

BIG GAME Preview



The Eagles: How They Got Here

The Eagles were 7-9 last year in the first season under coach Doug Pederson — hardly an impressive start to his tenure with promising quarterback Carson Wentz also in his rookie season with Philadelphia.

Expectations were low entering 2017, with many experts projecting the team to be around the .500 mark yet again. But some strategic roster moves in the offseason proved to be instrumental in helping the Eagles make the 2016 season a distant memory.

KEY ADDITIONS

Veteran running back LeGarrette Blount and defensive end Chris Long joined the Eagles after winning Super Bowl rings with the Patriots last year.

“I chose the Eagles for the reason of me fitting in really good here, having a championship run, having a banner season,” Blount told the Associated Press after he signed. “And they’re a really good team. They’re a really good team before I came. I just want to fit in.”

The Eagles also added receivers Alshon Jeffery and Torrey Smith, and traded for defensive tackle Tim Jernigan.

The moves didn’t gain a lot of media attention but quietly set the Eagles up for a successful campaign with Wentz leading the squad in his second season.

NEXT MAN UP

Quarterback Nick Foles has proven the importance of having a quality backup quarterback in today’s National Football League. When starter



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Carson Wentz went down with a torn ACL in week 14 of the regular season, the Eagles turned to Foles to pick up the slack.

He delivered.

Foles will now try to become the first backup quarterback to

win a Super Bowl since Tom Brady in 2002.

UNDERDOGS

On Jan. 22 — the day after the NFC and AFC title games, The Westgate SuperBook in Las Vegas installed the Patriots

as 5-and-a-half-point favorites in Super Bowl LII. That’s nothing new for the Eagles. They were the first No. 1 seed in NFL history to be underdogs in their opening playoff game but came away with a win over the Atlanta Falcons.

The Eagles also were three-point underdogs in the NFC title game against the Minnesota Vikings. Now the underdog masks sported by many fans throughout the playoffs will be in full force for Super Sunday.

The Patriots: How They Got Here

Here we go again. The New England Patriots are back in the Super Bowl.

After playing in their seventh straight AFC championship game on Jan. 21 against the Jacksonville Jaguars, the Patriots are looking for their second straight Super Bowl victory.

New England made the biggest comeback in Super Bowl history last year, overcoming a 25-point deficit to defeat the Atlanta Falcons, 34-28, to win the big game. Having had much of its key core intact heading into the 2017-18 season, it's no surprise the Patriots find themselves making yet another Super Bowl run.

Facing the Eagles is nothing new, either. Tom Brady and the Patriots beat Philadelphia in Super Bowl XXXIX.

EXCELLENCE DEFINED

The Patriots will appear in their 10th Super Bowl, the most by any franchise. (Dallas, Denver and Pittsburgh have been to eight.) With a win, New England would earn its sixth title, which would tie the Steelers for most in National Football League history.

So how did they get here? Well, that's more of the same, too.

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BELICHICK AND BRADY

Coach Bill Belichick and quarterback Tom Brady have been the driving factors in all of the Patriots' Super Bowl wins. They earned their first three in a four-year span (2002 to 2005) but had to wait 10 years for their next championship.

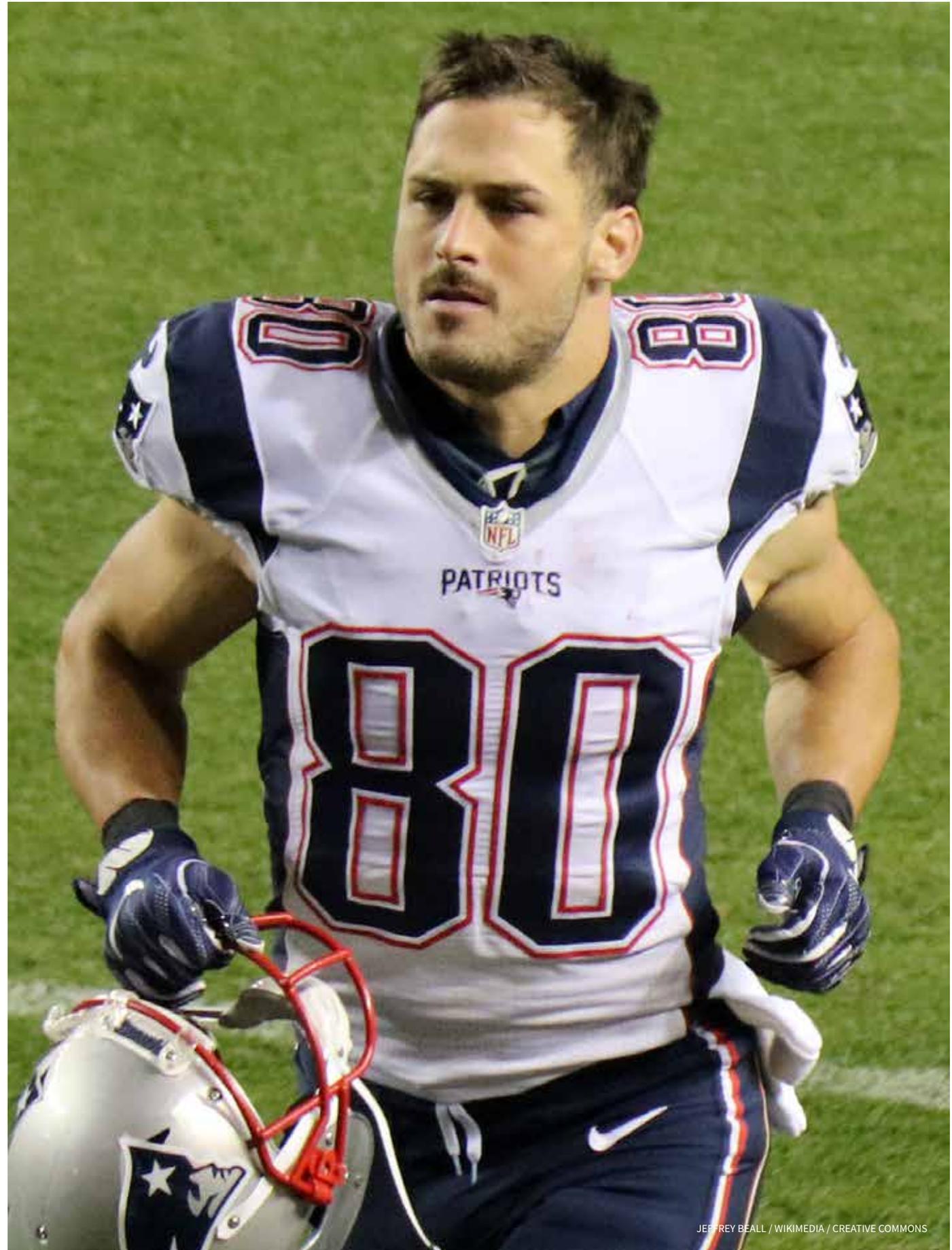
Even with a little extra drama this year after the Patriots traded backup quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo to the San Francisco 49ers, Belichick and Brady found a way to work through their differences.

OVERCOMING INJURIES

The Patriots' week of practice ahead of their AFC championship game against the Jaguars featured a scary moment for Brady.

He cut his knuckle on a helmet during a handoff and it required 12 stitches. Brady missed one practice and became the talk of the town throughout the week, with Patriots fans fearing the worst.

But the future Hall of Famer put together a solid game with 290 yards and two touchdowns, including the go-ahead touchdown pass to Danny Amendola with 2:48 left in the game.



Foles: Surprising Super Bowl Starter

Even Nick Foles didn't see this coming.

Philadelphia drafted Foles out of college but traded him after the 2014 season to the Rams as the Eagles acquired quarterback Sam Bradford. After a winding road that almost led to retirement, Foles put together a solid playoff run to position the Eagles for a chance at the Super Bowl championship.

The quarterback passed for 352 yards and three touchdowns in the Eagles' blowout victory over the Minnesota Vikings in the NFC title game on Jan. 21.

The victory was surprising to many prognosticators, many of whom considered Foles outmatched by a stellar Vikings defense.

Foles surely will face similar doubters as he leads the Eagles against the heavily favored Patriots in the Super Bowl.

REPLACING WENTZ

Foles was thrust into the starter's role when quarterback Carson Wentz went down with a torn ACL in week 14 of the regular season. Wentz had been on his way to an MVP-caliber season before the injury, leading many to believe the Eagles would be hard-pressed to replace him.

Enter Foles.

The backup was inconsistent down the stretch of the regular season but put together



MATTHEW STRAUBMULLER / FLICKR / CREATIVE COMMONS

er quality performances in playoff wins over Atlanta and Minnesota. His first-half performance against the Vikings put the game out of reach early, allowing the Eagles defense to put pressure on

Minnesota's offense in the second half.

OVERCOMING HISTORY

On Feb. 4, the Eagles will try to overcome a less-than-stellar Super Bowl history that

features a defeat to the Oakland Raiders in Super Bowl XV and the heartbreaking 24-21 loss to the Patriots in Super Bowl XXXIX.

Foles will have to play a key role in helping the Eagles

build out an early lead, although it may be Philadelphia's defense that carries the burden of limiting the late-game heroics of Patriots quarterback Tom Brady.

Tom the Terrific (Again)

Tom Brady has defied the odds — he is now 40 years old — to become arguably the greatest quarterback in the history of the National Football League. While that topic is a hotly contested debate, Brady's postseason records speak for themselves.

To add to his illustrious career, Brady was named MVP of the league by the Pro Football Writers Association in January.

Brady finished the season with 4,577 total yards, 32 touchdowns and eight interceptions. His passer rating was 102.8, and the Patriots had the No. 1 offense in the NFL.

This is the third PFWA MVP award, and he has won the Associated Press MVP award twice.

Check out some of Brady's most impressive statistics from his Hall of Fame career:

- More playoff wins by himself (27) than 28 NFL franchises do in their entire history, including Oakland (25), New York Giants (24) and Washington (23).

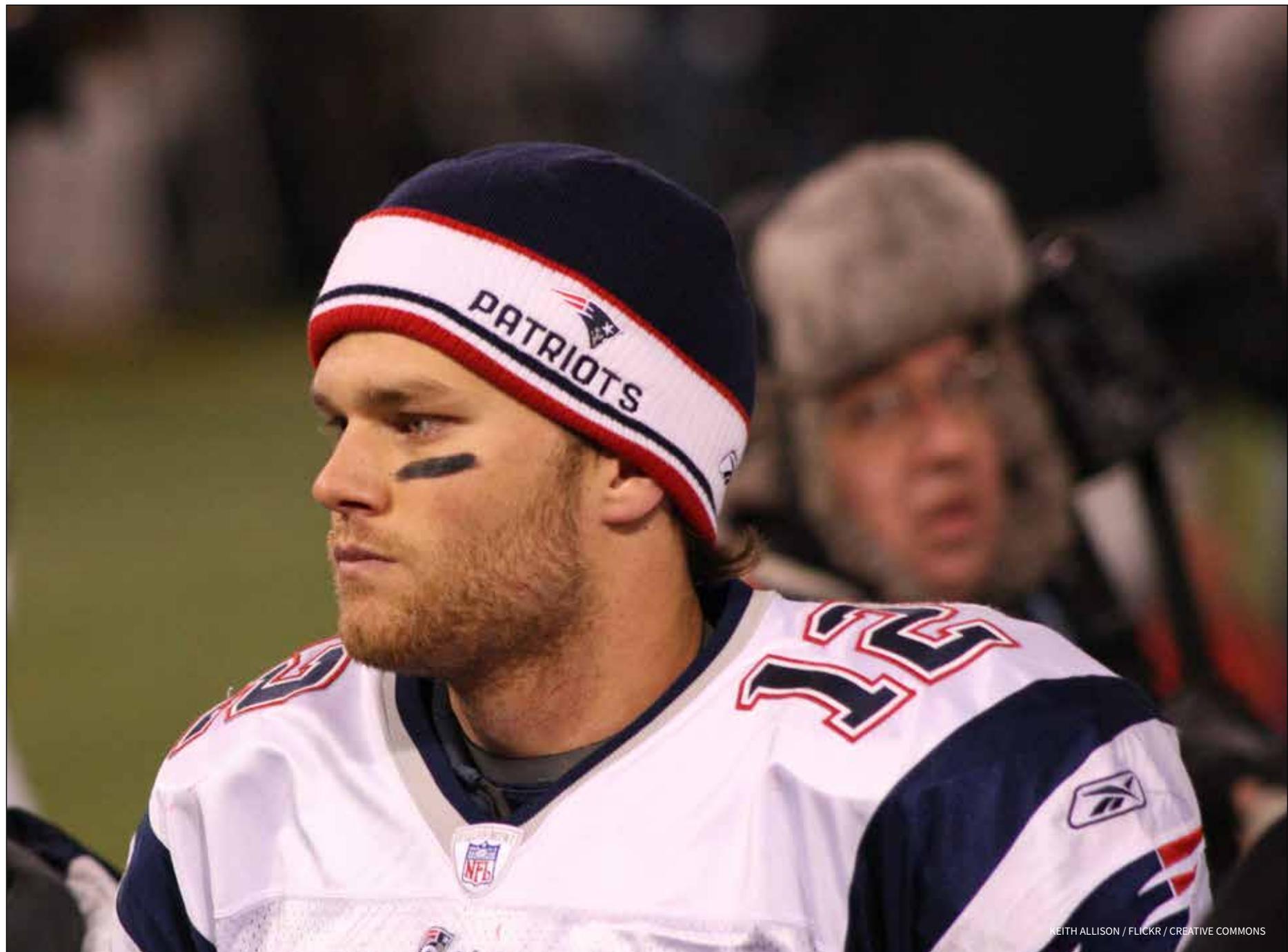
- Eight comebacks and three other fourth-quarter or game-winning drives in the postseason. Eli Manning is the next-closest quarterback with five.

- Started two more Super Bowls (seven) than any other quarterback in history. (John Elway had five starts.)

- Won a record five Super Bowls, one more than Terry Bradshaw and Joe Montana.

- More playoff starts than Peyton Manning and Johnny Unitas combined.

- More passing touchdowns in the Super Bowl (15) than all but 25 quarterbacks have in



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their entire playoff careers.

- Four Super Bowl MVP awards (Super Bowls XXXVI, XXXVIII, XLIX, and LI), the most ever by a single player.

- Selected to 13 Pro Bowls.

- Led his team to more division titles (15) than any other quarterback in NFL history.

- At the end of the 2017 regu-

lar season, Brady was fourth all-time in career passing yards, tied for third with Drew Brees in career touchdown passes.

- Brady has never had a los-

ing season as a starting quarterback and his combined regular-season and postseason wins are the most of any quarterback in NFL history.

Who Has the Edge On D?

High-flying offenses will likely be the topic of discussion heading into Super Bowl LII, but it's the underrated defenses that may well get the last laugh.

Some of the most memorable Super Bowl contests have featured unbelievable defensive play — whether it be James Harrison's 100-yard interception return in Pittsburgh's Super Bowl XLII victory or Malcolm Butler's goal line interception just a few years ago to help New England beat Seattle in Super Bowl XLIX.

Who will be the defensive star this year?

PHILADELPHIA DEFENSE

Defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz had a tall task in 2017, especially during the final quarter of the season. Once MVP candidate Carson Wentz was lost for the year on offense, Philadelphia turned to its defense for consistent play.

Defensive tackle Fletcher Cox and safety Malcolm Jenkins — the Eagles Pro Bowl picks — shouldered the burden and helped turn in an impressive playoff performance.

Philadelphia has allowed only 33 points total in its past four games, including 17 points through two postseason



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contests. The Eagles forced three against Minnesota in the NFC title game and will look for a similar performance to unseat New England.

Other players to watch: Defensive end Brandon Graham had an outstanding season, and cornerbacks Ronald Darby and Jalen Mills have been consistently strong, shutting down big-play wide receivers.

NEW ENGLAND DEFENSE

Patriots defensive coordinator Matt Patricia is likely coaching his last game as a Patriot, as it has been announced he will take over the Detroit Lions head coach job in 2018. Patricia has been a master of building solid defenses without a lot of star power.

While 2017 wasn't the best defensive unit of his career —

the Patriots ranked 29th in total defense — they came up big in the playoffs on their way to the team's 10th Super Bowl appearance.

New England's team defense approach shined in the second half of its win over Jacksonville in the AFC championship game. The Patriots stifled the Jaguars' offense in the final 30 minutes of the game to advance with a 24-20

victory.

Linebackers Kyle Van Noy and James Harrison have been solid at pressuring opposing quarterbacks, while the secondary lead by safety Devin McCourty has held its own against big-time quarterbacks.

The unit will have to be strong against Foles and the Eagles, which have shown a consistent ability to light up the scoreboard.



Running Wild

With so many offensive weapons at the disposal of Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and Eagles counterpart Nick Foles, the team with the best running back performance may be the last one standing on Super Sunday.

The Patriots have traditionally depended on a by-committee approach but have found a regular running back this season in Dion Lewis. The Eagles traded for former Miami Dolphins running back Jay Ajayi during the regular season — a move that has paid dividends in forming a strong one-two punch with LeGarrette Blount.

LEWIS: A STEADY CONTRIBUTOR

Lewis rushed nine times for 34 yards and brought in seven of eight targets

for 32 yards in his team's 24-20 AFC championship game win over the Jacksonville Jaguars. He also gained 34 yards on two kickoff returns.

In the Patriots' divisional-round win over the Tennessee Titans, Lewis touched the ball 24 times (15 rushes, nine catches) for a team-high 141 yards from scrimmage.

The Patriots have depended on such steady performances out of Lewis the entire year.

A fifth-round pick of the Philadelphia Eagles in 2011, Lewis was

traded to the Browns in 2013. Since landing with the Patriots, he has been a solid contributor.

BLOUNT & AJAYI: TWO PEAS IN A POD

The best NFL teams often have two strong running backs to help keep defenses off balance. The Eagles certainly fit the bill with Blount and Ajayi.

Ajayi was acquired in a trade in October, giving the Eagles an outstanding one-two combination of speed and strength. We have seen the

running back position come up big in the Super Bowl as teams turn to their runners to control the clock late in the game.

Blount is a perennial playoff performer and can wear down defenses with his straightforward running style. Ajayi is more elusive but still packs a powerful punch at the line of scrimmage.

Blount and Ajayi could turn out to be the difference in Super Bowl LII, especially if the Eagles can jump out to an early lead.



Pederson vs. Belichick

Look no further than the head coaches of the Philadelphia Eagles and New England Patriots for main catalysts in their teams' respective success.

Both coaches led their teams through up-and-down seasons that featured injuries, controversies and close wins.

While Doug Pederson and Bill Belichick have traveled different roads throughout their careers, both coaches have extensive backgrounds in the National Football League.

Let's take a closer look at how each coach has reached this point in his career and how the experience of each coach could make the difference in Super Bowl LII.

HE'S BACK: BILL BELICHICK

Belichick has built a reputation

for consistency and excellence, compiling only one losing season with the Patriots — his first campaign as head coach in 2000.

After entering the professional coaching ranks with the Baltimore Colts in 1975, Belichick moved on to the Giants for a 12-year stint that included two Super Bowl victories with him as defensive coordinator.

Belichick then served as head coach of the Cleveland Browns from 1991 to 1995, finishing with a 36-44 record and making the playoffs only once.

He joined the New England Patriots in 1996 under Bill Parcells before eventually taking

over as head coach in 2000.

A COACHING UP-AND COMER: DAN QUINN

Pederson's football bloodlines are rich, as he served as the offensive coordinator of the Kansas City Chiefs from 2013 to 2015 and spent most of his playing career as a backup behind Brett Favre for the Green Bay Packers.

He was part of the Super Bowl XXXI team that beat New England in the Super Bowl. He also was a backup to Dan Marino as a member of the Miami Dolphins, and a starting quarterback for the Eagles and Cleveland Browns.

Pederson's offensive play-calling has been a big factor in the Eagles making the Super Bowl. He has simplified the offense on the fly for new quarterback Nick Foles while still allowing him to make some deep throws.

The Eagles use a run-pass-option series of plays that allows Foles to make a split-second decision to hand the ball off or throw it downfield. Foles has embraced the approach, and the results have been clear. With the Patriots ranked near the bottom of the league in terms of defense, it might be Pederson's creative play-calling that makes the difference in Super Bowl LII.