

ALL or NOTHING

DEPENDING ON WHO YOU ASK, PATRIOTS QUARTERBACK DREW BLEDSOE IS EITHER THE NEXT DAN MARINO OR...NOT

BY GRANT GLICKSON

DEPENDING ON WHICH BOSTON NEWSPAPER YOU READ, OR WHICH LOCAL RADIO STATION YOU LISTEN TO, DREW Bledsoe is either the greatest quarterback ever to throw a football or the most overrated sports figure Beantown has ever encountered. Both options are equally unsettling.

"Everything goes to extremes when you're in the public eye," Bledsoe says. "You're either great or you suck."

Bledsoe, a 24-year-old from Walla Walla, WA, has spent much of his four years as a professional downplaying the media frenzy that has swirled around him since he stormed into the NFL as the No. 1 overall pick in '93.

"The one thing that I've always said is to wait 10 years down the road before you compare me to Dan Marino," says Bledsoe. "Wait until I really accomplish something before you start comparing me to Troy Aikman. But, of course, that has always fallen on deaf ears. They are going to write what they are going to write."

Through his first three seasons, Bledsoe's career has been more like a roller-coaster ride in Disney's Space Mountain than a smooth sail down the Charles River. Bledsoe left Washington State after his junior season. He was the school's second all-time leading passer, having completed 532 passes for 7,373 yards and 46 touchdowns. The 21-year-old rookie immediately gave Bostonians reason to forget the sale of Babe Ruth to the hated New Yawkers, Bucky Dent's home run in '78, Bill Buckner's blooper in '86 and even Da Bears' Super Bowl massacre of their beloved Patriots in '85. The 6-5, 240-pound right-hander rewrote New England's record book. He set rookie passing records in '93 with 214 completions on 429 attempts for 2,494 yards and 15 touchdowns.

"Any quarterback that enjoys success as a rookie is doing it on pure physical skills," said Joe Theismann, a former Super Bowl quarterback with the Washington Redskins who is now an ESPN analyst.

"That year, he just dropped back and threw the football naturally."

If you expected a sophomore jinx to follow, you would have been wrong. In '94, Bledsoe threw for more yards (4,555) than any other second-year quarterback in NFL history other than Marino (5,084 in '84). In addition, Bledsoe, 22, set three NFL passing records—most attempts in a season (691) and most attempts (70) and completions (45) in a game—and established eight franchise marks on his way to becoming the youngest quarterback in league history ever to play in a Pro Bowl game. His 400 completions fell five short of breaking a fourth record, the single-season mark set by Warren Moon (404) with Houston in '91.

After Bledsoe guided the Patriots (10-6) into the playoffs for the first time in eight years, it was only a matter of time before New Englanders began mentioning his name in the same breath as such hometown legends as Larry Bird, Bobby Orr and Carl Yastrzemski.

"The expectations that other people set are quite often impossible to live up to," Theismann says. "In Drew's case, he established standards for himself that realistically he couldn't [continue to] achieve."

Maybe so. At the age of 23, Bledsoe became the youngest play-



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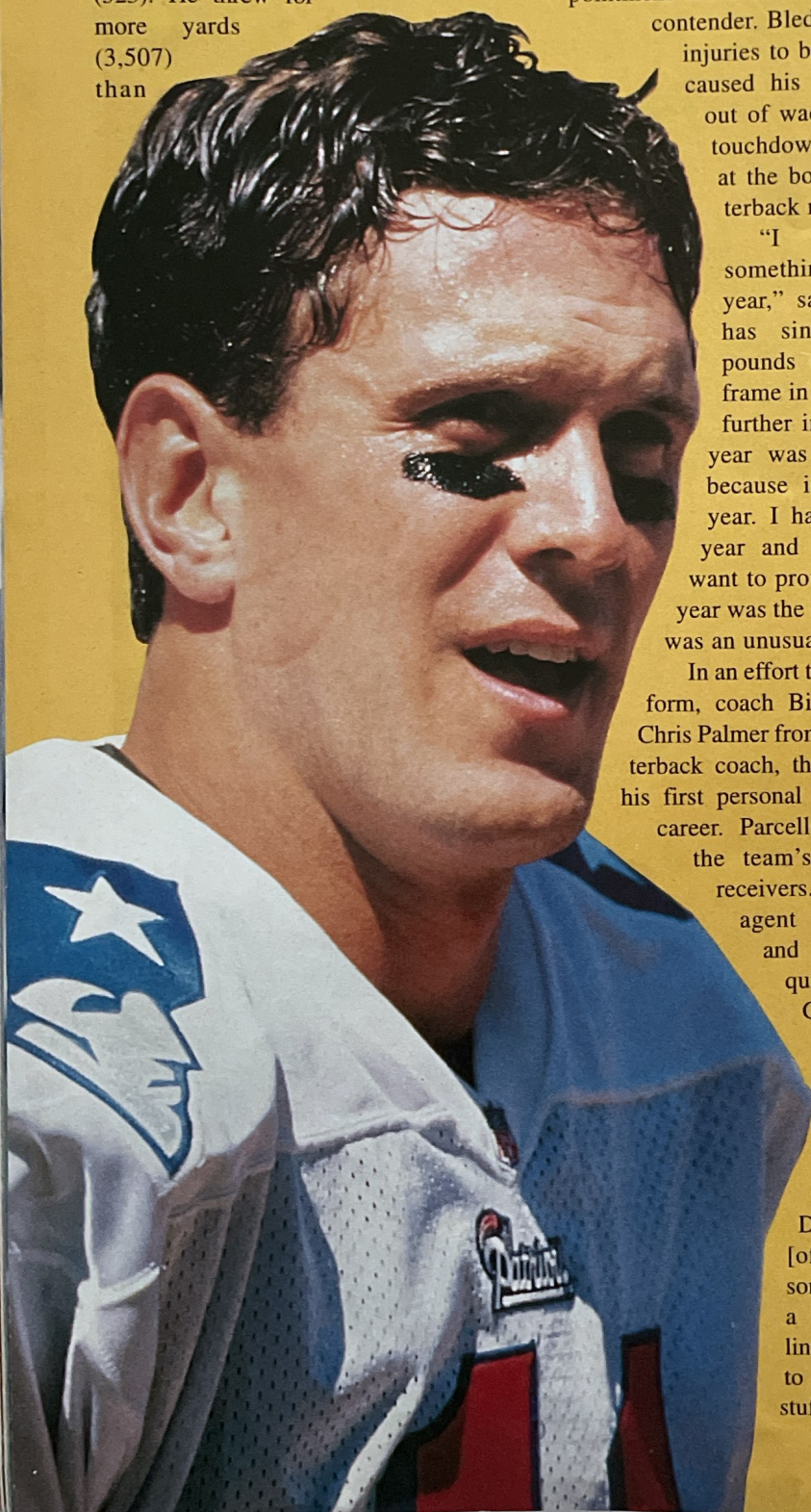
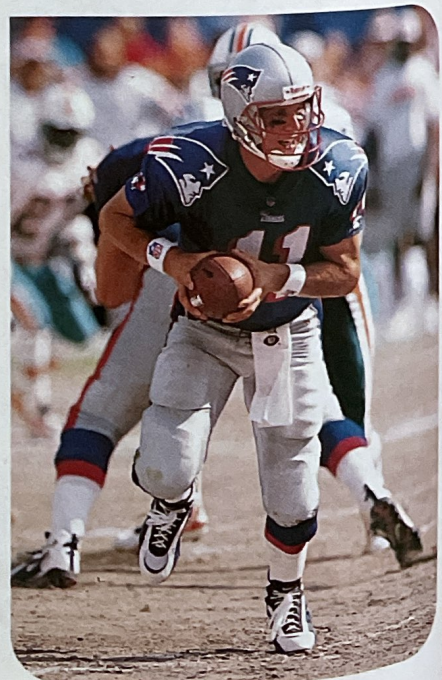
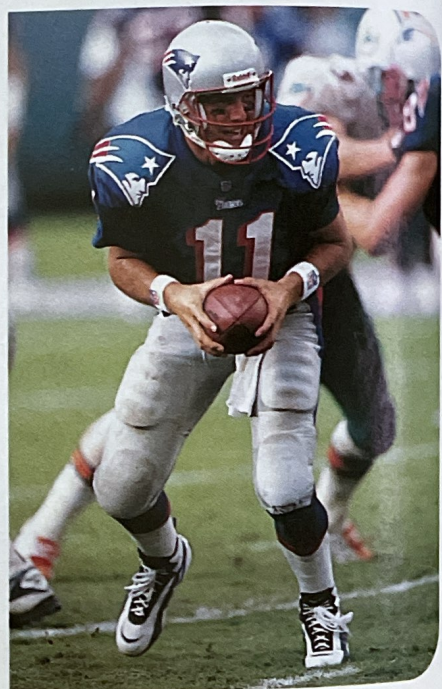
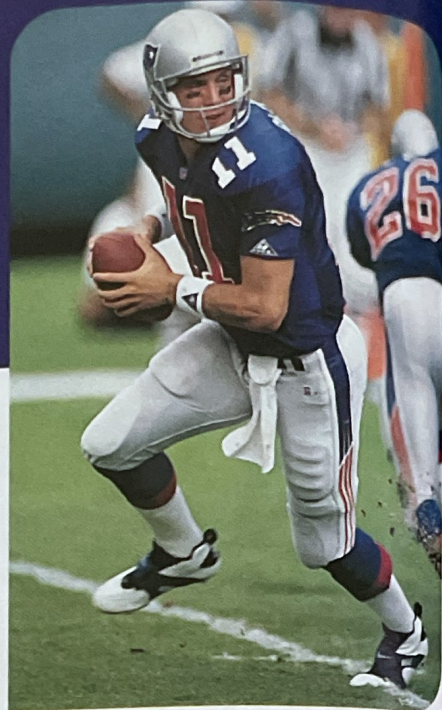
er in NFL history to reach the 10,000-yard passing plateau, surpassing some guy named Marino. In '95, for the second-straight year, Bledsoe led the NFL in attempts (636) and ranked second in the AFC in completions (323). He threw for more yards (3,507) than

any other quarterback in franchise history. But while the gaudy statistics continued to pile up for Bledsoe, the numbers that counted most—the won-loss columns (6-10)—were a major disappointment for a team expected to be a contender. Bledsoe, hampered by injuries to both shoulders that caused his mechanics to be out of wack, threw only 13 touchdown passes and was at the bottom of the quarterback ratings (63.7).

“I definitely have something to prove this year,” says Bledsoe, who has since added eight pounds of muscle to his frame in hopes of avoiding further injury. “My rookie year was kind of a wash because it was my rookie year. I had a good second year and then last year...I want to prove that the second year was the norm and last year was an unusual year.”

In an effort to return Bledsoe to form, coach Bill Parcells shifted Chris Palmer from receivers to quarterback coach, thus giving Bledsoe his first personal trainer of his pro career. Parcells also recognized the team's lack of quality receivers. He signed free-agent Shawn Jefferson and selected lightning-quick wide-out Terry Glenn with the Patriots' first-round pick in last April's draft.

“I think that everybody is looking for more from Drew because of his [off] year last season,” says Max Lane, a Patriot offensive lineman. “We all want to see if he has the stuff to bounce back.”





Bledsoe doesn't expect that to be a problem.

"I have my priorities really defined in my head," he says. "I know what's ultimately important and what's not, and if it's not overly important to me, I don't let it bother me."

Which is not to say that he hasn't heard the talk. "I'm excited about the fact that the fans are paying attention to us," he says. "When I got here, the Patriots were always the fourth sports team and really didn't spark much interest. Granted, the stuff they are saying isn't very positive. But at least we are on their minds. We're the team that they are paying attention to."

His critics have constantly pointed to the seven-year, \$42 million contract that he signed in July of '95, which made him the highest-paid player in league history.

"When you are making enough money to pay six or seven players, sometimes you feel like you have to have the production of six or seven players," he says. "I think that in order to be a successful quarterback, you have to realize what your job is, and you can't try and do too much. The quarterback's job is to put the ball in the other guys hands and let them play."

Despite the Patriots' middle-of-the-pack 4-3 start, the experts are still convinced that Bledsoe's the man who's going to send bombs bursting through the air well into the next century.

"Bledsoe is the best young quarterback out there," says Arizona offensive coordinator Jim Fassel, who insists that he believed that well before New England's boy wonder humiliated his team, 31-0, in Week Three in Foxboro.

"He has a real quick release. He has a good smooth consistent motion. When he sets up, he has good balance on his feet. He can control the ball from different positions. He has a live arm. He has all the things that you look for in a quarterback."

By the year 2000, Bledsoe will be primed to help lead his generation of quarterbacks into the future. The current crop of elite QBs—Aikman, Marino, Elway, Kelly and Young—will all be well beyond their primes or retired.

"I think that some of us young quarterbacks are going to have to carry the mantle," he says. "The established star quarterbacks are all getting kind of old. We are going to have to step up and carry the torch for the NFL. I think that I'll be a part of that, and guys you haven't even heard of will be a part of it too." ■