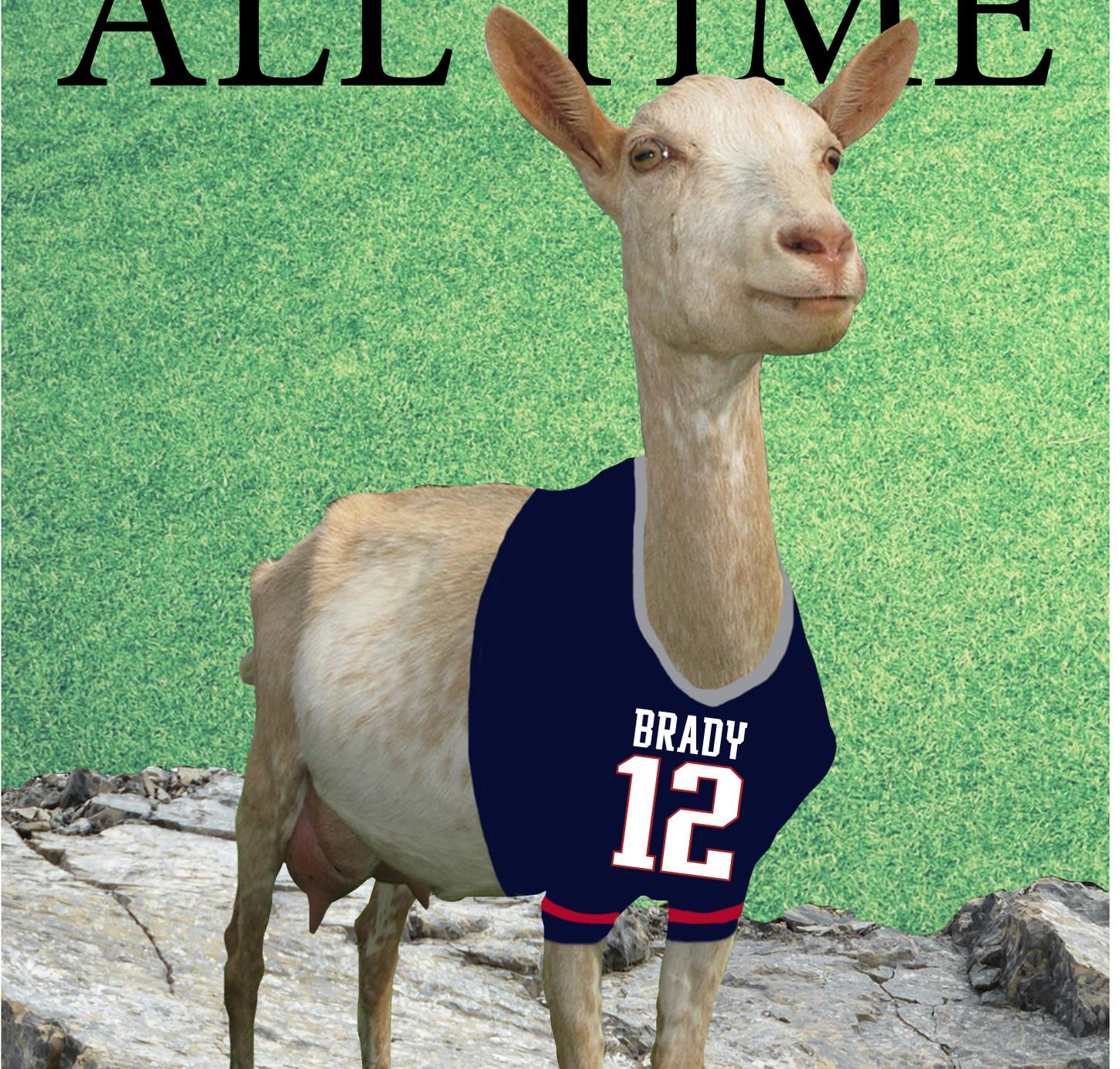


# PIC6

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## INSIDE THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME



# LIVING LEGEND

How  
Tom Brady  
does it Time  
*and Time*  
Again

By Chuck Klosterman



Photo By Keith Allison

**T**om Brady is the greatest quarterback in NFL history.

That's just my opinion, and that opinion is fungible. If someone else had made the same claim five years ago, I would have disagreed; five years ago, I didn't even think he was the best quarterback of his generation. But the erosion of time has validated his ascension. Classifying Brady as the all-time best QB is not a universally held view, but it's become the default response. His statistical legacy won't match Peyton Manning's, and Manning has changed the sport more. But Brady's six Super Bowl appearances (and his dominance in their head-to-head matchups) tilt the scales of hagiography in his direction. He has been football's most successful player at the game's most demanding position, during an era when the importance of that position has been incessantly amplified. His greatness can be quantified through a wide range of objective metrics. Yet it's the subjective details that matter much more.

America's fanatical, perverse obsession with football is rooted in a multitude of smaller fixations, most notably the concept of who a quarterback is and what that person represents. There is no cultural corollary in any other sport. It's the only position on the field a CEO would compare himself to, or a surgeon, or an actual general. It's the only position in sports that racists still worry about. People who don't care about football nevertheless understand that every clichéd story about high school involves the prom queen dating the quarterback. It serves as a signifier for a certain kind of elevated human, and Brady is that human in a non-metaphoric sense. He looks the way he's supposed to look. He has the kind of wife he's supposed to have. He has the right kind of inspirational backstory: a sixth-round draft pick who runs the 40-yard dash in a glacial 5.2 seconds, only to prove such things don't matter because this job requires skills that can't be reliably measured. Brady's vocation demands an inexact combination of mental and physical faculties, and it all hinges on his teammates' willingness to follow him unconditionally. This is part of the reason Brady does things like make cash payments to lowly practice-squad players who pick off his passes

during scrimmages—he must embody the definition of leadership, almost like a president. In fact, it sometimes seems like Brady could eventually be president, or at least governor of Massachusetts.

But this will never happen.

When I ask if it's something he's ever considered, he responds as if I am crazy.

"There is a 0.000 chance of me ever wanting to do that," says Brady. "I just think that no matter what you'd say or what you'd do, you'd be in a position where—you know, you're politicking. You know? Like, I think the great part about what I do is that there's a scoreboard. At the end of every week, you know how you did. You know how well you prepared. You know whether you executed your game plan. There's a tangible score. I think in politics, half the people are gonna like you and half the people are not gonna like you, no matter what you do or what you say... It's like there are no right answers. If there were, everyone would choose the right answers. They're all just opinions."

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## "He's been football's most successful player at the game's most demanding position"

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Had Brady given this quote as a rookie, it would have meant nothing. It would have scanned as a football player with relativist views on politics. But the events of the past year imbue these words with a stranger, deeper significance. After last season's AFC Championship game, the Patriots were accused of deflating the footballs below the legal level. What initially appeared to be a bizarre allegation against a pair of anonymous locker-room employees spiraled into a massive scandal that seemed to go on forever, consistently painting Brady as the conversational equivalent of a Person of Interest. This even applied to his own coach, Bill Belichick. During an uncomfortable January 22 press conference, Belichick said, "Tom's personal preferences on his footballs are something that he can talk about in much better detail than I could possibly provide. I can tell you that in my

entire coaching career, I have never talked to any player, [or] staff member, about football air pressure."

In May, Brady was suspended by the NFL for four games. He appealed the suspension and was re-instated in time for the opening of the 2015 season. Days later, an intensely reported ESPN The Magazine story outlined how the NFL bungled the Deflategate investigation and leaked false information to reporters. But the article was more damaging to the Patriots as an organization. It reported commissioner Roger Goodell purposefully over-penalized Brady and the Patriots on behalf of the other league owners, essentially as retribution for a decade of unproven institutional cheating (potentially including the first three New England Super Bowl victories, three games that were ultimately decided by a total of nine points).

Brady has never admitted any wrongdoing. He beat the suspension without conceding anything (and in the four games he was supposed to miss, he completed 73 percent of his passes for 11 touchdowns and zero interceptions). His résumé remains spotless. But things are different now, in a way that's easy to recognize but hard to explain. Even though he's said absolutely nothing of consequence in public, there is a sense that we now have a better understanding of who Tom Brady really is. And it's the same person we thought he was before, except now we have to admit what that actually means.

I'm interviewing Brady at a complicated point in his life. There are several things I want to ask him, almost all of which involve the same issue. I'm told Brady's camp has agreed to a wide-ranging sit-down interview, where nothing will be off the table. The initial plan is for the meeting to happen in Boston, and it will be a lengthy conversation. Two days before I leave, Brady's people say that the interview can't happen face-to-face (and the explanation as to why is too weird to explain). It will now be a one-hour interview on the phone.

Brady calls me on a Tuesday. He's driving somewhere and tells me he has only 45 minutes to talk. I ask a few questions about the unconventional trajectory of his career, particularly how it's possible that a man who was never the best quarterback in the Big Ten could end up as a two-time league MVP as a pro. He doesn't have a cogent answer, beyond classifying himself as a "late bloomer." We talk about the 2007 Patriots squad that went 16-0, and

# NFL RECORDS OWNED BY TOM BRADY

<b>REGULAR SEASON WINS BY STARTING QUARTERBACK</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>DIVISION TITLES</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>PLAYOFF GAMES STARTED</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>PLAYOFF WINS</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>PLAYOFF TOUCHDOWN PASSES</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>PLAYOFF PASSING YARDS</b>	<b>9,094</b>
<b>SUPERBOWL APPEARANCES</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>SUPERBOWL WINS</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>SUPERBOWL MVPs</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>SUPERBOWL TOUCHDOWN PASSES</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>SUPERBOWL PASSING YARDS</b>	<b>2,071</b>

I ask if wide receiver Randy Moss was the finest pure athlete he ever played with. He begrudgingly concedes that Moss was "the greatest vertical threat," although he goes out of his way to compliment Wes Welker and Julian Edelman, too. He never brags and he's never self-deprecating. He never offers any information that isn't directly tied to the question that was posed. Everything receives a concise, non-controversial answer (including the aforementioned passage about his lack of political ambition). Realizing time is evaporating, I awkwardly move into the Deflategate material, citing the findings of the official report published by the NFL's investigating attorney, Ted Wells.

These questions shall remain unasked, simply because Brady refused to repeat a one-word response he claims to have given many times before. Now, I'm not a cop or a lawyer or a judge. I don't have any classified information that can't be found on the Internet. My opinion on this event has as much concrete value as my opinion on Brady's quarterbacking, which is exactly zero. But I strongly suspect the real reason Brady did not want to answer a question about his "general awareness" of Deflategate is pretty uncomplicated: He doesn't want to keep saying something that isn't true, nor does he want to directly contradict what he said in the past. I realize that seems like a negative thing to conclude about someone I don't know. It seems like I'm suggesting that he both cheated and lied, and technically I am.

But I'm on his side here, kind of. Yes, what Brady allegedly did would be unethical. It's also what the world wants him to do.

And that may seem paradoxical, because—in the heat of the moment, when faced with the specifics of a crime—consumers are programmed to express outrage and disbelief and self-righteous indignation. But Brady is doing the very thing that prompts athletes to be lionized; the only problem is is the immediacy of the context. And that context will evolve, in the same direction it always does. Someday this media disaster will seem quaint.

That's just my opinion, and that opinion is fungible. If someone else had made the same claim five years ago, I would have disagreed; five years ago, I didn't even think he was the best quarterback of his generation. But the erosion of time has validated his ascension. Classifying Brady as the all-time best QB is not a universally held view, but it's become the default response. His statistical legacy won't match Peyton Manning's, and Manning has changed the sport more. But Brady's six Super Bowl appearances (and his dominance in their head-to-head matchups) tilt the scales of hagiography in his direction. He has been football's most successful player at the game's most demanding position, during an era when the importance of that position has been incessantly amplified.

Photo By Brad Muckenthaler



BEAT  
THE BLAH  
OUT OF  
MONDAY.

**ESPN**

MONDAY  
NIGHT  
FOOTBALL

