

## READ & REACT



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**A GOOD DAY OF WORK** — Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and tight end Rob Gronkowski run off the field at the end of a 30-7 win over the Vikings in Minnesota Sunday.

Photo by David Silverman

plains, but when he did, it was in the same capacity as an extra tight end on New England's "jumbo sets." Max protection was a point of emphasis this week, giving Fleming more opportunities against a Vikings defensive line featuring one of the game's most underrated pass rushers, Brian Robison. With Cameron offering extra protection up front, Robison was a non-factor, registering just one tackle and one quarterback hit, one of only three hits against Brady, in comparison to the four times he was sacked last weekend.

Through the first two quarters, Fleming was on the field for 14 of New England's first 27 snaps as an eligible receiver.

### Cornering the market

With Alfonzo Dennard's shoulder injury forcing him out of Week 1, Logan Ryan got the start opposite Darrelle Revis and came up with several big plays in a tough

assignment against the explosive Cordarrelle Patterson.

Ryan also showed he has a short memory, which is key at a position in the spotlight as much as the cornerback spot tends to be. After getting beat by Patterson on a third-down conversion in the second quarter, Ryan stepped in front of Patterson when Cassel tried to target him again on the next snap and butted the ball away for an incompleteness. Later in the drive, he made a great open-field tackle on running back Mike Azusa on a third-down reception to force Minnesota to punt. Ryan also recorded his first interception of the season on a poorly-drawn ball by Cassel in the second half.

That second cornerback spot opposite Revis is still up for grabs for the next two weeks until Brandon Browner returns from his suspension and even when Browner comes back, it's still unclear whether or not

he'll automatically get the starting job. Dennard had his moments in Week 1 and Ryan showed up on several plays Sunday against Minnesota.

With Dennard's health status still up in the air, though, it's worth noting he traveled with the team and warmed up on the field prior to Sunday's game. Ryan could have the opportunity to force the coaching staff to make some difficult decisions when Browner is eligible to play. Despite the aforementioned big plays, Ryan was still up and down Sunday, later getting burned by Patterson on a 3rd-and-3 catch before the end of the half.

### Jonesing for more

While his blocked field goal for a touchdown in the second quarter will be remembered as the turning point of Sunday's game, Chandler Jones made a major impact for start to finish after a quiet performance in Week 1.

The Patriots played more of a 4-3 front against Miami, forcing Jones to play closer to the line of scrimmage as more of a defensive end, where he was easily absorbed by bigger, stronger offensive tackles. Jones returned to his usual role Sunday as a defensive end/outside linebacker hybrid, allowing more room to maneuver, which led to a team-high eight tackles and a pair of sacks, reminiscent of his preseason breakthrough against Carolina.

Jones sliding back into his comfort zone pushed nose tackle Vince Wilfork for a few snaps on three-man fronts with Sealver Siliga at the nose depending on whether or not Jones lined up with a hand on the ground. Chris Jones getting more time at defensive tackle and flexing out as a 3-4 end also allowed Rob Ninkovich to play a hybrid role similar to that of Jones as a combo defensive end/outside linebacker.

The wrinkles made New England more effective against the run, limiting Minnesota to just 54 yards on the ground, which was undoubtedly due to the absence of Adrian Peterson as well, and also generated more pressure on the quarterback. The Patriots sacked Cassel six times and finished with eight total quarterback hits, a far cry from Week 1 when they barely laid a finger on Ryan Tannehill (one sack and zero additional quarterback hits).

### Taking what's theirs

Lost in the shuffle of New England's Week 1 loss to Miami was the fact the Patriots forced three turnovers (two fumbles and an interception) that led to 17 points. They did it again Sunday in Minnesota, scoring 17 points off four turnovers — all interceptions. Through two weeks, the Patriots are a solid plus-5 in giveaway/takeaway ratio, on pace to eclipse last year's plus-9. For reference, the Seahawks led the league in 2013 with a plus-22.

With seven takeaways through two weeks, the Patriots are nearly a quarter of the way to matching last year's total of 29.

### Zero impact

The Patriots not only held Patterson to just 56 receiving yards — albeit a team high on a dismal afternoon for the Vikings — they also limited his effectiveness at the kicking game thanks to Hapner Gostkowski drilling four touchbacks on kickoffs. Patterson scored two touchdowns on kick returns of more than 100 yards last year,

## RANDOM THOUGHTS

### ROGER BROWN

Penalties continue to be a problem for the Patriots. New England was penalized nine times for 100 yards in the loss to Miami, and picked up 15 penalties for 163 yards in the victory over Minnesota. The Patriots have been offside on a kickoff in each of their first two games.

The Vikings may have the best helmets in the NFL.

Looking forward to getting a longer look at rookie center Bryan Stork. New England's fourth-round pick out of Florida State. Stork got his first taste of an NFL regular-season game when he played in the second half against Minnesota.

### MICHAEL PARENTE

Even though Rob Gronkowski still isn't an every-down threat just yet and Alfonzo Dennard is now out with a shoulder injury, the Patriots have to feel pretty good about their health after watching bodies fall in Week 2, among them Redskins quarterback Robert Griffin III (leg), Redskins receiver DeSean Jackson (shoulder), Dolphins running back Knowshon Moreno (elbow) and Bengals wideout A.J. Green (toe), all of whom were hurt during Sunday's games.

It's been a few years since the NFL moved the spot of a kickoff from the 30 to the 35-yard line and the lack of game-breaking kickoff returns and/or bone-crushing hits on said returns really sucks the life out of the game. It's bad enough as it is that more than half of every long return is inevitably negated by a penalty. With so few opportunities these days, the Desmond Howards and Jacoby Jones of the world will soon become extinct.

One of the interesting prop bets of the day had to be the over/under on how many times the CBS crew of Ian Eagle and Dan Fouts mentioned Adrian Peterson's arrest for child abuse. Whoever bet the under won big. It was barely mentioned, despite the fact it was a major subplot on the field since Peterson's absence left the Vikings decimated in the backfield. Surprisingly, one of the few times either Fouts or Eagle brought it up was in the fourth quarter with the game out of reach.

but only had two opportunities Sunday, the first a 23-yard return on a kickoff five yards into the end zone. His second attempt was wiped out by an offside penalty on New England. Gostkowski aimed the rocket Gostkowski toward Adam Thielen to keep it out of Patterson's hands. ... Sunday was Belichick's 20th career win. He is now the sixth NFL coach to reach that mark. "Felt good," Belichick said. "They all feel good." ... The last blocked field goal for a touchdown return by New England was in 2009 when Patrick Chung blocked the kick and Kyle Arrington returned it for the touchdown. ... With more emphasis on the running game Sunday, tight end Rob Gronkowski played on only 28 of 67 offensive snaps. He's still working his way back into the mix following offseason knee surgery and has eight catches through two weeks. **PPW**