



# MASTER ~ AND ~ COMMANDER

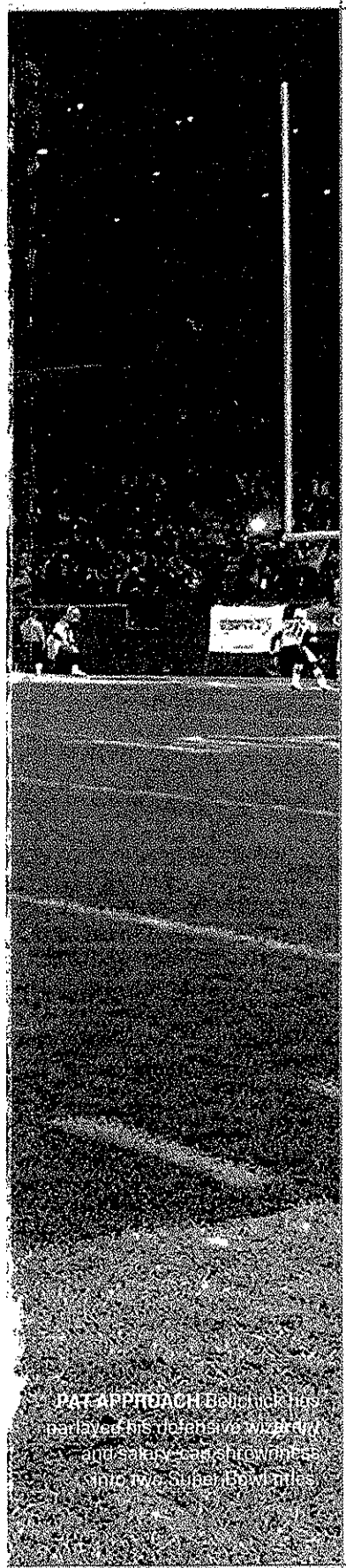


DEBORA/FPD

With football principles learned under his dad, a coach at Navy, brainy **Bill Belichick** has turned New England into the NFL's mightiest vessel

BY PETER KING

**W**OULD YOU like to see Bill's room?" ¶ The kindly voice belongs to Jeannette Belichick, a petite 82-year-old who is standing in the living room of her Annapolis, Md., home. Back when she taught Spanish at Hiram (Ohio) College, Jeannette spoke four languages fluently and understood seven, but now, as she says with a smile and a twinkle, "The only language I speak is football." ¶ It's a short walk to the onetime bedroom of Steve and Jeannette Belichick's only child, now 52 and coach of the two-time Super Bowl champion New England Patriots. The twin beds are made pristinely, as though awaiting military inspection. Two maritime



**PAT APPROACH** Belichick has parlayed his defensive wizardry and savvy coaching prowess into two Super Bowl titles

paintings done by amateur painter Steve—hang on the walls. A high school graduation photo of Bill sits on the dresser. The bookshelf is crammed with volumes from his days at Annapolis High. *A Separate Peace*, by John Knowles. *Future Shock*, by Alvin Toffler. *The Case of the Screaming Woman*, a Perry Mason mystery by Erle Stanley Gardner. There's *The Gettysburg Civil War Battle Game* and a signed football from the 1963 Navy team and four trophies from Bill's childhood athletic triumphs. "That room hasn't changed in 40 years," Bill says when asked about it later.

The room is, to be frank, a little barren. "It's not a big deal," Jeannette says. "That's the way we live."

The contents of the room provide a window into the mind of Bill Belichick. They tell us that the hottest coach in the NFL is well-educated and uncluttered in his thinking. Through a roller-coaster coaching ride that has included a trying stint with the Cleveland Browns in the 1990s and a Captain Queeg-like performance in walking away from the New York Jets 24 hours after being promoted to head coach in January 2000, Belichick has in many respects remained unaltered. "I don't think he's changed from his Cleveland days," says good friend Jim Brown, the Hall of Fame running back, who remains close to the Browns' organization. "He's acquired some life experiences, but he's exactly the same man I knew 10 years ago."

As a coach, however, Belichick has continually educated himself, never allowing himself or his team to become too predictable. Less than a month after the Patriots beat the Carolina Panthers to claim their their second Lombardi Trophy last February, he flew to Baton Rouge and spent two days drawing up schemes with his former defensive coordinator in Cleveland, LSU coach Nick Saban. For the second straight year he traveled to the Florida Keys to pick the brain of fellow two-time Super Bowl winner Jimmy Johnson. During a vacation on Nantucket before training camp, he listened to audiotapes of a book by retired Navy captain D. Michael Abrashoff called *It's Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best*

*Damn Ship in the Navy*. He also found time for one of the Harry Potter tomes. Hey, even a guy as intense as Belichick has to have fun once in a while.

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*"Frank took the hawk to its perch in the garage, set the burglar alarm, and locked the door. He had just sat down at the table for lunch when Joe appeared, carrying a volume of the encyclopedia."*

—FRANKLIN W. DIXON, THE HOODED HAWK MYSTERY

**E**VEN AT age nine, Bill Belichick had football on the brain. He was devoted to his father, a longtime assistant coach and scout at Navy. Son joined Dad whenever he could. If Steve had to drive to the Baltimore airport to pick up films on that week's opponent, Bill rode with him. Once home, Bill not only watched the films but also saw how his father diagrammed plays. When Bill was nine or 10, he tagged along to the weekly Monday-night meeting, at which players were given the scouting report for the next game.

"He'd sit in the back of the room, maybe for 90 minutes a session," says Steve, now 85. "I never had to say a word to him about

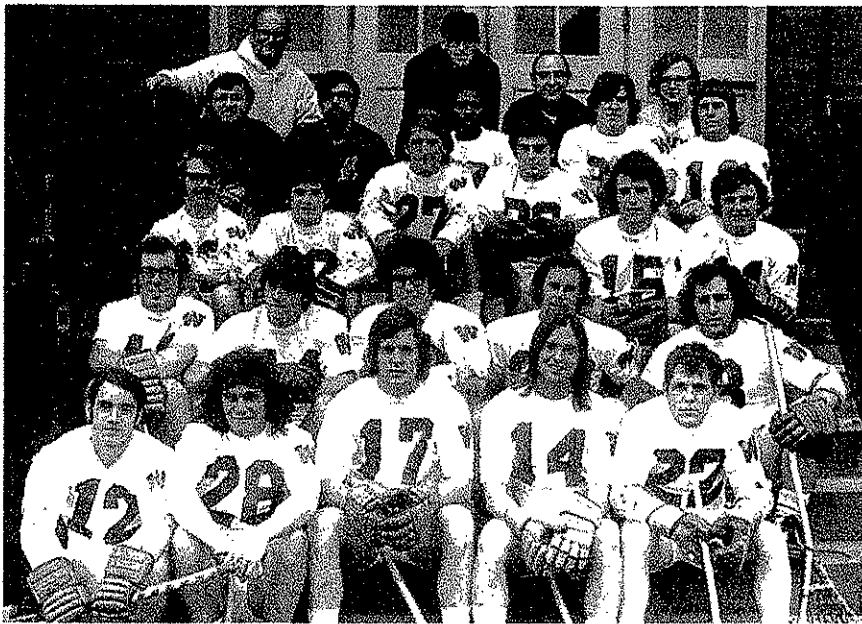
his behavior. He'd stare at the front of the room and not say a word."

When Bill was 10 or 11, the assistant in charge of the offensive game plan, Ernie Jorge, sent him an envelope every Thursday night. BILL'S READY LIST was written on the envelope, and inside was the game plan for the week, including all the plays. Before he was a teenager Bill knew terminology, formations, schemes. He also knew bona fide football stars from the time he spent at Midshipmen practices. When he was seven, Navy's biggest standout was running back Joe Bellino, the 1960 Heisman Trophy winner. "That was his first hero," Steve Belichick says. "Joe was the hero of a lot of kids in America then, and Bill was his friend."

To this day Bellino, now an auto-auction executive in the Boston area, remembers playing catch on the practice field with Bill. "Imagine what Bill must have absorbed," says Bellino. "He'd sit in the back of the room listening to his father give the scouting report. He's a six-, seven-, eight-year-old youngster hanging out at the Naval Academy. Midshipmen in uniform, parades, the brass, the visiting presidents, the football team with two Heisman winners [Bellino and 1963 recipient Roger Staubach]. And he saw his father's work ethic. He saw everyone in that room soak up what his dad was telling us, believing if we did what he said, we could beat anybody."

As he got older and the Staubach era began, Belichick was able to do more. If Staubach wanted to work after practice on a pass he knew he'd be using that week,

**BIG STICK** At six Bill was a little slugger; at Wesleyan (top row, far right), he was a lacrosse ringleader.



COURTESY OF THE BELICHICK FAMILY (TOP); COURTESY OF WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Belichick often served as his receiver. "Say Roger would be working on a sprint-out, throwing to the sideline," recalls Belichick. "I'd go to the spot on the sideline and practice the throw. Not a few. I'm talking 20, 30 of them. People ask me now why I do things a certain way. Look at the way I grew up. I grew up thinking, 'This is the way it's supposed to be.'"

Meanwhile at home, he and Jeannette read books to each other. Bill lived for the Hardy Boys. Sometimes, while his mom was getting dinner ready, he would sit in the kitchen and read a chapter aloud. Mother and son might trade off at bedtime, Jeannette reading a chapter, then Bill. In high school, the reading with Mom didn't stop. *A Clockwork Orange* one month, *The Godfather* the next.

Bill got a taste of the real world when Annapolis High was integrated before his freshman year, in 1966. It was also then that he began playing for the second influential football coach in his life, Al Laramore. "There was no individuality on his team, other than the number you wore," says Belichick, who worked his way up to first-string center as a senior. "I learned a lot about the team concept and about toughness from him. We used to have one bucket of water at practice. Everyone drank from it. If he didn't like the way we were practicing, he'd walk to the bucket, kick it over and say, 'You guys ain't gettin' a water break today.'"

*"Change is avalanching upon our heads, and most people are grotesquely unprepared to cope with it."*

—ALVIN TOFFLER, FUTURE SHOCK

**A**CTUALLY, BELICHICK was better at lacrosse than he was at football. But what he did best was organize. After a year at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., he enrolled at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn. Turned off by the poor facilities at Wesleyan, Belichick got permission from the Naval Academy athletic director for the Cardinals to hold lacrosse spring training on the Navy practice fields, and during consecutive spring breaks the team practiced in Annapolis. The players bunked at the Belichicks'.

When he graduated with a bachelor's degree in economics in the spring of 1975, Belichick wasn't sure what he wanted to do.



**TUNA HELPER** After directing Lawrence Taylor (56) and the Giants' defense under Parcells, Belichick took over the Browns.

He thought working in virtually any capacity for the coaching staff of a college or professional team would be his best way to build his résumé for a full-time graduate assistant's job in college football, which sounded like fun to him. So he wrote letters to 250 coaches. The Baltimore Colts hired him as a special assistant. He made \$25 a week, and he hitched a ride to and from work with head coach Ted Marchibroda. Belichick's duties included telling players who were about to be released that the coach wanted to see them in his office. On NFL teams that individual is known as the Turk, but Belichick inherited another nickname: Bad News Bill.

The pro game grew on him. From Baltimore he moved on to assistant jobs with the Detroit Lions and the Denver Broncos, and then for 12 years with the New York Giants, first as the special teams coach, then linebackers coach, then defensive coordinator. He worked under Bill Parcells for the last eight years, six as coordinator. "Bill gave me a lot of latitude to do my job," Belichick says. "There was probably never a week where he wouldn't adjust something in the defensive game plan, but he had a lot of respect for the coaches' doing their jobs." Because Parcells

was a domineering presence with a strong defensive reputation, it took a while for Belichick to be seen by NFL owners as his own man. But Browns owner Art Modell hired him after the Giants won their second Super Bowl, in January 1991.

From the beginning in Cleveland, Belichick was tougher and more demanding of the players than any of his recent predecessors. With reporters he was notoriously uncommunicative. His monosyllabic answers became so legendary ("Sitting through his press conferences was like putting a sharp pencil into your eye," says Tony Grossi, who covered the team for *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland) that when Patriots owner Robert Kraft was thinking of hiring Belichick in 2000, an executive from one NFL team sent him a tape of one of the coach's media

sessions and said, "Are you serious about hiring this guy?"

In the middle of the 1993 season Belichick decided that quarterback Bernie Kosar had become ineffective on the field and, with his complaints about what he thought was an unimaginative offense, a distraction off it. Backup Vinny Testaverde was hurt, but that didn't stop Belichick from releasing Kosar.

The Browns, 5-3 at the time, lost six of their last eight games. "We've kissed and made up," Kosar said recently. "We were both type A personalities who had different ideas about how we should be doing things. Now, as you can see, the man can coach."

Unlike many of the Cleveland players, Browns coaches loved working for Belichick. Every Monday after a win over an AFC Central opponent, he would have his secretary cash a check from his personal account, and \$200 in cash would be left on the desk of every assistant. Before the coaching staff headed off on vacation every June, he would distribute the proceeds from his TV and radio shows to his assistants—maybe \$12,000 a man—and take nothing for himself. "Bill remembered what it was like to be an assistant coach," says his former line coach Kirk Ferentz, now the head coach at Iowa. "He gave everyone a second Christmas. You think



that doesn't make you loyal?" One time Belichick left a \$100 bill in the car ashtray of low-level scout Scott Pioli. When Pioli protested that he didn't need the money, Belichick replied, "Shut up and take it. I've been where you've been."

Before the staff split for vacation one summer, Ferentz remembers, Belichick gave each assistant a book to read. One got *The Winner Within*, by Pat Riley. One got a book on the history of the Browns. One got *Educating Dexter*, about the drug addiction of former All-Pro defensive end Dexter Manley. Ferentz got *One More July*, by George Plimpton, about former Alabama and Green Bay Packers center Bill Curry. Belichick thought Ferentz could benefit from learning about Bear Bryant and Vince Lombardi. "Bill wanted us to read the books, then give reports on what we learned that could help the staff," Ferentz says. "He was always doing things like that."

"That's the thing about Bill," says former Browns player personnel director Mike Lombardi, now an Oakland Raiders executive. "He was always 'in search of.' When the salary cap and free agency were coming into the league, I told him I thought we should go see Jerry West, because he'd done such a great job managing the Lakers. We met [West] in Chicago at [the NBA] summer camp for draftees, and we spent three hours talking." West's advice: Develop your own players so you can manage salaries, and don't buy into the one-player-at-any-cost mentality.

That was tough when you worked for Modell. "Around the office," says one Browns staffer, "we used to say our organizational philosophy was, 'Ready, fire, aim.'" In the spring of 1995, following an 11-5 season and a playoff win over Parcells's Patriots, Modell signed troubled but talented free-agent wideout Andre Rison to a five-year, \$17 million deal. Rison lasted one season. Following a chaotic 5-11 season in '95—the one during which Modell announced he was

moving the franchise to Baltimore—Belichick was fired.

"I didn't walk away from there saying I did a bad job," says Belichick, who was 36-44 in five seasons. "Not at all. We took a bad team, made it pretty good, made the playoffs, had a bad year in the most off-the-charts negative situation maybe in football history, got fired. It just wasn't a good mix between Art and me."

No one except those closest to him realizes it, but it was because of his experience with Modell that Belichick walked away from the Jets' job. Belichick knew he might

he brought along a personnel man who had his full support. On the day Belichick took the job, the Patriots were \$10 million over the salary cap, so in 2000 he made his first order of business eliminating the surplus. That season the Patriots finished 5-11. "It was a rude awakening," says Kraft. "We paid so many guys, and we were still losing. We had to shut off the financial spigot."

Kraft saw a slightly different Belichick than the one he'd known in 1996 as a Pats assistant. "He used to be a junior Parcells," Kraft says. "He walked around saying things like, 'This team's worse than I thought,' or, 'We can't win with this.' I told him to cut it out. Who needs that? Talk to me about what

we can do to make it better. And he did."

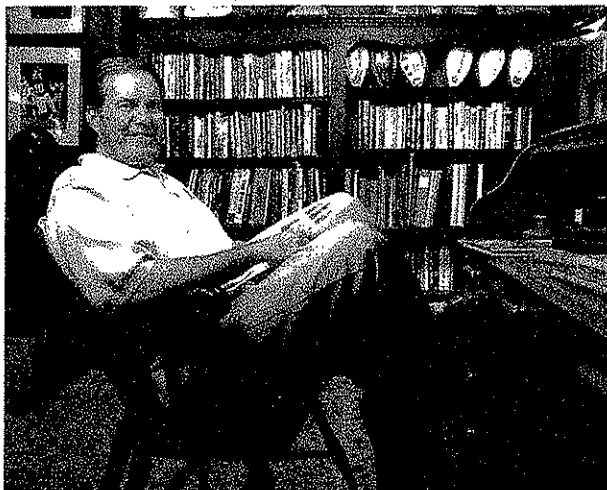
Belichick and Pioli studied more than 200 free agents in the early months of 2001. They signed 17 bit players who made the Patriots the next season for a piddling combined signing-bonus charge of \$2.7 million. One was Mike Vrabel, miscast as a special-teamer and a back-up linebacker with the Pittsburgh Steelers. Belichick thought the speedy and athletic Vrabel could fill two roles—dropping into coverage from defensive end or linebacker and playing as a nickel pass rusher.

"Until the Patriots called me, I thought seriously of going to law school, because my career with Pittsburgh wasn't working out," says Vrabel. "I didn't think anyone would find a way to use me. But I was amazed how much Bill knew about me. One day he came up to me and said, 'Remember in that Miami preseason game last year, how you played the power block? That's how we want to do it here.' In situational football, which is basically what the NFL is today, he's got to be the best mind out there." Against the St. Louis Rams in Super Bowl XXXVI, Vrabel pressured Kurt Warner into an interception that cornerback Ty Law returned for a touchdown. In Super Bowl XXXVIII, Vrabel had two sacks against the Panthers and, in a classic display of Belichick ingenuity, caught a fourth-quarter touchdown pass from Tom Brady.

Having studied the game for so long, and having understood it with such clarity since age 12, Belichick has the confidence to try



**BY THE BOOK** Belichick's dad (left) let him sit in on Navy coaches' meetings and taught him to button down every detail.



get only one more chance to be an NFL head coach, and he didn't want that to be under the thumb of an owner he didn't know (the Jets were up for sale), with a club president he viewed as a know-nothing (Steve Gutman) and, to a much lesser degree, a director of football operations he felt he had outgrown (Parcells). If he was going to be a head coach again, he would do it on his terms.

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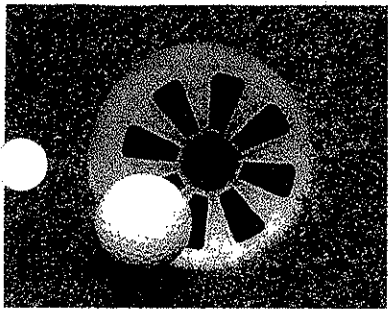
*"Each small victory improves the odds that you will triumph at the moment of truth."*

—PAT RILEY, *THE WINNER WITHIN*

**W**HEN HE joined New England 23 days after bailing on the Jets, Belichick had two important things going for him. He had an owner, Kraft, who was committed to letting him make all the football decisions. And in Pioli

**SI.com** Peter King's Monday Morning Quarterback, plus news and Postcards from Training Camp, at [si.com/nfl](http://si.com/nfl).

TIM CANETT/INPHOTO.COM (TOP); PETER ORENGRE



### Smart Tips for Sinking Putts

Follow these tips to help improve your putting game:

#### • Judging Distance

Break the distance of your putt into equal smaller parts, select one of those sections and count the number of times it fits between you and the hole. This will give you a feel for actual distance and help you develop a method of focusing, which you'll need to sink a putt. This strategy varies for uphill and downhill putts.

#### • Aiming

Good golfers do not always aim directly at the hole, but rather at spots on the green. Once you establish a general line for your putt, pick a spot a few feet in front of you and try to roll the ball over that spot. When putting, always make sure your weight is toward your toes. This will encourage you to align your shoulders over the ball and help you make better contact.

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anything that makes sense to him. He is always open to suggestions from his assistant coaches. Before the Super Bowl he was concerned about the power running of Carolina's Stephen Davis, so defensive coordinator Romeo Crennel suggested disguising a scheme that got backup linemen Jarvis Green and Ty Warren more involved. Davis carried 13 times for 49 yards.

The first time New England faced quarterback Drew Bledsoe after trading him to the Buffalo Bills in 2002, the Patriots surprised the Bills by not blitzing. Seven or eight times in the game, New England used a defense that had no linemen, four linebackers standing at or near the line and seven defensive backs. The Pats won 38-7. Against the Indianapolis Colts in the AFC Championship Game last January, New England told its players to be extremely physical with the Colts' wide receivers. On eight to 10 plays the Pats flopped Law and safety Rodney Harrison in their coverage of Marvin Harrison. The idea was to encourage Peyton Manning to throw short to Marvin Harrison, which would allow the defense to clobber the All-Pro wideout. If Manning elected to throw deep, Law would be there with blanket coverage. The four interceptions thrown by Manning, three of them by Law, told the story of the game. "There was a lot we hadn't seen," says Indianapolis coach Tony Dungy. "But that's the thing about Bill. He's not afraid to take risks."

Adds former Giants quarterback and current CBS analyst Phil Simms, "Bill changes all the time. To continue to win, you've got to."

That's why Belichick was in Baton Rouge last February. Even though his defense allowed the fewest points per game in the league last season (14.9) and held opponents to the fewest yards per pass attempt (5.23), Belichick wasn't about to stand pat. "He had just won the Super Bowl, for crying out loud, but here he was," says Saban. "We went at it for two days."

One new scheme Belichick came away with was a way to make his Cover 4 look like Cover 2. In Cover 4, a quartet of defensive backs spreads out across the deep secondary, each taking a quarter of the field. In Cover 2, two deep safeties are responsible for half the field. A quarterback has maybe three seconds from the time he takes the snap to the time he releases the ball. If he's expecting two deep safeties, he'd be pretty comfortable throwing an 18-yard out, assuming the receiver can beat his corner to

the sideline. If while the quarterback drops, Cover 2 morphs into Cover 4, the intermediate and deep areas suddenly get more crowded. A panicked quarterback might not recognize the change until it is too late.

At a minicamp in June, Brady went against Belichick's new scheme for the first time. "I was sure it was Cover 2, then all of a sudden I'm seeing Cover 4," Brady says. "The more I don't understand what I'm seeing, the longer it takes me to get into my read progression. The later I throw, the better the chances are for an incompleteness or interception."

Belichick knows, however, that sustaining success in today's NFL requires more than just devising defensive wrinkles. When he met with Johnson this year, the topic was how to keep a championship team together. "Don't think I'm going to give you a solution you'll be happy with," Johnson told him. "You've won two of the last three Super Bowls, and the problem with that is that everyone in the organization thinks they're a bigger reason than they are for your winning." Johnson's advice: Quietly put incentives into the contracts of players you want to keep, don't redo any contract until the last season of the deal and figure out who you can win without.

"Jimmy's really the only guy in this era who's lived it, who's dealt with what we're dealing with, and more," Belichick says. "Who else am I gonna talk to?"

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*"You must adapt to your opportunities and weaknesses. You can use a variety of approaches and still have a consistent result."*

—SUN TZU, THE ART OF WAR

**B**E FITTINGLY, Belichick has a library full of books in his brick house in a leafy Boston suburb. While examining the titles one day this summer, a visitor came across a thin, worn paperback.

"*The Art of War*," the visitor said, looking at the translation of a 2,500-year-old treatise on the Chinese principles of warfare. "Wow. You read that?"

"Yeah," Belichick replied, getting a look on his face not unlike the one he wears when a play goes wrong. "I got something out of it. But, you know, 'Don't move your troops when the ground is muddy'? I mean..."

He's not saying he's any smarter than Sun Tzu. He just knows that he's got a pretty good brain, and he's willing to use it. Just as Jeannette and Steve Belichick taught their boy to do. □

**Kevin Salisbury - Community College of Rhode Island**

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- Act as if we value what we do
- Realize that we all have common goals
- Insist on having FUN
- No complaints
- "responsibility is mine" attitude

*Values:*

- value swimming, excellence, tough challenges, joy of pursuit of excellence
- decisions
- "act as if" and "talk as if" what you are doing is valuable

*Other suggestions:*

- careful not to lose passion for excellence
- always evolve and change
- stay on top of it every day
- make 25 decisions:
  - 5 training decisions
  - 5 competition decisions
  - 5 out of pool decisions (3 of which are lifestyle decisions)
  - 5 nutrition decisions
  - 5 psychology training decisions