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## Imagine Me And You...

THE BRONCOS HAVE TURNED A FANTASY DREAM—A QB LEGEND PAIRED WITH THE TOP PASS CATCHER OF THE PAST EIGHT YEARS—INTO EVERY LOMBARDI-LUSTING FOE'S MOST FRIGHTENING REALITY

CHRIS BALLARD

**WHEN PEOPLE RECOGNIZE** Wes Welker, they almost always ask him the same question. It's not about the five Pro Bowls he made, or his two trips to the Super Bowl with the Patriots, or the NFL record he set by catching more than 110 passes in each of five seasons. Instead people ask, "What's Tom Brady like?"

That's not to say this is all they care about. People also ask, "What's Peyton Manning like?"

Being a genial sort, Welker answers as best he can. Of Brady, his teammate for six seasons in New England and either the best or second-best quarterback of his generation, Welker thinks the following: that he couldn't stand him at first ("He was very intense, wanted it done a certain way and was like, You can't do it a different way"); that he soon came to appreciate Brady's intensity; that he's one of the toughest players in the NFL; that he is a slave to "the best moisturizers"; that he's shockingly skittish about rodents (more on that later); and that, in the end, he became a combination of Welker's big brother and best friend.

As for Manning, Welker's new teammate with the Broncos and also the best or second-best QB of his generation, Welker has less to go on. Sure, the two played in Pro Bowls together. And yes, upon becoming a free agent last winter, Wes texted Peyton, who enthusiastically wooed him ("Reminded me a little bit of the old college recruiting days," Manning says). And true, the two have communicated regularly since Broncos summer workouts began. For example, one evening in early June, Welker was eating dinner when his phone started dinging with text messages. They were from Manning, who was at home watching film from the day's workouts on his iPad. "Middle of the field closed. Run a 16 yard in route, not a seam," Peyton wrote in one.

Welker responded, "Oh s---, just when I was feeling good about my practice." But of course Welker loves that kind of stuff. He's a football nerd too.

Which is to say that Welker gets why people ask him about Brady and Manning. After all, he says, during his free agency "there were only two places I was going to play, in my mind." He didn't want to be part of a rebuilding team or paired with an inexperienced quarterback. And if Denver and New England had fallen through, he admits, "I didn't have a plan B."

Of course, Welker didn't advertise this—sort of kills one's market value—but once you have high standards, why lower them? By signing a two-year, \$12 million deal with the Broncos after turning down what many Boston fans viewed as a lowball two-year, \$10 million offer from the Pats, he landed with a team well-positioned to make a deep playoff run. Denver has a stout defense and a potent aerial attack that includes, in addition to Manning and Welker, talented young receivers Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas. Bookmakers have the Broncos at 13 to 2 to win the Super Bowl, behind only the 49ers (6 to 1).

How far Denver goes will hinge on Welker—Broncos executive VP John Elway's most important off-season acquisition—and his chemistry with Manning. In which case the more interesting questions to ask the 32-year-old receiver may not be about his quarterbacks but about him. After six seasons inside Bill Belichick's cone of silence, in which thou shalt not raise any individual above the team, it turns out we know surprisingly little about Wes Welker.

**FIRST, A STORY.** After Welker signed with the Dolphins as a 23-year-old in 2004, he bought a two-bedroom house near Fort Lauderdale. His neighbor, a New Yorker in his 60s, appraised the 5'9", bro-ish young guy hauling in boxes. "What's your job?" the man asked. "Are you buying this house on your own or with your parents?" Welker put down a box. "I play for the Dolphins," he said.

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The neighbor stared, disbelieving. Then he said, "No wonder they were 4--12 this season!"

The comment struck Welker as insulting—"very insulting, actually," he says—but also, he allows, pretty funny.

Welker recounts this on a June morning in that same house in Fort Lauderdale, which his wife, Anna, is systematically converting from bachelor pad to respectable home, replacing a decor that was heavy on leather couches and yellowing cushions with one full of distressed wood and repainted cabinets. As he talks, he is cooking egg sandwiches, a specialty of his. Actually, they are his only specialty. The rest of the time Anna cooks. But the mornings belong to Wes.

So he stands there tending the stove, all shoulders, two-day scruff and intense blue eyes, like some tiny action hero in flip-flops and a gray workout shirt. Carefully he dabs coconut butter into a little skillet, toasts two pieces of gluten-free white bread and simmers one egg at a time over low heat, dusting the surface with organic garlic salt and checking frequently to guard against burning. Such is his pride in these concoctions—crunchy and a little sweet to the taste—that when he proposed to Anna, two years ago, it was in the morning, just after the couple had finished a pair of what Wes calls "really perfect" egg sandwiches. She was shocked. She hadn't showered and still had in her retainer. "This better not be one of your pranks, Wes," she blurted out when he got down on one knee.

It wasn't. They got married a year ago. Earlier this summer they finally got around to a honeymoon, in Belize, from which they have just returned. "Probably made a baby," reports Welker. There were other activities, he adds, such as sleeping and eating and playing Scrabble and, for him, sneaking away for neurotic sessions on the treadmill.

On this, his first morning back, Welker has already worked out for two hours at The Chamber, a nearby football-oriented gym owned by retired Miami wide receiver Chris Chambers. He began at 7 a.m. with elastic-band stretching, then hit the track to work on explosion before grunting through core exercises and functional lifts, sweat puddling on the rubber mat below him. Welker's work ethic is renowned—he says his mantra is "Dominate every day"—and he believes it's a key to his success. Plenty of NFL players train hard under team supervision but lose focus during downtime.

"Guys will play basketball with their boys and think that's their workout for the day," Welker says, amazed. "That's not a workout. I wish they gave us more time off, to be honest. This is where I gain on other players."

**IDENTIFYING—AND** maximizing—advantages has long been a theme of Welker's life. Growing up in Oklahoma City, there was a time when his brother, Lee, who is five years older, was six inches taller and 30 pounds heavier than him. Wes lost every fight, every wrestling match and most arguments. So one day he devised a tactic to exact payback: When he heard his mother's car pulling into the driveway in the afternoon, he would kick his brother in the groin and then sprint to his mom, telling her that Lee was out to get him.

The Welker household was an otherwise happy one. Lee and Wes's father, Leland, worked for Southwestern Bell, and their mother, Shelley, was a nurse. The couple saved to send their sons to private school. The boys suffered no lack of parental encouragement. Wes remembers his mother repeatedly telling him he was the best everything: the best-looking, the best athlete. His father was likewise supportive, though he had one rule: If he was paying, he expected the boys to try hard. This wasn't an issue in sports, especially for Wes, who outran all the boys on the soccer field. Though he was an all-state striker

at Heritage Hall High, his true love was football. Upon discovering the game in sixth grade, he was hooked on its speed, strategy and contact. It was like one big game of capture the flag, only you got to level the guy with the flag.

There was only one problem: Wes looked more like a second baseman than a football player. The family tracked the boys' heights on a wall in the laundry room, and Wes kept waiting for his pencil marks to leap up. They never did. As a result, a familiar theme emerged: Wes kicked butt; no one noticed. Or at least no one who mattered. Wes led Heritage Hall to an improbable Class 2A championship in his junior season and next year was named the state player of the year. He was a standout receiver, returner, defensive back and placekicker. (His two-yard scoring dive and extra-point kick with 55 seconds remaining gave Heritage Hall a 35--34 victory in that championship game.) On signing day he received no Division I offers. He went home and punched a hole in his bedroom wall.

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His high school coach, Rod Warner, became his personal telemarketer, calling more than 100 schools and pitching his star's services. Finally Mike Leach, then the coach at Texas Tech, took a chance. Over the next four seasons Welker set school records with 259 receptions for 3,069 yards.

Naturally he wasn't even invited to the NFL combine. He went undrafted.

That summer Welker was, however, invited to the Chargers' training camp. He was cut after the first game of the season. A few weeks later he signed with the Dolphins, for whom he broke so many seam routes and returned so many kicks up the gut over three seasons that the AFC East rival Patriots got sick of trying to stop him. In 2007, New England sent second- and seventh-round picks to Miami to acquire the 190-pound white guy with the great hands. In the ensuing six seasons Welker caught more passes than any other player in the NFL, carving up the middle of the field.

These days Welker is conflicted about his time with the Patriots. He loves Boston's hardcore fans and has great respect for many of his old teammates. But the vibe changed at the end, and Welker's relationship with Belichick deteriorated. Welker says the coach got on him in a way he never had before, admonishing him in front of the team. Welker didn't understand it. He knew that motivated some players, but he wasn't one of them. He was out on the field every day busting his butt; he didn't need anyone to push him. "It was just kind of hard," Welker says, "one of those deals where you have to endure him, put up with him. I felt like there came a point where he was...." Welker trails off. "But he does it to everybody, it's the way he is." (Belichick declined to comment for this story.)

Welker respected Belichick, and even now he feels the presence of his old coach, like a phantom limb. "When I'm answering questions from the Denver media, I'm not worried about what the Broncos' people are going to think," Welker says. "I'm worried about what Belichick will think. Isn't that crazy?"

Leaving Boston was difficult for Welker. "You always think you're one of those players who will be in one place the whole time, one of those guys they'll never let leave because you play hurt, do what it takes," he says. "But it's a different age. A lot of coaches, they like having younger guys. This game's so tough on you, it's all about, How many more hits can you take? So they buy low, sell high. It's a numbers game."

He's not bitter about it, he says. He understands the logic. Still, it's worth noting that three of the most important players on his new team are Welker, a 35-year-old cornerback (Champ Bailey) and a 37-year-old quarterback.

**THE FIRST** quality time Welker spent with Manning was in April, when the quarterback invited his receivers to Durham, N.C., for informal workout sessions with Duke coach David Cutcliffe, Manning's old offensive coordinator at Tennessee. After three days on the field they gathered for a final dinner, and each player received an envelope. Welker's contained instructions to play along with what was about to happen, as did everyone else's—except Decker's. In his envelope Decker, a third-year player on a rookie contract, found a bill for the camp for \$3,500, broken down to include laundry charges and coaching from the Duke staff. Decker stared, disbelieving. *Manning invited me down here and then invoiced me?* "I kept looking at it, then looking over at Peyton," says Decker. "It had state tax on here. I was like, What is going on? This is

unbelievable. Really?"

At the head of the table, Manning droned on about how he really appreciated everybody supporting the program and how glad he was they all came. Finally, Manning gave up the gag. "He got me good," says Decker.

Welker, for one, appreciates a good prank. This is a guy who keeps a large plastic rat tied to the inside of a kitchen cabinet. When people come over, Anna asks them to "get something for me from that high shelf." Upon opening the door, the guest is confronted by an onrushing black rodent. Hurling Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski was so scared that he later apologized for his hysterical reaction. ("It's O.K., Rob," Anna told him.) Others have shrieked. But it was Brady who had the most memorable response. "He high-stepped it, just flew out the door," says Welker. "Fastest I ever saw him run."

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Welker's next Manning experience came in early-summer workouts, as he tried to adjust to a new offense in which he will be freelancing less. Hence the text messages. "A lot of the stuff I know, but I'm wanting to get out and get open, and he's reading other stuff," explains Welker. "He's wanting me to break downhill and different things like that, and that's a little new for me. In New England, if the middle of the field was closed, I'd run a seam route. It's something I've been doing for six years now, so I have to teach my brain to do it the way he's expecting me to do it." Asked if he could still try to be creative on his routes, Welker laughs. "At the end of the day you run it the way he wants it, or he won't throw it to you," he says. "That's the way it was with Tom too. *Go ahead and run it like that, but I'm not going to throw you the ball.*"

Doing drills at Broncos camp on a recent 90° morning, Welker and Manning appear to be an odd pairing: the tiny receiver zipping around on one field and the tall, lumbering quarterback working with his backups on the other. Even at 37, with his blue jersey precisely tucked into his shorts, towel hanging from his hip, Manning looks like an oversized kid, all torso and forehead. He had his own breakup with a team for which he had expected to play forever; after he had spinal-fusion surgery and sat out the 2011 season, the Colts released him in 2012, and he signed a five-year, \$96 million deal with Denver. Welker and Manning are two of the more unlikely free-agent pickups in sports, maybe the most effective quarterback and receiver of their generation. Asked if they've talked about their parallel narratives, Manning pauses for a moment. "We haven't really shared that," he says. "I think each situation is unique. I know that was not an easy time for him. For me, I know I became more comfortable when I got back on the field."

What Manning would rather talk about, naturally, is football. He lauds Welker's affinity for the "cerebral part of the game" and compares him to former Colts running back Marshall Faulk in his ability to read coverages like a quarterback. This matters greatly to Manning, and he wants it to matter to his teammates too. Last season he regularly posted articles in the lockers of Decker and Thomas. One piece was about Tony Gonzalez's dedication and work ethic; Manning highlighted passages about how Gonzalez put in extra time after practice and worked on his weaknesses. The quarterback also taped two pieces of paper to the two receivers' lockers almost every week. One contained the league leaders in dropped passes, with Thomas's and Decker's names highlighted. The other contained the leaders in quarterback completion percentage, with Manning's name highlighted, invariably at the top.

Asked about it, Manning launches into a soliloquy of impressive passion, depth and, ultimately, borderline obsession.

"Dropped passes is an NFL statistic, believe it or not," he says. "Now, there's the drop and there's the poor-throw category. If you're Number 1 in [the latter], that means you have the least amount of poor throws. I've been searching for whoever the guy is who charts these: You can't find him." Manning furrows his large brow. "He's an anonymous man who sits in his office and says he's giving that a poor throw. We always argue over it—is it a drop or a poor throw? The rule is, if you get your hands on it, it's a drop. Decker and Thomas like to fight with me on it. So I'm trying to find this guy. He's a powerful guy; he can shake up a locker room in a heartbeat. I always argue, How does he know I wasn't trying to throw it on the inside hip of the receiver? He's probably smart to stay hidden and anonymous, because a lot of QBs want to...." Here Manning trails off, leaving the last part to our imaginations.

You can see how Manning's receivers might appreciate playing with such an exacting man. You can also see how it might

be enjoyable to give him a little grief, especially because he considers himself to be prank-immune. Which is why, on the morning of the photo shoot for the cover of this magazine, Decker and Welker pulled aside the photographer and the Broncos' head of media relations, Patrick Smyth, and told them their plan. Then, when Manning arrived for the shoot, the receivers told him to get changed. Manning didn't understand. "Didn't you hear?" Decker said. "We're doing it shirtless."

The quarterback became quite flustered, according to Welker: "He was hedging, like, Maybe a few years ago, but not now. And then he was asking Patrick Smyth about it, and I'm thinking, C'mon, don't back out on me now!" Welker laughs. "Finally [Manning] said, 'No way, I'm just not going to do it. You guys take the photo without me.' It was hilarious."

Asked about it, Manning goes into deadpan denial mode. "I don't know about that," he says. "You got any more questions about Wes?"

**YES, LET'S** get back to Wes. Here he is at his Fort Lauderdale house. It's now noon, and he is playing pool. When he misses, he says "Gol-lee!" the Oklahoma in him coming out. Anna arrives with two large frosted mugs filled with thick green goo. "Kale shakes!" says Wes. "These are the best."

Over the next four hours, first at his house and then at the Royal Pig, a nearby sports bar, Welker proves to be an interesting combination of character traits. He's vain enough to get hair-restoration surgery but self-assured enough to talk about it publicly; he returned to Boston recently to do a press conference with the surgeon who performed the procedure. Welker also does commercials for Depend undergarments. ("Though I keep saying Depends when they're filming—I mean, who wears a underwear?") He uses Twitter but finds the dialogue strange. ("There are always so many immature people that whatever you say, [they go] 'f---ing traitor.' I get it, bro, I went to another team.") On occasion he accompanies his wife to Pilates, the only man in the class. He owns three pairs of the same Lululemon khaki shorts, which he deems the most comfortable ever. He also recently led a fund-raising auction at which his college quarterback, Kliff Kingsbury, bought a rescue dog for \$5,000, only to realize that he didn't really have time for a dog. So now Wes and Anna have a five-month-old beagle-mix puppy named Penny.

In most areas of life, as you can see, Welker is a go-with-the-flow guy. But not in football. He is fascinated by excellence, by the tiny things that add up to a lot. When he finds out that a reporter has done profiles of NBA stars Steve Nash and LeBron James, he is curious: What makes them great? What are their secrets? He wants to know all the details. He has a notebook that he takes to film study so he can write down all his mistakes. Even if he's written the same thing a dozen times before, he writes it again, to further sear it into his memory. A typical page reads (route names changed at Welker's request):

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*On Ace route, 18--20 yards, you are hot receiver off the stance. Run it like a corner route.*

*Spray it from the punt formation.*

*Never upright near on the Kentucky. I was too far across on the route where I go straight down. I was more towards the pylon.*

Over lunch at the Royal Pig he becomes excited while diagramming routes on the bar with his finger. As a player who operates in the crevices, Welker believes deception is the essence of football. When he took penalty kicks in soccer, he explains, he always approached the ball the same way, no matter where he was going to put it—near corner or far corner. And now, as a receiver, he tries to start different routes identically. "I group my routes into bunches of four to seven," he says. "With one bunch I go up, then out, then back. Then up, out, back and go. And so on." The key, Welker believes, is to convince himself that he's always running the same route, at least at the beginning. "I tell myself I'm running an under route, and I actually run it, exactly as I would. I just break it off. Ninety-five percent of the time, I'm actually running a different route." If he really believes it, Welker says, the defender will too.

One bar patron recognizes Welker—or seems to think he does—but says nothing. That suits Welker just fine. "Most people growing up just want to get famous, then they get famous and want to be normal people," he says. "I blend in a lot more

than most."

So out he strolls into the warm afternoon, flip-flops clacking, looking like just another short, fit white guy in a city full of them. The sight brings to mind something Welker said earlier while finger-scribbling routes on the bar. After some thought, he offered up a football philosophy of sorts. "Everything in the game is about making something look one way," he said, "and it actually being the other."

So being Wes Welker—or at least looking like him—may not be such a disadvantage. It may, in fact, be just the opposite.

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