributed their fair share to the record, although they won't get dinner out of it. The linebackers in particular overpursued several plays and Dillon said he used their speed against them, by cutting back against the grain.

But 65-yard runs aren't usually part of Dillon's repertoire. He's a power runner. He said his philosophy is to aim for a 4-yard run with every carry. Anything after that is a bonus.

Breaking Payton's 23-year-old single-game record, needless to say, wasn't part of the plan.

"Walter Payton is still the best back ever to play the game," Dillon said. On one day, Dillon was better.

NFL focus falls on Vikings

by Bill Williamson
Knight-Ridder Tribune
October 24, 2000

EDEN PRAIRIE, Minn. - It's starting to take a life of its own.

The Vikings are beginning to become the inner parts of a much bigger plot. They are the lone unbeaten team in the NFL.

They are now the story of the league. As long as they stay unbeaten, every opponent will be gunning for them, trying to be the first to knock off No. 1. Every week, the Vikings will be the talk of the NFL. Can they become the first team since the 1972 Miami Dolphins to run the table? Who can beat the Vikings?

The sports world is captivated by perfection. The combination of the Vikings' fourth-quarter comeback against Buffalo on Sunday and a loss

by suddenly vulnerable St. Louis leaves the 7-0 Vikings by themselves in the Undeclared Department.

Let the pressure cooker begin. "You're definitely in the spotlight when you're the last (undefeated) team left," said Vikings backup quarterback Bobby Brister, who experienced the pressure when Denver ran out to a 13-0 record in 1998.

"We really started feeling it a couple games before we lost. . . . It got tough. Everyone wants to talk about it, and it gets to be a big thing. . . . But right now, this team is 7-0, and it's not that big of a deal yet. It's starting to be, though, because St. Louis lost. But, at this point, it's a good thing, because it can give us some good momentum. We believe we should be unbeaten."

The Vikings, who visit NFC Central rival Tampa Bay on Sunday, are the NFL's last unbeaten team for the

first time since 1975, when they started 10-0. This is the fourth season in which the Vikings have won their first seven games. They were 9-0 in 1973 and 7-0 two seasons ago.

Vikings receiver Cris Carter is V unimpressed with the team's status. However, the last unbeaten team in the NFL the past three years has gone on to win the Super Bowl.

"Being 7-0 means you've won seven games in seven different ways," said Carter of the Vikings, whose team 10-game winning streak in the regular season in the longest current streak in the NFL.

Still, Carter knows the Vikings are in position to put a cushion between themselves and their opposition, not only in the NFC Central Division, but in the conference. The Vikings hold a two-game lead over Detroit in the division and have beaten the Lions .

The Vikings will have a chance to bury Tampa Bay this week. After winning their first three games, the Buccaneers, a preseason Super Bowl favorite, have lost four straight, including a 30-23 decision at the Metrodome on Oct. 9.

The Vikings' NFC playoff prospects also are promising. They hold a one-game lead over the Rams in the race for the home-field advantage throughout the playoffs. The Rams, who have serious defensive issues, are expected to play the next four weeks without star quarterback Kurt Warner, who broke the little finger on his throwing hand Sunday.

"Getting the home field is so huge," Brister said. "In Denver, when we won back-to-back Super Bowls, we did it both ways, and doing it with the home-field advantage is the best way to go."

Penn State quarterback indicted

by Dick Jerardi
October 25, 2000
Knight-Ridder Tribune

Penn State quarterback Rashard Casey was indicted on a second-degree assault charge Tuesday by a Hudson County, N.J., grand jury investigating the alleged beating of an off-duty police officer in May in Hoboken, sources said.

Grand jury proceedings are secret and no official announcement will be made until at least next Tuesday.

Terry Hull, first assistant Hudson County prosecutor, said that, under court rules, he was unable to speak about the grand jury's decision regarding the charges against Casey and Desmond Miller, a former Hoboken High School classmate of Casey's.

He did say that he could have spoken if the grand jury, meeting in Jersey City, had decided not to press charges or to send the matter back to municipal court where it would have been treated as a misdemeanor, the equivalent of a disorderly person offense. The grand jury's only other option was an indictment.

It is expected that a judge will assign the case, probably next Tuesday or the following Tuesday. At that time, the indictment likely will be made public. According to a source, Miller also was indicted on a second-degree assault charge.

A second-degree charge is a felony. The maximum sentence is 10 years. Casey and Miller, both 22, were arrested May 14 after an alleged incident at 2:40 a.m. outside a Hoboken bar.

Miller was arrested at the scene. Casey was arrested at a McDonald's restaurant several blocks away.

It's unlikely a trial would be scheduled until sometime in 2001.

Police charged Casey and Miller with beating off-duty police officer Patrick Fitzsimmons, 34. Fitzsimmons was treated and released from a hospital that day.

Hoboken Police Chief Carmen LaBruno said Fitzsimmons has not returned to work since the incident.

In July, Fitzsimmons filed a civil lawsuit against Casey, Miller and Keon Walker, a Syracuse defensive back and a former high school teammate of Casey's. Walker, who was at the scene of the incident, was not charged by police.

torney Anthony J. Pope Jr. said that his client had suffered facial and jaw injuries, and that his vision and mental well-being had been affected.

Casey and Miller pleaded not guilty at their arraignments on May 15.

Casey talked briefly about the incident on Aug. 5. "I'm not embarrassed by anything," he said then.

He had been told by Penn State coach Joe Paterno and his attorney not to talk about the case, but did elaborate somewhat.

"If you are in my shoes and something like that nonsense, as I call it, happened," Casey said, "things come out and people write things and say things, you can't do anything but live with it and grow from it."

Casey's attorney, Dennis McAlevy, has been saying for months his client is innocent.

In August, McAlevy said: "I truly don't think they're going to indict him. I'd love for them to dismiss the whole thing."

Tuesday, McAlevy had no comment. The Penn State sports information office said it had received no official notification of any decision.

Paterno was steadfastly stood behind his quarterback, saying in May that he "hoped and expected he will be exonerated when all the facts are examined."

In August, Paterno said: "I'm going to play Rashard Casey until something convinces me I shouldn't." Casey has been the starter from the first game.

Paterno has been criticized by some for playing Casey while the charges were pending. He has been asked several times if his stance would change were his quarterback to be indicted. The coach has said he wouldn't deal in speculation.

Since the indictment won't be made public for at least a week, it won't be an issue for Paterno this week. After Penn State plays at Indiana on Saturday, it will have three regular-season games remaining: Iowa, at Michigan and Michigan State. The only way Penn State (3-5) would play in a bowl game is if it wins all four games.

"I honestly have gone with the premise that Rashard didn't do it," Paterno said Oct. 17. "I wasn't at the scene and can't tell you I was an eyewitness or anything like that. Deep down in my gut, I don't think he did it. That is the way I have approached it."

Timber! Stern is not amused; T-Wolves lose Smith, 5 top draft choices

by Sam Smith
October 26, 2000
Chicago Tribune

Remember the good old days when there used to be an NBA franchise in Minnesota?

Tuesday for instance?

NBA Commissioner David Stern imposed Wednesday what is believed to be the harshest penalty in the history of American team sports on the Minnesota Timberwolves - forfeiture of five No. 1 draft picks and a \$3.5 million fine - for signing forward Joe Smith to an illegal secret contract designed to circumvent the league's salary-cap rules.

The ruling is expected to have wide-ranging ramifications that could lead to the suspension or resignation of General Manager Kevin McHale, the loss of Smith and perhaps a forced trade of star Kevin Garnett.

Timberwolves officials declined comment on the ruling.

In it, Stern ordered the Timberwolves to forfeit their No. 1 draft pick in each of the next five years through the 2004-05 season. It is a shocking penalty, because the NBA considers No. 1 draft picks so vital to a team's future that it doesn't allow teams to trade them in consecutive seasons.

Finced the team \$3.5 million, the

maximum allowed.

Voided Smith's contract for the coming season, the illegal second contract that was to pay Smith about \$86 million over seven years starting next year and the two previous one-year contracts that Smith had with the Timberwolves since the 1998-99 season.

Smith appears to have little incentive to re-sign with Minnesota, even though it was his desire to stay which prompted the illegal contracts that resulted in the penalties.

The only two teams with room under the salary cap are the Bulls and Los Angeles Clippers. The Clippers have about \$4 million available and the Bulls about \$5 million, although they could get close to \$6 million if they cut some marginal players. Also, the Miami Heat is awaiting an NBA ruling on a medical exception for Alonzo Mourning. If granted, it would give the Heat \$3.88 million to offer Smith.

Smith, 25, the No. 1 pick in the 1995 draft from Maryland, figures to suffer the least because of the ruling. Although he has been viewed as

something of a bust for a top pick, his career averages are 14.5 points and 7.5 rebounds. He averaged 18.7 points and 8.5 rebounds at Golden State before questionable associations and lack of discipline caused his game to slip.

The big damage will be to the Minnesota franchise and its fans. The penalties come just two days after the University of Minnesota basketball program was hit with major NCAA sanctions for academic fraud.

Officials around the NBA were stunned at the forfeiture of five No. 1 draft picks.

Because of the huge contracts the Wolves have given Garnett and Terrell Brandon, they will be over the salary cap through at least the 2002-03 season. That means they cannot pursue free agents. All they would have to improve the team is the salary-cap exception, and it seems unlikely any top players would choose to go there in light of the team's dire situation.

And this is a franchise that never has advanced past the first round of the playoffs.

Stern's statement said additional

