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Spygate to Deflategate: Inside what split the NFL and Patriots apart

His bosses were furious. Roger Goodell knew it. So on April 1, 2008, the NFL commissioner convened an emergency session of the league's spring meeting at The Breakers hotel in Palm Beach, Florida. Attendance was limited to each team's owner and head coach. A palpable anger and frustration had rumbled inside club front offices since the opening Sunday of the 2007 season. During the first half of the New England Patriots' game against the New York Jets at Giants Stadium, a 26-year-old Patriots video assistant named Matt Estrella had been caught on the sideline, illegally videotaping Jets coaches' defensive signals, beginning the scandal known as Spygate.

Behind closed doors, Goodell addressed what he called "the elephant in the room" and, according to sources at the meeting, turned over the floor to Robert Kraft. Then 66, the billionaire Patriots owner stood and apologized for the damage his team had done to the league and the public's confidence in pro football. Kraft talked about the deep respect he had for his 31 fellow owners and their shared interest in protecting the NFL's shield. Witnesses would later say Kraft's remarks were heartfelt, his demeanor chastened. For a moment, he seemed to well up.

Then the Patriots' coach, Bill Belichick, the cheating program's mastermind, spoke. He said he had merely misinterpreted a league rule, explaining that he thought it was legal to videotape opposing teams' signals as long as the material wasn't used in real time. Few in the room bought it. Belichick said he had made a mistake -- "my mistake."

Now it was Goodell's turn. The league office lifer, then 49 years old, had been commissioner just 18 months, promoted, in part, because of Kraft's support. His audience wanted to know why he had managed his first crisis in a manner at once hasty and strangely secretive. Goodell had imposed a $500,000 fine on Belichick, a $250,000 fine on the team and the loss of a first-round draft pick just four days after league security officials had caught the Patriots and before he'd even sent a team of investigators to Foxborough, Massachusetts. Those investigators hadn't come up empty: Inside a room accessible only to Belichick and a few others, they found a library of scouting material containing videotapes of opponents' signals, with detailed notes matching signals to plays for many teams going back seven seasons. Among them were handwritten diagrams of the defensive signals of the Pittsburgh Steelers, including the notes used in the January 2002 AFC Championship Game won by the Patriots 24-17. Yet almost as quickly as the tapes and notes were found, they were destroyed, on Goodell's orders: League executives stomped the tapes into pieces and shredded the papers inside a Gillette Stadium conference room.

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Goodell tried to assuage his bosses: He ordered the destruction of the tapes and notes, he insisted, so they couldn't be exploited again. Many in the room didn't believe it. And some would conclude it was as if Goodell, Kraft and Belichick had acted like partners, complicit in trying to sweep the scandal's details under the rug while the rest of the league was left wondering how much glory the Patriots' cheating had cost their teams. "Goodell didn't want anybody to know that his gold franchise had won Super Bowls by cheating," a senior executive whose team lost to the Patriots in a Super Bowl now says. "If that gets out, that hurts your business."

Just before he finished speaking, Goodell looked his bosses in the eye and, with dead certainty, said that from then on, cheaters would be dealt with forcefully. He promised the owners that all 32 teams would be held to the same high standards expected of players. But many owners and coaches concluded he was really only sending that message to one team: the New England Patriots.

SEVEN YEARS LATER, Robert Kraft took the podium on the first day of the Patriots' 2015 training camp and, with a mix of bitterness and sadness, apologized to his team's fans. "I was wrong to put my faith in the league," he said. It was a stunning statement from the NFL owner who has been Roger Goodell's biggest booster and defender.

Goodell had just upheld the four-game suspension he had leveled in early May against quarterback Tom Brady for a new Patriots cheating scandal known as Deflategate. An NFL-commissioned investigation, led

by lawyer Ted Wells, after four months had concluded it "was more probable than not" that Brady had been "at least generally aware" that the Patriots' footballs used in the AFC Championship Game held this year had been deflated to air pressure levels below what the league allowed. Goodell deemed the Patriots and Brady "guilty of conduct detrimental to the integrity of, and public confidence in, the game of football," the league's highest crime, and punished the franchise and its marquee player.

Kraft was convinced Brady was innocent, but he "reluctantly" accepted the punishment, in large part because he was certain Goodell would reduce, or eliminate, his quarterback's four-game suspension, the way business is often done in the NFL. Kraft had good reason to believe Goodell might honor a quid pro quo: Throughout Goodell's nightmare 2014 season of overturned player discipline penalties, bumbling news conferences and a lack of candor, Kraft had publicly stood by the commissioner -- even as he privately signaled deep disappointment in Goodell's performance and fury at the judgment of his top lieutenants, according to sources. After Goodell had upheld Brady's punishment, on the basis mainly of his failure to cooperate by destroying his cellphone, Kraft felt burned and betrayed.

Now, the owner of the defending Super Bowl champions was publicly ripping the league. To anyone casually watching Deflategate, the civil war pitting Goodell against the Patriots and their star quarterback made no sense. Why were the league's premier franchise, led by a cherished team owner, and Brady, one of the NFL's greatest ambassadors, being smeared because a little air might have been let out of some footballs?

But league insiders knew that Deflategate didn't begin on the eve of the AFC Championship Game.

It began in 2007, with Spygate.

Interviews by ESPN The Magazine and Outside the Lines with more than 90 league officials, owners, team executives and coaches, current and former Patriots coaches, staffers and players, and reviews of previously undisclosed private notes from key meetings, show that Spygate is the centerpiece of a long, secret history between Goodell's NFL, which declined comment for this story, and Kraft's Patriots. The diametrically opposed way the inquiries were managed by Goodell -- and, more importantly, perceived by his bosses -- reveals much about how and why NFL punishment is often dispensed. The widespread perception that Goodell gave the Patriots a break on Spygate, followed by the NFL's stonewalling of a potential congressional investigation into the matter, shaped owners' expectations of what needed to be done by 345 Park Ave. on Deflategate.

It was, one owner says, time for "a makeup call."

IN AUGUST 2000, before a Patriots preseason game against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Jimmy Dee, the head of New England's video department, approached one of his charges, Matt Walsh, with a strange assignment: He wanted Walsh to film the Bucs' offensive and defensive signals, the arm waving and hand folding that team coaches use to communicate plays and formations to the men on the field. Walsh was 24 years old, a lifelong New Englander and Patriots fan. He was one of the few employees Belichick retained that season, his first as the team's coach. The practice of decoding signals was universal in football -- a single stolen signal can change a game -- with advance scouts jotting down notes, then matching the signal to the play. The Patriots created a novel spying system that made the decoding more dependable.

Walsh later told investigators that, at the time, he didn't know the NFL game operations manual forbade taping signals. He would later recall that even Dee seemed unsure of "what specifically it was that the coaches wanted me to film." Regardless, Walsh complied, standing on the sideline with a camera aimed at Tampa Bay's coaches. After the game, he gave the Beta tape to Dee.

Not coincidentally, the Bucs were also New England's opponent in the regular-season opener. A few days before the game, Walsh told Senate investigators, according to notes of the interview, a backup quarterback named John Friesz was summoned to Belichick's office. Offensive coordinator Charlie Weis and a professorial, quirky man named Ernie Adams were present. Adams was -- and still is -- a mystery in the Patriots building, a socially awkward amateur historian of pro football and the Vietnam War who often wore the same red, hole-ridden Patriots sweater from the 1970s. He had a photographic memory, and Brady once said that Adams "knows more about professional football than anyone I ever met."

Adams' title was football research director, the only known person with that title in the NFL. He had made a fortune in the stock market in the 1980s, and the joke was that the only person in the building richer than Adams was Kraft. Belichick and Adams had been friends since 1970, when they were classmates at Phillips Academy, a New England prep school. Adams introduced himself to Belichick because he recognized his name from a little-known scouting book published in 1962 by his father, Steve Belichick.

"He told me, 'The league doesn't need this. We're asking you to come out with a couple lines exonerating us and saying we did our due diligence.'"

Mike Martz, ex-Rams coach, about commissioner Roger Goodell

When Bill Belichick became coach of the Browns in 1991, he hired Adams to be a consigliere of sorts. Owner Art Modell famously offered $10,000 to any employee who could tell him what Adams did. In short, in Cleveland and in New England, Adams did whatever he wanted -- and whatever Belichick wanted: statistical analysis, scouting and strategy. Years later, Walsh recalled to Senate investigators that Adams told old stories from the Browns about giving a video staffer an NFL Films shirt and assigning him to film the opponents' sideline huddles and grease boards from behind the bench. The shared view of Belichick and Adams, according to many who've worked with them, is this: The league is lazy and incompetent, so why not push every boundary? "You'd want Bill and Ernie doing your taxes," says a former Patriots assistant coach. "They would find all the loopholes, and then when the IRS would close them, they'd find more."

Days before the Tampa Bay game, in Belichick's office, Friesz was told that the Patriots had a tape of the Bucs' signals. He was instructed to memorize them, and during the game, to watch Bucs defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin and tell Weis the defensive play, which Weis would relay over the radio headset system to quarterback Drew Bledsoe. That Sunday against the Bucs, Walsh later told investigators, the Patriots played more no-huddle than usual, forcing Kiffin to signal in plays quickly, allowing Weis sufficient time to relay the information. Years later, some Patriots coaches would point to the score -- a 21-16 Bucs win -- as evidence of Spygate's ineffectiveness. But as Walsh later told investigators, Friesz, who did not respond to messages to comment for this story, told Walsh after the game that the Patriots knew 75 percent of the Bucs' defenses before the snap.

Now, the Patriots realized that they were on to something, a schematic edge that could allow their best minds more control on the field. Taping from the sideline increased efficiency and minimized confusion.

And so, as Walsh later told investigators, the system improved, becoming more streamlined -- and more secretive. The quarterbacks were cut out of the process. The only people involved were a few coaches, the video staff and, of course, Adams. Belichick, almost five years after being fired by the Browns and fully aware that this was his last best shot as a head coach, placed an innovative system of cheating in the hands of his most trusted friend.

AS THE PATRIOTS became a dynasty and Belichick became the first coach to win three Super Bowls in four years, an entire system of covert videotaping was developed and a secret library created. "It got out of control," a former Patriots assistant coach says. Sources with knowledge of the system say an advance scout would attend the games of upcoming Patriots opponents and assemble a spreadsheet of all the signals and corresponding plays. The scout would give it to Adams, who would spend most of the week in his office with the door closed, matching the notes to the tapes filmed from the sideline. Files were created, organized by opponent and by coach. During games, Walsh later told investigators, the Patriots' videographers were told to look like media members, to tape over their team logos or turn their sweatshirt inside out, to wear credentials that said Patriots TV or Kraft Productions. The videographers also were provided with excuses for what to tell NFL security if asked what they were doing: Tell them you're filming the quarterbacks. Or the kickers. Or footage for a team show.

The cameramen's assignments differed depending on the opponent. For instance, Walsh told investigators that against Indianapolis he was directed to take close-ups of the Colts' offensive signals, then of Peyton Manning's hand signals. Mostly, though, the tapes were of defensive signals. Each video sequence would usually include three shots: the down and distance, the signal, and, as an in-house joke, a tight shot of a cheerleader's top or skirt. The tape was then often edited, sources say, so that Adams' copy contained only the signals, in rapid fire, one after another. According to investigators, Walsh once asked Adams, "Are the tapes up to standards?"

"You're doing a good job," Adams said. "But make sure that you get everyone who's giving signals, even dummy signals."

As much as the Patriots tried to keep the circle of those who knew about the taping small, sometimes the team would add recently cut players from upcoming opponents and pay them only to help decipher signals, former Patriots staffers say. In 2005, for instance, they signed a defensive player from a team they were going to play in the upcoming season. Before that game, the player was led to a room where Adams was waiting. They closed the door, and Adams played a compilation tape that matched the signals to the plays from the player's former team, and asked how many were accurate. "He had about 50 percent of them right," the player says now.

During games, Adams sat in the coaches' box, with binoculars and notes of decoded signals, wearing a headset with a direct audio line to Belichick. Whenever Adams saw an opposing coach's signal he recognized, he'd say something like, "Watch for the Two Deep Blitz," and either that information was relayed to Brady or a play designed specifically to exploit the defense was called. A former Patriots employee who was directly involved in the taping system says "it helped our offense a lot," especially in divisional games in which there was a short amount of time between the first and second matchups, making it harder for opposing coaches to change signals.

Still, some of the coaches who were with the Patriots during the Spygate years debate the system's effectiveness. One coach who was in the booth with Adams says it didn't work because Adams was

"horrible" and "never had the calls right." Another former coach says "Ernie is the guy who you watch football with and says, 'It's going to be a run!' And it's a pass. 'It's going to be a pass!' And it's a run. 'It's going to be a run!' It's a run. 'I told you!'"

In fact, many former New England coaches and employees insist that the taping of signals wasn't even the most effective cheating method the Patriots deployed in that era. Several of them acknowledge that during pregame warm-ups, a low-level Patriots employee would sneak into the visiting locker room and steal the play sheet, listing the first 20 or so scripted calls for the opposing team's offense. (The practice became so notorious that some coaches put out fake play sheets for the Patriots to swipe.) Numerous former employees say the Patriots would have someone rummage through the visiting team hotel for playbooks or scouting reports. Walsh later told investigators that he was once instructed to remove the labels and erase tapes of a Patriots practice because the team had illegally used a player on injured reserve. At Gillette Stadium, the scrambling and jamming of the opponents' coach-to-quarterback radio line -- "small s---" that many teams do, according to a former Pats assistant coach -- occurred so often that one team asked a league official to sit in the coaches' box during the game and wait for it to happen. Sure enough, on a key third down, the headset went out.

But the truth is, only one man truly knows how much Spygate, or any other suspect method, affected games: Belichick.

He had spent his entire adult life in professional football, trying to master a game no coach could control. Since he entered the league in 1975, Belichick had witnessed the dark side of each decade's dynasties, airbrushed away by time and lore. Football's tradition of cheating through espionage goes back to its earliest days, pioneered by legends such as George Halas. And so when it came to certain tactics -- especially recording signals of a coach "in front of 80,000 people," Belichick would later say, a practice that he claimed other teams did and that former Cowboys coach Jimmy Johnson once confessed to trying himself -- Belichick considered it fair game. He could call an offensive or defensive play whenever he wanted, based on a suggestion from Adams or not, and never have to explain why to anyone. "Remember, so much of this is the head coach's prerogative," says a former Patriots assistant coach. (Belichick, Adams and Dee declined to comment for this story through the Patriots, who made several officials available to talk but not others.)

A former member of the NFL competition committee says the committee spent much of 2001-06 "discussing ways in which the Patriots cheated," even if nothing could be proved. It reached a level of paranoia in which conspiracy theories ran wild and nothing -- the notion of bugging locker rooms or of Brady having a second frequency in his helmet to help decipher the defense -- was out of the realm of possibility. There were regular rumors that the Patriots had taped the Rams' walk-through practice before Super Bowl XXXVI in February 2002, one of the greatest upsets in NFL history, a game won by the Patriots 20-17 on a last-second Adam Vinatieri field goal. The rumors and speculation reached a fever pitch in 2006. Before the season, a rule was proposed to allow radio communications to one defensive player on the field, as was already allowed for quarterbacks. If it had passed, defensive signals would have been unnecessary. But it failed. In 2007, the proposal failed once again, this time by two votes, with Belichick voting against it. (The rule change passed in 2008 after Spygate broke, with Belichick voting for it.) The allegations against the Patriots prompted NFL executive vice president of football operations Ray Anderson to send a letter to all 32 team owners, general managers and head coaches on

Sept. 6, 2006, reminding them that "videotaping of any type, including but not limited to taping of an opponent's offensive or defensive signals, is prohibited from the sidelines."

But the Patriots kept doing it. In November 2006, Green Bay Packers security officials caught Matt Estrella shooting unauthorized footage at Lambeau Field. When asked what he was doing, according to notes from the Senate investigation of Spygate that had not previously been disclosed, Estrella said he was with Kraft Productions and was taping panoramic shots of the stadium. He was removed by Packers security. That same year, according to former Colts GM Bill Polian, who served for years on the competition committee and is now an analyst for ESPN, several teams complained that the Patriots had videotaped signals of their coaches. And so the Patriots -- and the rest of the NFL -- were warned again, in writing, before the 2007 season, sources say.

Looking back on it, several former Patriots coaches insist that spying helped them most against less sophisticated teams -- the Dolphins and Bills chief among them -- whose coaches didn't bother changing their signals. Even when they had the perfect play teed up, sometimes the system would fail, owing to human error. Several opposing coaches now say they wish they had messed with Belichick's head the way he had messed with theirs. You want to tape signals? Fine. We'll have three guys signaling plays and disguise it so much that Ernie Adams has to waste an entire day trying to decode them, then change them all when we play.

At the time, though, only one head coach actually did: Eric Mangini.

ON SEPT. 9, 2007, in the first game of the season, Estrella aimed a video camera at the New York Jets' sideline, unaware he was the target of a sting operation. Mangini was entering his second year as the Jets' coach. Belichick had practically invented Mangini: In January 1995, he saw potential in a 24-year-old Browns PR intern and moved the fellow Wesleyan alum into football operations. Belichick hired Mangini to be his assistant when he coached under head coach Bill Parcells for the Jets in the late '90s, and soon became a father figure of sorts to Mangini, whose father had died when he was young. Then, in 2000, Belichick brought Mangini to New England as defensive backs coach, promoting him to defensive coordinator in 2005.

In 2006, Jets GM Mike Tannenbaum, one of Mangini's best friends and another Belichick charge, wanted to hire the 34-year-old Mangini as head coach. Mangini took the job over the objections of Belichick, who hated the Jets so much that he barely mentioned his tenure there in his official Patriots bio. Belichick revoked Mangini's key card access and didn't allow him to pack up his office. The tension was raised later that year, when the Patriots accused the Jets of tampering and the Jets countered with an accusation that the Patriots had circumvented the salary cap. Mangini, who is currently the defensive coordinator for the San Francisco 49ers and who declined to comment for this story, knew the Patriots inside and out and would tweak his former boss by using his tricks against him, like having a quarterback punt on third-and-long at midfield, one of Belichick's favorite moves.

Then there was the videotaping. Mangini knew the Patriots did it, so he would have three Jets coaches signal in plays: One coach's signal would alert the players to which coach was actually signaling in the play. Still, Mangini saw it as a sign of disrespect that Belichick taped their signals -- "He's pissing in my face," he told a confidant -- and wanted it to end. Before the 2007 opener, sources say, he warned

various Patriots staffers, "We know you do this. Don't do it in our house." Tannenbaum, who declined comment, told team security to remove any unauthorized cameramen on the field.

During the first half, Jets security monitored Estrella, who held a camera and wore a polo shirt with a taped-over Patriots logo under a red media vest that said: NFL PHOTOGRAPHER 138. With the backing of Jets owner Woody Johnson and Tannenbaum, Jets security alerted NFL security, a step Mangini acknowledged publicly later that he never wanted. Shortly before halftime, security encircled and then confronted Estrella. He said he was with "Kraft Productions." They took him into a small room off the stadium's tunnel, confiscated his camera and tape, and made him wait. He was sweating. Someone gave Estrella water, and he was shaking so severely that he spilled it. "He was s---ting a brick," a source says.

On Monday morning, Estrella's camera and the spy tape were at NFL headquarters on Park Avenue.

CONSIDERING HOW THE NFL currently conducts its investigations or reviews of its investigations -- outsourcing the legwork, allowing it to take months to complete, making the findings public, and almost always losing if the inevitable appeal is heard by an independent arbitrator -- it's striking that the Spygate inquiry lasted only a little over a week, and that Goodell's findings stuck. The day after the game, Sept. 10, the Jets sent a letter to the Patriots asking them to preserve any evidence because they had sent an official grievance about the Patriots' spying to the NFL, says Robyn Glaser, vice president of the Kraft Group and club counsel of the Patriots. Kraft told Belichick to tell the truth and cooperate with the investigation, and the coach waived the opportunity to have a hearing. On Sept. 12, Goodell spoke on the phone with Belichick for 30 minutes, sources say. Belichick explained that he had misinterpreted a rule, which the commissioner did not believe to be true, sources say, and that he had been engaged in the practice of taping signals for "some time." The coach explained that "at the most, he might gain a little intelligence," Goodell would later recall, according to notes. Belichick didn't volunteer the total number of games at which the Patriots had recorded signals, sources say, and the commissioner didn't ask. "Goodell didn't want to know how many games were taped," another source with firsthand knowledge of the investigation says, "and Belichick didn't want to tell him."

The next day, the league announced its historic punishment against the Patriots, including an NFL maximum fine for Belichick. Goodell and league executives hoped Spygate would be over.

But instead it became an obsession around the league and with many fans. When Estrella's confiscated tape was leaked to Fox's Jay Glazer a week after Estrella was caught, the blowback was so great that the league dispatched three of its executives -- general counsel Jeff Pash, Anderson and VP of football operations Ron Hill -- to Foxborough on Sept. 18.

What happened next has never been made public: The league officials interviewed Belichick, Adams and Dee, says Glaser, the Patriots' club counsel. Once again, nobody asked how many games had been recorded or attempted to determine whether a game was ever swayed by the spying, sources say. The Patriots staffers insisted that the spying had a limited impact on games. Then the Patriots told the league officials they possessed eight tapes containing game footage along with a half-inch-thick stack of notes of signals and other scouting information belonging to Adams, Glaser says. The league officials watched portions of the tapes. Goodell was contacted, and he ordered the tapes and notes to be destroyed, but the Patriots didn't want any of it to leave the building, arguing that some of it was obtained legally and thus was proprietary. So in a stadium conference room, Pash and the other NFL executives stomped the videotapes into small pieces and fed Adams' notes into a shredder, Glaser says.

She recalls picking up the shards of plastic from the smashed Beta tapes off the floor and throwing them away.

The Patriots turned over what they turned over, and the NFL accepted it. Sources with knowledge of the investigation insist that the Patriots were "borderline noncompliant." And a former high-level Patriots employee agrees, saying, "The way the Patriots tried to approach it, they tried to cover up everything," although he refused to specify how. Glaser adamantly denies that assertion, saying all the Patriots' evidence of stolen signals was turned over to the league that day. On Sept. 20, Glaser says the team signed a certification letter promising the league that the only evidence of the videotaping of illegal signals had been destroyed two days earlier and that no other tapes or notes of stolen signals were in the team's possession. The letter does not detail the games that were recorded or itemize the notes that were shredded.

And that was it. The inquiry was over, with only Belichick and Adams knowing the true scope of the taping. (After the season, Belichick would acknowledge the Patriots taped a "significant number" of games, and according to documents and sources, they recorded signals in at least 40 games during the Spygate era.) The quick resolution mollified some owners and executives, who say they admired the speed -- and limited transparency -- in which Goodell carried out the investigation. "This is the way things should be done ... the way they were done under Pete Rozelle and Paul Tagliabue," a former executive now says. "Keep the dirty laundry in the family."

But other owners, coaches, team executives and players were outraged by how little the league investigated what the Patriots' cheating had accomplished in games. The NFL refused to volunteer information -- teams that had been videotaped were not officially notified by the league office, sources say -- and some executives were told that the tapes were burned in a dumpster, not crushed into pieces in a conference room. The NFL's explanation of why it was destroyed -- "So that our clubs would know they no longer exist and cannot be used by anyone," the league said at the time -- only made it worse for those who were critical. "I wish the evidence had not been destroyed because at least we would know what had been done," Polian says. "Lack of specificity just leads to speculation, and that serves no one's purpose -- the Patriots included."

The view around much of the league was that Goodell had done a major favor for Kraft, one of his closest confidants who had extended critical support when he became the commissioner the previous summer. Kraft is a member of the NFL's three-person compensation committee, which each year determines Goodell's salary and bonuses -- $35 million in 2013, and nearly $44.2 million in 2012. "It felt like this enormous break was given to the Patriots," a former exec says. They were also angry at Belichick -- partly, some admit, out of jealousy for his success but also because of the widespread rumors that he was always pushing the envelope. The narrative that paralleled the Patriots' rise -- a team mostly void of superstars, built not to blow out opponents but to win the game's handful of decisive plays -- only increased rivals' suspicions. After all, the Patriots had won three Super Bowls by a total of nine points. Although Belichick admitted to Kraft that the taping had helped them only 1 percent of the time ("Then you're a real schmuck," Kraft told him), the spying very well could have affected a game, opponents say. "Why would they go to such great lengths for so long to do it and hide it if it didn't work?" a longtime former executive says. "It made no sense."

"Ernie is the guy who you watch football with and says, 'It's going to be a run!' And it's a pass. 'It's going to be a pass!' And it's a run. 'It's going to be a run!' It's a run. 'I told you!'"

Former Patriots assistant coach about Ernie Adams

The Patriots' primary victims saw Spygate, and other videotaping rumors, as confirmation that they had been cheated out of a Super Bowl -- even though they lacked proof. The Panthers now believe that their practices had been taped by the Patriots before Super Bowl XXXVIII in 2004. "Our players came in after that first half and said it was like [the Patriots] were in our huddle," a Panthers source says. During halftime -- New England led 14-10 -- Carolina's offensive coordinator, Dan Henning, changed game plans because of worries the Patriots had too close a read on Carolina's schemes. And, in the second half, the Panthers moved the ball at will before losing 32-29 on a last-second field goal. "Do I have any tape to prove they cheated?" this source says. "No. But I'm convinced they did it."

No player was more resolute that Spygate had affected games than Hines Ward, the Steelers' All-Pro wide receiver. Ward told reporters that Patriots inside information about Steelers play calling helped New England upset Pittsburgh 24-17 in the January 2002 AFC Championship Game. "Oh, they knew," Ward, now an NBC analyst who didn't return messages for this story, said after Spygate broke. "They were calling our stuff out. They knew a lot of our calls. There's no question some of their players were calling out some of our stuff."

Some of the Steelers' defensive coaches remain convinced that a deep touchdown pass from Brady to Deion Branch in the January 2005 AFC Championship Game, which was won by the Patriots 41-27, came from stolen signals because Pittsburgh hadn't changed its signals all year, sources say, and the two teams had played a game in the regular season that Walsh told investigators he believes was taped. "They knew the signals, so they knew when it went in what the coverage was and how to attack it," says a former Steelers coach. "I've had a couple of guys on my teams from New England, and they've told me those things."

When Spygate broke, some of the Eagles now believed they had an answer for a question that had vexed them since they lost to the Patriots 24-21 in Super Bowl XXXIX: How did New England seem completely prepared for the rarely used dime defense the Eagles deployed in the second quarter, scoring touchdowns on three of four drives? The Eagles suspected that either practices were filmed or a playbook was stolen. "To this day, some believe that we were robbed by the Patriots not playing by the rules ... and knowing our game plan," a former Eagles football operations staffer says.

It didn't matter that the Patriots went 18-1 in 2007. Or that they would average more wins a season after Spygate than before. Or that Belichick would come to be universally recognized as his generation's greatest coach. Or that many with the Patriots remain mystified at the notion that a historic penalty was somehow perceived to be lenient. The Patriots were forever branded as cheaters -- an asterisk, in the view of many fans, forever affixed to their wins. The NFL was all too aware of the damage baseball had suffered because of the steroids scandal, its biggest stars and most cherished records tarnished. After Spygate made headlines, rumors that had existed for years around the NFL that the Patriots had cheated in the Super Bowl that had propelled their run, against the Rams, were beginning to boil to the surface, threatening everything. "I don't think fans really want to know this -- they just want to watch football," the Panthers source says. "But if you tell them that the games aren't on the level, they'll care. Boy, will they care."

IN JANUARY 2008, in the middle of the playoffs, Arlen Specter, the senior United States senator from Pennsylvania, bumped into Carl Hulse, a New York Times congressional reporter, on Capitol Hill. Hulse

asked Specter which team he thought would win the Super Bowl, which would eventually feature the New York Giants and the undefeated Patriots.

"It all depends," Specter jokingly replied, "if there is cheating involved."

Specter told Hulse he was troubled by the NFL's lightning-quick investigation and by the destruction of the tapes and the notes. Twice during the previous few months, he had written letters to Goodell seeking additional information about Spygate. Twice the commissioner had not replied.

That disclosure led to a story in the Times, putting Spygate, and all of its unanswered questions, front and center two days before the Super Bowl. Only then did Goodell reply to Specter. Unsatisfied, Specter told the Times, "The American people are entitled to be sure about the integrity of the game." Even more intriguing to Specter, there were fresh reports that Matt Walsh, working as an assistant golf pro in Hawaii at the time, had not been interviewed by the NFL the previous September. The reports suggested Walsh had additional information -- and possessed videotapes -- of the Patriots' spying.

Specter was at the time the ranking Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee. A former federal prosecutor, he had cut his investigative teeth as a lawyer for the Warren Commission, and two decades earlier he had gone after the NFL for its antitrust exemption. Specter was now 77 years old and undergoing chemotherapy to treat non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the complications from which would claim his life in October 2012. One of his biggest political patrons was Comcast, the Philadelphia-based cable TV giant that was at the time locked in a dispute with the league over fees for carrying the NFL Network, a connection the senator vehemently denied had motivated his interest in Spygate.

Instead, Specter said he was motivated by curiosity about Goodell's own statements on the matter, according to hundreds of previously undisclosed papers belonging to Specter and interviews with former aides and others who spoke with him at the time. At his pre-Super Bowl news conference on Feb. 1, 2008, Goodell insisted the Patriots' taping was "quite limited" and "not something done on a widespread basis," contradicting what Belichick had told him. Goodell was asked how many tapes the league had reviewed, and destroyed, the previous September. "I believe there were six tapes," the commissioner replied, "and I believe some were from the preseason in 2007, and the rest were primarily in the late 2006 season."

The Patriots had spied far more often than that, of course, but Specter didn't know it at the time. All he knew was that he didn't buy Goodell's explanation for destroying the tapes -- that he didn't want to create an uneven playing field. "You couldn't sell that in kindergarten," Specter said.

U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter's notes from his meeting with Goodell on Feb. 13, 2008: "No valid reason to destroy."

SPECTER DIDN'T HAVE subpoena power, so he played hardball with the league, threatening to pursue legislation that would cancel its antitrust exemption. And so at 3 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 13, 2008 -- 10 days after the Giants upset the previously undefeated Patriots 17-14 in the Super Bowl -- Goodell and Pash arrived at Specter's office, Room 711 of the Senate Hart Building on Capitol Hill. During the 1-hour, 40-minute interview, the new details of which are revealed in Specter's papers and in interviews with key aides, Goodell was supremely confident, "cool as a cucumber," stuck to his talking points and apologized for nothing, recalls a senior aide to Specter. Pash, who according to a source later that spring

would offer to resign over how the Spygate investigation was handled, spent the interview "sweating, squirming."

Repeating what he had proclaimed publicly, Goodell assured Specter the destroyed tapes went back only to the 2006 season. But then he confessed something new: that the Patriots began their taping operation in 2000 and the destroyed notes were for games as early as 2002, "overwhelmingly for AFC East rivals," contradicting an assertion he made just two weeks earlier in public. The commissioner told Specter that among the destroyed notes were the Patriots' detailed diagrams of the Steelers' defensive signals from several games, including the January 2002 AFC Championship Game -- in which Ward later alleged that the Patriots called "our stuff out."

When Specter pressed Goodell on the speed of the investigation and his decision to destroy evidence, Goodell became "defensive" and had "the overtone of something to hide" according to notes taken by Danny Fisher, a counsel on Sen. Specter's Judiciary Committee staff and the lead investigator on the Spygate inquiry. "No valid reason to destroy," Specter wrote in his own notes, which are archived as the Senator Arlen Specter Papers at the University of Pittsburgh.

Goodell assured Specter that "most teams do not believe there is an advantage" from the taping, a comment contradicted by the outraged public and private remarks of many players and coaches, then and now. "Even if Belichick figured out the signals," Goodell insisted, "there is not sufficient time to call in the play."

The senator seethed that Goodell seemed completely uninterested in whether a single game had been compromised. He asked Goodell whether the spying might have tipped the Patriots' Super Bowl win against the senator's favorite team, the Eagles. Goodell said that he had spoken with Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie and then-head coach Andy Reid and that "both said the outcome of the [February] 2005 Super Bowl was legitimate," an assertion contradicted by the private feelings of many senior members of the team.

Then Specter moved to the most damning allegation still unresolved at the time: that the Patriots had taped the Rams' pre-Super Bowl walk-through.

The commissioner acknowledged that he first "got wind" of the widespread rumor the previous September, something he had not said publicly. But Goodell told Specter the NFL had found no hard evidence that New England had taped the walk-through, saying that the league interviewed the video staffs of the Patriots and the Rams. "Each said no taping went on, and if it had, the Rams' video staff surely would have reported it," the notes show.

After the interview, Specter was even more convinced that Goodell had neglected to look hard enough for the truth. And so he decided to investigate the things the NFL had chosen to ignore. "The league's explanations just didn't add up, and the senator's prosecutorial instincts wouldn't allow him to let it go," Fisher says.

After the meeting with Specter, Goodell told reporters he had no regrets about his decision to destroy the evidence.

"I think it was the right thing to do," he said. "I have nothing to hide."

WITHIN DAYS, SPECTER concluded that the NFL, the Patriots and senior league officials were very much hiding from him. His calls and emails to 25 people from the Patriots, members of the competition committee and other teams went unanswered; lawyers from white-shoe Manhattan law firms, including one representing the Patriots' videographers, declined to make their clients available for questioning. (The senator was able to reach one former Patriots scout, who told him to "keep digging.") In his 2012 book, "Life Among the Cannibals," Specter wrote that a powerful friend -- he wouldn't name the person -- told him that if he "laid off the Patriots," there could be a lot of money for him in Palm Beach. Specter told the friend, "I couldn't care less."

So Specter turned to the one person who appeared willing to talk: Matt Walsh.

Since the Patriots had lost to the Giants in the Super Bowl, Walsh had emerged as a reluctant whistleblower in media stories. He had not been interviewed by the NFL and had kept eight previously undisclosed spying tapes and other material from his days in New England; he was fired in 2003 for performance issues. Walsh hinted that the cheating was more widespread than anyone knew -- and, perhaps, that he possessed proof that the Patriots had taped the Rams walk-through.

On May 13, 2008, after signing an indemnification agreement with the NFL, Walsh and his lawyer met for 3 hours and 15 minutes at league headquarters with Goodell, Pash, outside NFL lawyer Gregg Levy, Patriots lawyer Dan Goldberg, and Milt Ahlerich, the league's director of security. A source in the meeting says that Ahlerich asked the majority of the questions; Goodell was mostly silent. Afterward, Goodell told reporters that the information provided by Walsh was "consistent with what we disciplined the Patriots for last fall" and that he "was not aware" of a taped Rams walk-through and "does not know of anybody who says there is a tape." Hoping to end the matter forever, Goodell added that unless some new piece of information emerged, the league's interest in Spygate was closed.

That afternoon, Walsh and his lawyer, Michael N. Levy, flew to Washington and met with Specter and his staff for more than three hours. Walsh, who along with Levy declined to comment for this story, covered many topics; among them, that the public didn't know the great lengths that video assistants were told to use to cover up the videotaping of signals. Belichick had insisted that it was done openly, with nothing to hide.

"Were you surprised that Belichick said he had misinterpreted the rules?" Specter asked.

"Yes," Walsh said. "I was surprised that Belichick would think that because of the culture of sneakiness."

Walsh told Specter that the taping continued in the years after he left the team, by Steve Scarnecchia, his successor as video assistant, whom Walsh claimed to see taping opposing coaches' signals at Gillette Stadium from 2003 to 2005. Specter asked whether he had told Goodell about it. "No," Walsh said. "Goodell didn't ask me about that."

Then Specter turned to the alleged videotaping of the Rams' walk-through. Walsh confessed that after the Patriots' team picture, he and at least three other team videographers lingered around the Louisiana Superdome, setting up cameras for the game. Suddenly, the Rams arrived and started their walk-through. The three videographers, in full Patriots apparel, hung around, on the field and in the stands, for 30 minutes. Nobody said anything. Walsh said he observed star Rams running back Marshall Faulk

line up in an unusual position: as a kickoff returner. That night, Walsh reported what he had seen to Patriots assistant coach Brian Daboll, who asked an array of questions about the Rams' formations. Walsh said that Daboll, who declined through the Patriots to comment for this story, drew a series of diagrams -- an account Daboll later denied to league investigators.

Faulk had returned only one kickoff in his career before the Super Bowl. Sure enough, in the second quarter, he lined up deep. The Patriots were ready: Vinatieri kicked it into a corner, leading Faulk out of bounds after gaining 1 yard.

During the walk-through, the Rams had also practiced some of their newly designed red zone plays. When they ran the same plays late in the Super Bowl's fourth quarter, the Patriots' defense was in position on nearly every down. On one new play, quarterback Kurt Warner rolled to his right and turned to throw to Faulk in the flat, where three Patriots defenders were waiting. On the sideline, Rams coach Mike Martz was stunned. He was famous for his imaginative, unpredictable plays, and now it was as if the Patriots knew what was coming on plays that had never been run before. The Patriots' game plan had called for a defender to hit Faulk on every down, as a means of eliminating him, but one coach who worked with an assistant on that 2001 Patriots team says that the ex-Pats assistant coach once bragged that New England knew exactly what the Rams would call in the red zone. "He'd say, 'A little birdie told us,'" the coach says now.

In the meeting in Specter's office, the senator asked Walsh: "Were there any live electronics during the walk-through?"

"It's certainly possible," Walsh said. "But I have no evidence."

In the coming years, the Patriots would become baffled by those persistent rumors, which were mostly fueled by a pre-Super Bowl 2008 Boston Herald report -- later retracted -- that a team videographer had taped it. Some media outlets -- including ESPN -- have inadvertently repeated it as fact. According to Patriots spokesman Stacey James, "The New England Patriots have never filmed or recorded another team's practice or walkthrough. ... Clearly the damage has been irreparable. ... It is disappointing that some choose to believe in myths, conjecture and rumors rather than give credit to coach Belichick, his staff and the players."

After the Walsh interview, Specter again accused Goodell of conducting a "fatally flawed" investigation designed not to determine whether the taping affected a game. He complained to aides that the NFL had never publicly identified the "more than 50 people" in 11 days whom Goodell had claimed the league had interviewed. And, Fisher says that Specter felt "stonewalled" by everyone connected to the NFL. And so Specter called for an independent investigation of Spygate, modeled after the inquiry by former Sen. George Mitchell of the rampant use of steroids in major league baseball, or a transparent investigation led by a committee of Congress. Asked whether he was willing to say the NFL covered up, Specter hesitated. "No," he said. "There was just an enormous amount of haste."

But in his handwritten notes the day before, beneath Matt Walsh's name, Specter jotted the phrase, "Cover-up."

ON THE EXACT DAY that Specter called for an investigation, Goodell left a voice mail message on Mike Martz's cellphone. The Super Bowl against the Patriots had derailed Martz's career as much as it made Belichick's. Martz's offense, dubbed "The Greatest Show on Turf" in 1999, was never the same, and in 2006, he was fired as the Rams' coach. After bouncing around the league, he was then the 49ers' offensive coordinator. Like a number of former Rams -- especially Faulk and Warner, who now both work for the NFL Network -- Martz was deeply suspicious of whether the Patriots had videotaped the walk-through or his team's practices before the Super Bowl, even though he believes that the Rams' three turnovers were the main factors in the defeat.

Martz says now that he returned Goodell's call from the 49ers' practice field. During a five-minute conversation, Martz recalls that the commissioner sounded panicked about Specter's calls for a wider investigation. Martz also recalls that Goodell asked him to write a statement, saying that he was satisfied with the NFL's Spygate investigation and was certain the Patriots had not cheated and asking everyone to move on -- like leaders of the Steelers and Eagles had done.

"I wish the evidence had not been destroyed because at least we would know what had been done."

Former Indianapolis Colts president Bill Polian

"He told me, 'The league doesn't need this. We're asking you to come out with a couple lines exonerating us and saying we did our due diligence,'" says Martz, now 64 years old and out of coaching, during a July interview at his summer cabin in the Idaho mountains.

A congressional inquiry that would put league officials under oath had to be avoided, Martz recalls Goodell telling him. "If it ever got to an investigation, it would be terrible for the league," Goodell said.

Martz says he still had more questions, but he agreed that a congressional investigation "could kill the league." So in the end, Martz got in line. He wrote the statement that evening, and it was released the next day, reading in part that he was "very confident there was no impropriety" and that it was "time to put this behind us."

Shown a copy of his statement this past July, Martz was stunned to read several sentences about Walsh that he says he's certain he did not write. "It shocked me," he says. "It appears embellished quite a bit -- some lines I know I didn't write. Who changed it? I don't know."

Since Spygate broke, Martz says he has continued to hear things about the run-up to that Super Bowl. Goodell "told me to take him at his word," he says. "It was hard to swallow because I always felt something happened but I didn't know what it was and I couldn't prove it anyway. Even to this day, I think something happened."

No matter how angry owners and coaches were over Goodell's handling of Spygate, they were unified in their view that a congressional investigation posed a threat to the game itself. On June 5, 2008, Specter delivered a lengthy speech on the Senate floor, blasting the NFL's investigation, destruction of evidence and lack of transparency. "The overwhelming evidence flatly contradicts Commissioner Goodell's assertion that there was little or no effect on the outcome of the game," he said. Once more, Specter called for "an objective, thorough, transparent investigation" of Spygate. But he knew then, his aides now say, that such an investigation was never going to happen.

The NFL had won. Barely.

GOODELL MOVED ON immediately -- the same day as Specter's floor statement, actually -- introducing a mandatory "Policy on Integrity of the Game & Enforcement of Competitive Rules" to be signed by owners, team presidents, general managers and head coaches after each season, swearing they had "complied with all League competitive policies." The first thick paragraph detailing prohibited acts reads like a litany of Spygate-era acts and accusations, including "unauthorized videotaping on game day or of practices, meetings or other organized team activities" and the barring of "unauthorized entry into locker rooms, coaches' booths, meeting rooms or other private areas." At the same time, the league also relaxed its investigative standard of proof to the "preponderance of the evidence," making findings of guilt easier, and required the signees to cooperate with NFL investigations.

But Spygate's damage went far beyond rule changes and new disciplinary procedures. Belichick's reputation was so tarnished that he worried that Spygate would come up during his Hall of Fame consideration, people who know him say. Goodell was now suspect in many of his bosses' eyes after making the first of several conduct decisions that would ultimately draw unwanted criticism. And Kraft no longer owned what many considered to be the model sports franchise. Kraft would later say that he knew that Spygate wasn't "personal," that Goodell had done "what he thought was right for the league ... even if his judgment isn't pure."

And yet, despite Spygate, Kraft's influence in the league grew, with Goodell and with business matters. During labor negotiations in 2011, Kraft emerged as the reasoned, respected voice among those who helped bridge the wide gulf between the players' union and the owners. As chairman of the league's broadcast committee, Kraft took the lead to hammer out long-term, record-shattering agreements with NBC, Fox, CBS and ESPN. To some executives, Kraft was considered "the assistant commissioner," a nickname that a source says has always embarrassed him because it's not how he wants to be perceived. He was always as quick to praise and defend Goodell in public as he was during closed-door meetings.

Last autumn, though, Goodell suffered through his worst season as commissioner, one in which the publicity about the NFL and Goodell's leadership was almost uniformly negative for months. His mishandling of the Ray Rice domestic violence discipline caused commentators, including some at ESPN, to call for his firing. Some owners felt Goodell's handling was cause for his dismissal or, at the very least, his contract not being renewed beyond March 2019. One owner said, "We're paying this guy $45 million for this s---?"

Publicly, Kraft continued his role as Goodell's chief supporter, saying that the commissioner had been "excellent" on Rice. But sources say Kraft became deeply concerned last fall by the performance of Goodell. A close friend who saw him that October recalls Kraft saying, "Roger's been very disappointing in the way he has handled this. And I'm not alone in feeling like that." Kraft was also furious at the league's executives, from Pash to its public relations staff, and said they had failed to help Goodell. "Roger's people don't have a f---ing clue as to what they are doing," Kraft told his friend.

Another team's senior executive who frequently talks with owners says the owners last autumn were "really split. There are people who feel [Goodell] has made them a lot of money and they shouldn't do anything. Others think, 'He has embarrassed the league and if we had a better commissioner, we'd be making more money.'" All the negative headlines certainly haven't affected the league's bottom line --

total revenues and TV ratings continue to shatter records. The NFL's annual revenue, racing toward $15 billion, is the most important metric that Goodell's bosses use to judge his performance, several owners and executives say.

Shortly before this past Thanksgiving, as the league awaited a former federal judge's decision on the appropriateness of the indefinite suspension Goodell had given to Rice, Kraft attended a fundraising dinner and, reflecting a sense among some owners, confided to a friend, "Roger is on very thin ice." At the same time, according to another source, Kraft was still rallying support for the commissioner despite his increasing disappointments. Asked when the owners would likely discuss Goodell's performance, Kraft replied, "We're going to wait until after the Super Bowl."

And then, on the eve of the AFC Championship Game, as Kraft hosted Goodell at a dinner party at his Brookline, Massachusetts, estate, a league official got a tip from the Colts about the Patriots' use of deflated footballs.

EVEN THE LANGUAGE of the tip seemed to echo suspicions shaped by the Spygate era. Ryan Grigson, the Colts' general manager, forwarded to the league office an emailed accusation made by Colts equipment manager Sean Sullivan: "It is well known around the league that after the Patriots game balls are checked by the officials and brought out for game usage, the ball boys for the Patriots will let out some air with a ball needle because their quarterback likes a smaller football so he can grip it better."

From the beginning, though, Goodell managed Deflategate in the opposite way he tried to dispose of Spygate. He announced a lengthy investigation and, in solidarity with many owners, outsourced it to Wells, whose law firm had defended the NFL during the mammoth concussions litigation. In an inquiry lasting four months and costing at least $5 million, according to sources, Ted Wells and his team conducted 66 interviews with Patriots staffers and league officials. Wells, who declined to comment, also plumbed cellphone records and text messages.

A 243-page report was made public that applied the league's evidentiary standards -- relaxed after Spygate -- against Brady, while Belichick, who had professed no knowledge of the air pressure of his team's footballs and said this past January that the Patriots "try to do everything right," was absolved of any wrongdoing. Finally, Goodell and Troy Vincent, executive vice president of football operations, waited until the conclusion of the investigation before awarding punishment, rather than the other way around. Another legacy of Spygate -- consequences for failing to cooperate with a league investigation -- was used against the Patriots and, ultimately, Brady. Goodell upheld Brady's four-game suspension because the quarterback had asked an assistant to dispose of his cellphone before his March interview with Wells. That, in fact, was the only notable similarity between the two investigations: the order to destroy evidence.

Sources say that the Patriots privately viewed it all as a witch hunt, endorsed by owners resentful of New England's success and a commissioner who deferred too much authority to Pash and Vincent. Patriots executives were furious that a Jan. 19 letter they received from NFL executive David Gardi contained two critical facts -- details the league used as the basis for its investigation -- that were later proved false: that during a surprise inspection at halftime of the AFC Championship Game one of New England's footballs tested far below the legal weight limit, at 10.1 psi, and that all of the Colts' balls were inflated to the permitted range. A source close to Brady views the targeting of him as resentment and

retribution by opposing teams: "Tom has won 77 percent of his games -- in a league that is designed for parity, that's a no-no."

But to the many owners who saw the Patriots as longtime cheaters, it really didn't matter that Goodell appeared eager, perhaps overeager, to show the rest of the NFL that he had learned the lessons of Spygate. One team owner acknowledges that for years there was a "jealous ... hater" relationship among many owners with Kraft, the residue of Spygate. "It's not surprising that there's a makeup call," one team owner says. Another longtime executive says a number of owners wanted Goodell to "go hard on this one."

Kraft felt it firsthand in May. He had publicly threatened legal action against the NFL but then privately decided against it. Not long after arriving in San Francisco for the league's spring meeting, Kraft sensed that many owners wouldn't have stood with him anyway, sources say. They backed Goodell.

"The one that stunned him the most -- the one that really rocked him -- was John Mara," says a close friend of Kraft's. The Giants' president and CEO is a quiet, deeply respected owner whom Goodell often leans on for counsel. Mara had signaled to Kraft, "It's not there. We're not there with you on this. Something has to happen. The commissioner has to do his job." Mara insists that this account "is not true," but the next day at the spring meeting, Kraft announced he'd grudgingly accept the league's punishment against his team, proclaiming it was best for the league. After Kraft's announcement that he would accept the penalties, a number of owners, including Mara, thanked him for doing so, sources say.

Over the summer, Jerry Jones of the Cowboys and Stephen Ross of the Dolphins publicly backed Goodell's Deflategate investigation despite all of its embarrassments -- from the flawed science to the questions of its independence to the inaccurate leaks reported by ESPN and other media outlets. Many other owners and executives, who feared alienating Kraft, did so privately, insisting that Goodell's willingness to take on the Patriots has helped him emerge in a stronger position with most of his billionaire bosses, managing the expectations of his 32 constituents with the savvy of a U.S. senator's son.

"Roger did the right thing -- at last," one owner said after Goodell upheld Brady's punishment. "He looks tough -- and that's good."

"Pleased," said another longtime owner.

"About time," an executive close to another owner said. "Overdue."

"The world has never seen anyone as good as Roger Goodell as a political maneuverer. If he were in Congress, he'd be majority [leader]," one owner says.

THE MAKEUP CALL carried public fallout. In his 40-page decision on Sept. 3 that vacated Brady's suspension over Deflategate, Judge Richard M. Berman rebuked Goodell and the NFL, saying that the commissioner had "dispensed his own brand of industrial justice." Columnists, analysts and even some NFL players immediately pounced, racing to proclaim that Goodell finally had suffered a crushing, perhaps legacy-defining defeat. From the Saints' Bountygate scandal through Deflategate, Goodell is 0-5 on appeals of his high-profile disciplinary decisions. Even an influential team owner, Arthur Blank of the

Falcons, publicly said Goodell's absolute disciplinary power should be reconsidered, an extraordinary proposal that quickly gained momentum.

It didn't matter that Berman only ruled on whether the league had followed the collective bargaining agreement, not on Brady's guilt or innocence. It didn't matter that the Patriots had accepted the league's punishment in May. For the second time in less than a decade, in the eyes of some owners and executives, Goodell had the Patriots in his hands, and let them go. The league lost, again. The Patriots won, again. "In 20 years," says a coach of another team, "nobody will remember Deflategate."

And so it was that in mid-June, while Deflategate's appeal rolled on, Kraft hosted a party at his Brookline estate for his players and coaching staff. Before dinner, the owner promised "rich" and "sweet" desserts that were, of course, the Super Bowl champions' rings. On one side of the ring, the recipient's name is engraved in white gold, along with the years of the Patriots' Super Bowl titles: 2001, 2003, 2004 and, now, 2014.

A photograph snapped at the party went viral: There was a smiling Tom Brady, in a designer suit, showing off all four of his rings, a pair on each hand. On the middle finger of his right hand, Brady flashed the new ring, the gaudiest of the four, glittering with 205 diamonds -- and no asterisks.