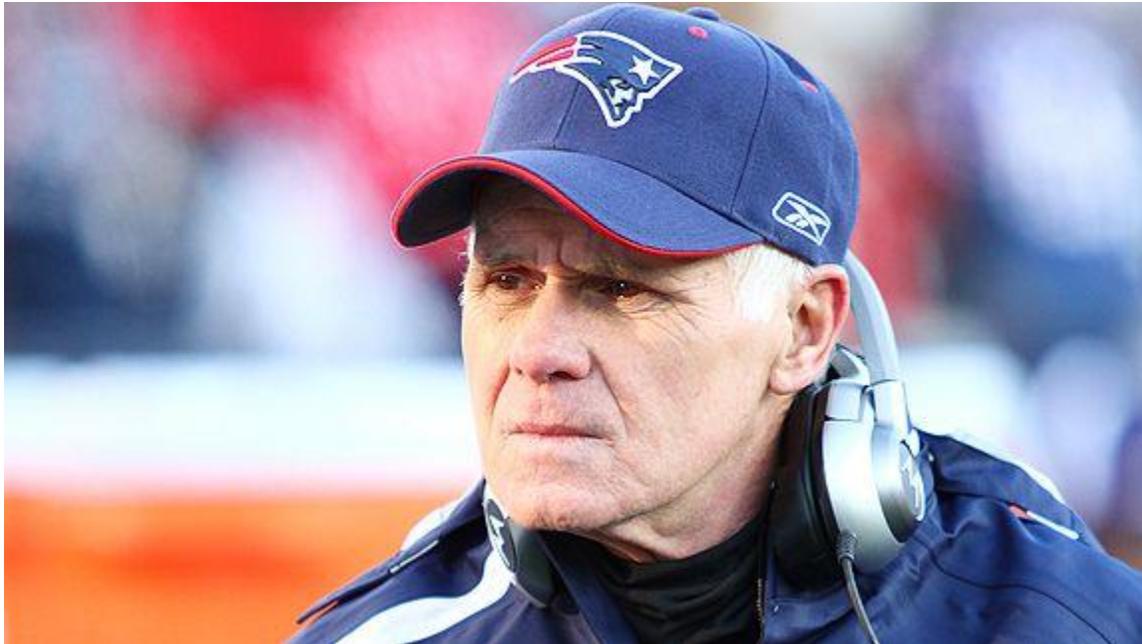


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O-line coach is Pats' unsung hero

Dante Scarnecchia's methods are tough, and his linemen are even tougher

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Jerome Davis/Icon SMID Dante Scarnecchia's offensive line has weathered personnel changes, but one thing is constant: Tom Brady has time to throw.

The best team in football right now has a secret weapon. Yes, I'm talking about the [New England Patriots](#), but no, I'm not talking about [Danny Woodhead](#). Everybody knows about him by now.

In a season that may ultimately go down as the best performances ever by a pair of future Hall of Famers in head coach Bill Belichick and [Tom Brady](#), it is the offensive line that has allowed Brady to flourish even though he lacks elite weapons around him. The man behind the scenes who makes the Pats' line go, and has for a long time, is veteran offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia.

I worked under nine different offensive line coaches during my seven years in the NFL, and Scarnecchia was the best of them all. That's saying a lot, considering I had the opportunity to play for trench legends like Jim McNally and Joe Bugel. It's even more surprising when you consider the fact that I don't agree with some of the things Scarnecchia believes in schematically and didn't particularly care for his negative reinforcement motivational style.

Yet the only word that comes to mind when I think about Scar (as he is known inside the Patriots' facility) is respect. He is unrelenting in his demand for excellence from his charges, and

no group in the league will ever be tougher both mentally and physically. He simply won't allow it. The Pats' offensive line is not stocked with exceptional individual talents. Left guard [Logan Mankins](#), back in the fold since the Cleveland game after a contract dispute, is probably the only player in the top five in his position. Yet, as a group, there is no unit in the NFL playing any better right now. The Pats' O-line has allowed only 21 sacks this season despite the fact that New England puts the ball in the air early and often every week. The O-line also has helped former undrafted free agents Woodhead and [BenJarvus Green-Ellis](#) rush for 5.2 and 4.3 yards per carry, respectively.

But don't just take my word for it.

"He's the best coach I ever had," said one NFL offensive lineman who has suited up for three different teams during his career. "When I was there, it was clear the entire group respected and trusted him. His individual period was by far the toughest I was ever a part of, and I think that helps build the mental toughness it takes to overcome adverse situations."

Ah, yes. Scarnecchia's dreaded individual period. Individual periods are the drills in which position players work solely amongst each other before running plays with the rest of the group on their side of the ball. Scarnecchia's was not fun and by far the hardest I ever had, as well. It was nonstop and left all of us out of breath and fatigued by the time it was over. But man, were we in great shape.

It's not just his individual period. Scarnecchia never lets his players rest once their feet hit the grass. He maximizes every possible minute of time on the practice field. For example, a lot of teams either allow the offensive linemen to rest or have a blitz walk-through with their helmets off during special-team periods. Not Scar. Special-team periods are when the Pats work on the timing of their patented screens, which effectively means it turns into yet another conditioning period for his guys.

Despite the demanding gruff exterior, Scarnecchia does have a softer side. He has been known to invite the offensive line to his beach house over the summer for dinner with their families. Ultimately, he comes across as the military superior who is extremely hard on his troops even though deep down he really cares about them, which makes perfect sense when you consider that he spent time as a sergeant in the United States Marine Corps.

So you can keep talking about Brady, Belichick and even Woodhead, and rightfully so. Just make sure you mention Scarnecchia, as well, even though he would probably just as soon wish that you wouldn't.