

BETWEEN THE LINES

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Brady Takes His Ball and Goes South

Introduction

On March 17, New England Patriots quarterback, Tom Brady, announced he would not be returning to his team of the last twenty years, and that he was signing instead as a free agent with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Brady's announcement likely signaled the end of the most dominant and durable team dynasty in the history of professional football and certainly terminated the sport's most successful player/coach pairing (with head coach Bill Belichick). The move has fueled intense public and media speculation over Brady's reasons, citing factors ranging from his age and future team role, to his relationship with Belichick and the Patriots organization, and to his personal and family life. The ever tactful and media-savvy Brady has offered next to nothing in terms of direct criticism of his (now former) team or its personnel, or dissatisfaction with his prospects in New England. Instead, he has confined his public statements, on the one hand, to broad expressions of goodwill and gratitude to fans and former teammates for his experience and success in New England and, on the other, profuse enthusiasm for the challenges and opportunities presented by the move to Tampa Bay. Nevertheless, his decision to end a Hall of Fame career with the Patriots obviously means Brady believes that playing in Tampa is a better option for him now than staying in New England. The question is: Why?

While we at BIA typically apply our proprietary methodology to evaluate the reliability and transparency of statements made by C-suite executives, here we analyze an open letter submitted by Brady to *The Players' Tribune* for insights into his motives for moving to Florida. We examine his reflections on his career with the Patriots, his description of the opportunities and challenges presented by the move to Tampa Bay, and one major omission to understand why he feels leaving New England was a better option than staying.

New England Never Felt Like Home

Brady begins his letter with ruminations on the nature of change and challenges in an athlete's career and reflections on the path that brought him to New England. The first hint he offers into his motives for leaving comes from his personal life, when he talks about his children and the need to balance his professional and family obligations. "For as long as I can remember, my career, and football in general, has been an extremely important and gratifying part of my life. But just as important, and oftentimes more gratifying, are the times I spend with my wife and children, and the joy I feel watching my kids get older. In my case this means always checking in with myself and with them to make sure my priorities are in the right place — and if they're not, making adjustments." Brady's mention of "making adjustments" is an apparent reference to the move to Tampa Bay, indicating that he believes, in some measure, that staying in New England would not allow him to put his priorities "in the right place," although the reasons why are unclear.

Brady then devotes several paragraphs to the differences between New England and California (where he grew up), and the difficulty he had adjusting to living in the Northeast, stating at one point "it took me a little longer than it would most people to get used to." He adds that his children, who were born and raised in Massachusetts, "will always think of themselves as New Englanders," and then adds "In a very special way, I will too." Brady's need to qualify his sense of being a New Englander, combined with his lengthy reflections on his difficult adjustment, are strong indicators that he does not see himself fully belonging in New England.

Bad Blood Between Brady and Belichick

In the next section Brady asserts that he will miss most the personal and professional relationships he has built in New England, "the entire New England Patriots organization, and Robert Kraft and the entire Kraft family. It extends to countless other individuals who played such a valuable role in my 20 years as a Patriot. Teammates and coaches, past and present. Old friends, new friends, the neighbors we went trick-or-treating with every year."

In a glaring omission for the normally tactful and diplomatic Brady, he fails to name coach Belichick despite acknowledging Kraft and the Kraft family by name. In fact, Brady's only mention of Belichick in the entire letter is when he recalls the 2000 draft. "By the way, in the sixth round it's not like Coach Belichick himself was on the other end of the line — I think it was his assistant, Berj." The decay of Brady's personal relationship with Belichick in recent years is the stuff of talk radio. It became very public in 2017 that Belichick favored trading Brady and keeping backup quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo while Kraft did not. Brady's failure to even once acknowledge, by name, the head coach with whom he won nine conference and six league championships with is a strong indicator that the rumors of a deep, fundamental rift between the two are valid.

Brady No Longer the Leader of the Pack

Brady then asserts "but mostly I'll miss the fans" before devoting four paragraphs to reminiscing about them. He says, "The support and love of New England fans has always been unconditional" and later describes the move to Tampa Bay, in part, as a "great change." These statements begin to establish a clear pattern suggesting Brady's disaffection with the Patriots, a sense that unlike the fans' support, he no longer has the organization's unconditional support.

Brady states emphatically: "I love my sport. I love doing what I do. I want to keep doing it until I don't want to do it anymore. Playing football isn't something you can do alone in a backyard either. Football is a team sport, and getting a chance to collaborate with my teammates is a big reason I was drawn to the game in the first place."

This strongly worded and very personal statement by Brady is the clearest signal in the letter that he feels his priorities and core values with respect to playing football would no longer have been satisfied in New England. This sentiment is repeated and amplified in Brady's various descriptions of the opportunities in Tampa Bay:

"I want to hear other people say, 'Go, man. Now that's what we've been missing. That's what we need! That's what we've been looking for!"

"Playing for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers is a change, a challenge, an opportunity to lead and collaborate, **and also to be seen and heard.**"

"Most of all, I'm motivated. I want to deliver for my new team, my new coaches and my new teammates."

"They've welcomed me as one of their own. **They want to listen to what I have to say.** I'm excited to be embraced **fully** for what I can bring to the Bucs. In turn I'm ready to embrace fully a team that is confident in what I do — and what I bring — and is willing to go on this ride with me."

Collectively, these statements illustrate a clear belief and some level of resentment by Brady that he had lost the confidence and approval of the Patriots organization and that his opportunities for leadership and accomplishment going forward would be far more limited in New England than in Tampa Bay.

A consummate, driven competitor, Brady makes repeated assertions about his conditioning, his physical abilities, and his ability to accomplish new goals.

"My training and conditioning hasn't changed over the years. It may be the off-season now, but to me it feels like the season has already started."

"Physically, I'm as capable of doing my job as I've ever been. Now I want to see what more I can do. I want to see how great I can be."

"I want to show everybody what I got."

These statements reflect a strong desire on Brady's part to prove himself, to his new team as well as his old, despite his assertion that "At this point in my career, the only person I have to prove anything to is myself."

In a recent Instagram statement, Brady writes

"If there is one thing I have learned about football, it's that nobody cares what you did last year or the year before that...you earn the trust and respect of those around through your commitment every single day. I'm starting a new football journey and thankful for the Buccaneers for giving me an opportunity to do what I love to do. I look forward to meeting all my new teammates and coaches and proving to them that they can believe and trust in me...I have always believed that well done is better than well said, so I'm not gonna say much more - I'm just gonna get to work!"

Taken collectively, these statements provide clear indication that Brady feels he had lost the confidence of the Patriots, that he will be better appreciated and respected in Tampa Bay, that he harbors some resentment over the Patriots' loss of faith in him, and that as a result, he is as strongly motivated to prove the Patriots wrong as he is to prove the Buccaneers right.

The Bucs Look Better

Sports analysts could argue for more pragmatic motives on Brady's part. For example, recognizing that he has only a few years of playing time left and that the Patriots are entering a possibly multi-season period of rebuilding, Brady may see a move to Tampa Bay, a team with a core set of quality offensive skill players already in place, as his last best chance to play in the upper tier of the NFL and possibly make another deep playoff run. However, the tone of his remarks, his disaffection with his former team couched as enthusiasm for the opportunities in Tampa Bay, his effusive praise of his fans, and his apparent shunning of Bill Belichick also all point to strong emotional drivers in Brady's decision.

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