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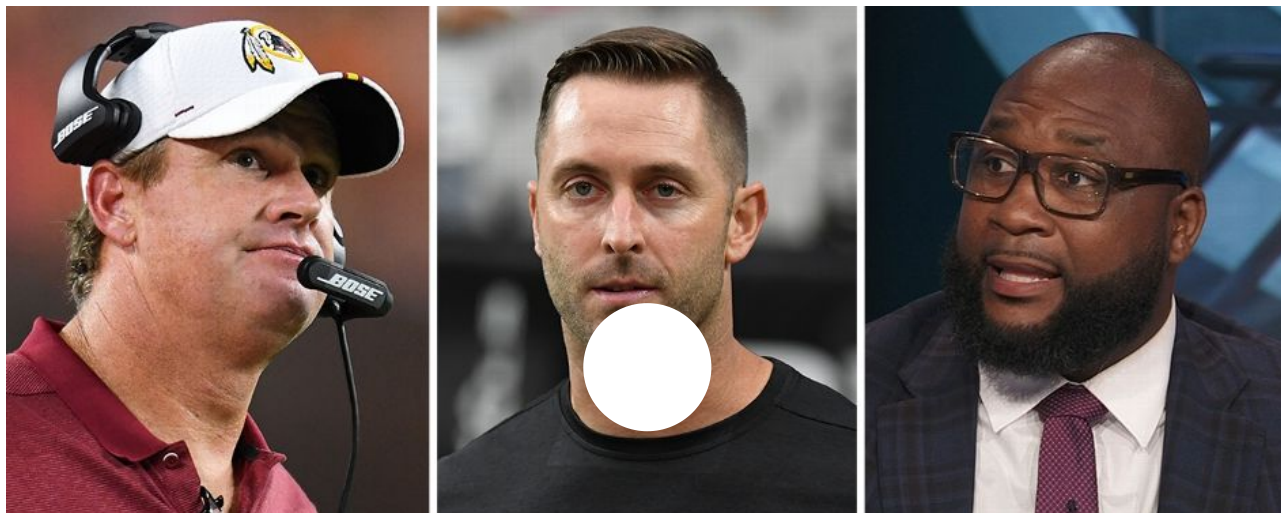
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EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

Ranking NFL coaches who could get fired with disastrous seasons



Ryan Clark explains why Jay Gruden will be under pressure in Washington, while Marcus Spears says Kliff Kingsbury will have to prove himself and improve Arizona's offense. (1:57)



Brian Burke
ESPN Analytics

Aug 20, 2019

Continuing a tradition that we began two years ago, we've taken a data-driven look at which NFL head coaches are sitting on the hottest seats entering the 2019 season.

We're not predicting which coaches will be fired; that involves two separate factors in how hot each seat is, and the fortunes of each team in 2019. Instead, we isolated the first factor -- the heat under all 32 seats -- by assuming they will all have the same losing season. Specifically, we presupposed every team would finish the year 4-12, and then asked our analytical model to make a projection on the fate of each coach.

Just as before, we trained our model using Pro Football Reference's data on all NFL coaching tenures since 1979. Unsurprisingly, the most important factor is the team's record from the present season, but there are a number of other

factors that interact with each other within the model. [Click here to read more about our methodology.](#)

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We've tested the model against every season for the past 40 years, and it's correct 80 percent of the time when using a cutoff of more than 50% predicting a firing and less than 50% predicting retention. At the end of last season, the model was accurate on four of the five most likely coaches to be replaced. Time ran out for Todd Bowles (73%) with the [New York Jets](#) after three straight losing seasons. Steve Wilks (61%) was let go after a single two-win campaign for the [Arizona Cardinals](#) in 2018. After defying the model's predictions for years, Marvin Lewis (60%) saw his long tenure with the [Cincinnati Bengals](#) finally come to a close after three straight losing seasons. Dirk Koetter (54%) was replaced by the [Tampa Bay Buccaneers](#) following two down years. Only the [San Francisco 49ers'](#) Kyle Shanahan (54%) survived among the model's top five. Much of the blame for 2019's weak record could be blamed on the injury to quarterback [Jimmy Garoppolo](#).

EDITOR'S PICKS



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The other coaches replaced after last season were Adam Gase (39%) with the [Miami Dolphins](#) and Vance Joseph (38%) with the [Denver Broncos](#). Gase's seven-win 2018 season wasn't enough to save his job, and Joseph's one-win improvement over 2017 ended his tenure after two seasons.

These are the hottest seats entering 2019, assuming a four-win season:



1. Sean McDermott, [Buffalo Bills](#)

Chances of being fired: 73%

A four-win season would mean two consecutive years of steady decline for the Bills after their first playoff appearance in nearly a generation in 2017, which was McDermott's first season in charge. Young quarterbacks are expected to make a significant jump in their second full season, so if the Bills' offense stumbles in 2019, much of the blame probably will be laid at the feet of the coaching staff, not second-year quarterback [Josh Allen](#).

Although not part of the model, the league has seen coaching changes salvage the early careers of [Mitchell Trubisky](#) in Chicago and [Jared Goff](#) in Los Angeles, so that will be on the minds of Buffalo's decision-makers.



2. Doug Marrone, [Jacksonville Jaguars](#)

Chances of being fired: 71%

Marrone's situation is similar to McDermott's, as he's entering his third full season and has seen his team's fortunes decline from making the playoffs in his first season. Another season headed in the wrong direction, especially with a talented roster and an expected upgrade at quarterback with [Nick Foles](#), would make a fourth season unlikely.

The only distinction the model sees between Marrone and McDermott is that Marrone had a better postseason run in 2017.



3. Brian Flores, [Miami Dolphins](#)

Chances of being fired: 67%

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Gone are the days when NFL coaches were given at least two years to prove themselves, if they even existed at all. The list of one-and-done coaches continues to grow and now includes Wilks, who was fired after a single season in Arizona.

Ironically, Flores inherits Wilks' quarterback, [Josh Rosen](#), who struggled behind a poor offensive line last season. Because of that situation, I would take Flores' 67% estimate with a grain of salt. But part of the reason that number is so high for a first-year coach is that Miami won seven games in 2018 -- good for second place in the AFC East -- so the expectations in the model might be a little higher for him than new coaches who join teams residing at the bottom of the standings.



4. Mike Vrabel, [Tennessee Titans](#)

Chances of being fired: 66%

Vrabel's situation is unusual in that he took over a team that won a playoff game in 2017. Last season, the Titans were able to match 2017's regular season win total of nine but missed out on a playoff berth.

A four-win campaign in 2019 would be a deep disappointment for Tennessee and a sharp fall from the team's recent baseline.

A second straight year of slippage for the Vikings could spell the end for Mike Zimmer in Minnesota.
Brace Hemmelgarn/USA TODAY Sports



5. Mike Zimmer, [Minnesota Vikings](#)

Chances of being fired: 66%

Zimmer, entering his sixth season leading the Vikings, has enjoyed some significant success, but his team has been inconsistent. A very poor 2019 would mean a second straight season of steep decline for a team that was nearly championship caliber in 2017.

Unsurprisingly, consecutive years of decline seem to be a key predictor for a coach being fired. I can tell you from our [pass block win rate metric](#) that Minnesota's most glaring need is along the offensive line. The team invested a

lot of resources into free-agent quarterback [Kirk Cousins](#) last offseason, so the heat is on the coaching staff to help make that pay off. Zimmer, whose background is on defense, will need to find the right formula to improve his offense.



6. Jon Gruden, [Oakland Raiders](#)

Chances of being fired: 61%

With all due apologies, our model does not know about 10-year monster coaching contracts, so it's unlikely Gruden loses his job after a second four-win season. But it is instructive to know that if he had a contract similar to most other coaches, he'd probably be let go.

Last year's sequence of unpopular personnel decisions would usually turn up the temperature for him, but he has the luxury of thinking long-term, so he should have time for the Raiders' recent draft haul to develop.



7. Jay Gruden, [Washington Redskins](#)

Chances of being fired: 61%

Just a half percentage point behind his brother is the other Gruden, who has finished between 7-9 and 9-7 in each of the past four seasons. Last season's losing record can be forgiven, though. By season's end he was down to his fourth starting quarterback, [Josh Johnson](#), after a run of injuries. [Gruden admitted in May](#) that he won't be back unless he makes the playoffs this season.



8. Bill O'Brien, [Houston Texans](#)

Chances of being fired: 56%

Peyton's Places

To celebrate 100 years of pro football, Peyton Manning travels the country to see the people and places that made the NFL the NFL.

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This is a hard one to explain. O'Brien is only one season removed from 11 wins and an AFC South title, so one bad season isn't going to turn the tide against him. But that's just it -- expectations are what matters. His roster is talented, so a precipitous drop to four wins would raise questions about his tenure.

Unlike other coaches coming off playoff appearances, O'Brien doesn't have the same pedigree of success that would otherwise guarantee his job. The turbulence in the Texans' front office counts against him in our model, which considers only whether the current general manager (or de facto GM) who hired each coach is still in place. In this situation, however, O'Brien seems to be the senior authority in Houston.

Lukewarm seats

No coach is completely safe, especially after a down season for his team. Most coaches not noted above fall in the 30% to 50% range in this exercise. Pete Carroll ([Seattle Seahawks](#)), John Harbaugh ([Baltimore Ravens](#)), Jason Garrett ([Dallas Cowboys](#)) and Ron Rivera ([Carolina Panthers](#)) are notable coaches in that range. These are cases in which a long tenure can start to count against a coach, especially with inconsistent success in recent seasons. They each have distinguished résumés but might want to consider updating them in the event of a disappointing season in 2019.

Pete Carroll's past Super Bowl success might not matter if the Seahawks go into a tailspin in 2019.
Ted S. Warren/AP

The next most vulnerable group tends to be all of the first- and second-year head coaches. The safest coaches are the ones you'd expect -- Sean McVay, Doug Pederson, Sean Payton (who reset his clock with a strong 2017 and even stronger 2018), Bill Belichick and Mike Tomlin. Even that group is given a 10% to 20% chance by our model. It might seem crazy, but there are more than a few examples of coaches fired with relatively stellar records. Jimmy Johnson of the Cowboys and Marty Schottenheimer (of multiple franchises) are the most prominent.

As always, every case is unique, and there are important aspects of each that even a sophisticated mathematical model can't consider. You can think of this exercise as a measure of how unexpected or unprecedented it might be to replace a head coach given his résumé.

Methodology

While the team's record is obviously of critical importance to whether a coach is fired, here are the other factors taken into account by our model:

- The degree of decline or improvement from the previous season -- this is almost as important in our model as this year's record. The fact that GMs and owners are much more likely to pull the trigger after a team fails to meet expectations is hardly surprising, but it's important to note that a coach who goes from 3-13 to 5-11 is less likely to be fired than a coach who slips from 9-7 to 5-11.
- The next most important factor is the coach's long-term record with the team, represented by his rolling average winning percentage for the past two to five seasons.
- Playoff success matters. The model looks at how long it has been since a coach made the playoffs, and the number of seasons since a playoff victory. The recency of a playoff appearance appears slightly more important than that of a playoff win.
- Did the current GM hire you? The thinking here is that a general manager (or whoever has the hiring and firing authority) is more likely to cut ties with his predecessor's coaching hire. Coaches generally have a 25% chance of getting fired when working with a GM who didn't hire him, as opposed to 18% when the current GM is the one who did.
- Tenure has an impact on the model, but not in a straightforward way. Whether you've been the coach for a long time or you just arrived, the data still relies on a combination of other factors to determine whether your seat should be hotter.
- I also included Super Bowl appearances/victories as factors, but they turned out to be the least important. Coaches with a Super Bowl appearance or victory on their résumé aren't given much extra slack.

Grading Cam Newton's move to the Patriots: Little risk, huge potential and a new-look Patriots offense



Adam Scheffer breaks down how the Patriots managed to strike a deal with former MVP quarterback Cam Newton. (2:18)



Bill Barnwell
ESPN Staff Writer

9:10 PM PT

In the end, [Cam Newton](#) and the [New England Patriots](#) made [too much sense for each other](#). In a league in which every other starting quarterback opportunity was full, the Patriots gave the former NFL MVP his only realistic chance of being a Week 1 starter on a competitive team. And while I don't doubt that the Patriots still believe [Jarrett Stidham](#) is capable of being a starter at the NFL level, the chance to acquire the 2015 MVP when the alternatives were Stidham and [Brian Hoyer](#) was always going to interest coach Bill Belichick at the right price.

We might never know whether Belichick delayed the timing of the Newton signing to coincide with the [news that the Patriots had lost a third-round pick from the latest in their series of league investigations](#), but by the time we get to September, it won't matter. New England might have come away with the bargain of the offseason by [agreeing to terms with Newton on a one-year deal](#), reportedly for the league minimum. Newton also can [reportedly make up to \\$7.5 million in incentives](#), before he would presumably be able to hit the market again under far better circumstances in 2021.

Jump to [the grade for the deal](#)

The facts about Newton's post-MVP career

To start, there's very little risk here for the Patriots. They have only about \$1.8 million in cap room, so depending on how the incentives are structured, they might need to create additional space to get Newton under contract. They can achieve that by extending guard [Joe Thuney](#) or cutting someone such as [Rex Burkhead](#), [Deatrich Wise Jr.](#) or [Jermaine Eluemunor](#). If Newton gets hurt or isn't able to beat out Stidham, New England would presumably be out only about \$1 million. When you consider that the organization paid [Antonio Brown](#) more than \$9 million for [one game last season](#), you can see just how little the Patriots have to lose by adding Newton.

EDITOR'S PICKS



[Patriots can't lose with incentive-laden deal for Cam Newton](#)



[Cam Newton signing with Patriots: NFL players react on social media](#)



[Cam Newton fantasy football outlook and projection as a New England Patriot](#)

Of course, that's the \$7 million question. If we knew that Newton was healthy, there's little chance he would be available in the market for the league

minimum. He hasn't been healthy for a regular-season snap since the first half of 2018, and with the [coronavirus rampaging](#) through America this spring and summer, no team has been able to get Newton in for a workout or a physical. It was going to be impossible for a team to commit to him as its starter on significant money, even if he is a better option than someone like [Nick Foles](#) or [Gardner Minshew](#).

The chances of a healthy -- or at least much healthier -- version of Newton showing up for the Patriots this season are much better than some would suggest. The idea that he hasn't been a valuable quarterback since his 2015 MVP campaign is a product of selective memory. Let's take a quick look back through recent history to explain why I'm optimistic.

Newton wasn't very good in 2016, when an injury-riddled [Carolina Panthers](#) team fell from 15-1 to 6-10. His line was beaten up by injuries, and his top wide receiver was [Kelvin Benjamin](#), who is now out of football. The [Denver Broncos](#) laid waste to Newton in their Super Bowl rematch in Week 1, and he would eventually miss time with a concussion before returning to the field. He finished 25th in QBR that year at 47.1, falling just below then-[Miami Dolphins](#) starter and recently successful reclamation project [Ryan Tannehill](#) at 48.6. (If you think Newton was done because of his injury history, consider that Tannehill tore an ACL at the end of that season, did it again the following offseason, missed time with a capsule injury in his shoulder in 2018 and still earned a massive contract after getting a chance to play in 2019.)

In 2017, while Newton didn't return to his MVP form, he was still a useful quarterback. Despite losing [Greg Olsen](#) for most of the season and general manager Dave Gettleman choosing to make a disastrous investment in left tackle [Matt Kalil](#), Newton finished the year 19th in QBR at 51.5. He was effective enough as a passer and runner to lead a Panthers team to an 11-5 record and a playoff berth.

In Week 4 of 2017, he delivered one of his most impressive performances of the season. The former Auburn star went 22-of-29 for 316 yards with three touchdowns and an interception while adding 44 rushing yards and a touchdown on the ground in beating the Patriots at Foxborough [33-30](#). Newton won his prior game against the Pats in 2013, as well. His combined line against Belichick has seen him post a passer rating of 128.2, while also carrying the ball 15 times for 106 yards. I don't think Belichick makes his decision based on two games, but the man knows how difficult a healthy Newton can be to stop.

In the hopes of keeping him healthy and building a more effective offense around the combination of his skills with those of running back [Christian McCaffrey](#), the Panthers made changes during the 2018 offseason. In came Norv Turner, who surprisingly installed a more modern offense than the one Newton ran under Mike Shula. The Panthers used their top two picks on wideouts in [DJ Moore](#) and [Curtis Samuel](#), although the latter also was injured. Olsen still missed time, and the offensive line was cobbled together as a result of injuries, but there was more around Newton than there had been over the prior three seasons.

Cam Newton threw just 89 passes last season before a foot injury caused him to miss the Panthers' final 14 games. Carolina released him in March. Ronald Martinez/Getty Images

Newton played excellent football through the first half of 2018. With Carolina sitting pretty at 6-2 in the NFC South, he was 10th in the league in passer rating (100.8) and 12th in QBR (63.1). Often one of the deepest average passers in football, he was given shorter passes to throw and magically improved his completion percentage to 67.3. The former first overall pick was averaging nearly four touchdowns for every interception and producing nearly 280 yards from scrimmage per game. He was [fourth on my midseason MVP ballot that year](#).

The [Pittsburgh Steelers](#) beat the Panthers [52-21 in Week 10](#). Pretty quickly, it became clear that Newton's right shoulder was a problem. He struggled to make throws with zip over the second half of the season, and while he battled through the injury before eventually sitting out in late December, the Panthers collapsed during the second half. He underwent shoulder surgery after the season.

It's important to make this distinction, because if you weren't paying attention to the Panthers last summer and into the preseason, you might have missed an important piece of information. By all accounts, Newton healed from that shoulder injury. One report from camp lauded [the return of his deep ball](#), which had gone missing as a result of the shoulder injury the prior year. He looked to be back on schedule to return as the Panthers' primary quarterback, and while I'm sure there would have been some growing pains, there was no suggestion that he was still being bothered by his shoulder when the next injury struck.

Newton suffered a [Lisfranc injury to his left foot](#) in a preseason loss to Belichick's Patriots. He sat out the remainder of the preseason before returning for Week 1, but [when I watched Newton play](#) against the [Los Angeles Rams](#), I

didn't see a quarterback who was struggling for velocity or arm strength. From how he was moving and how many passes he sailed *over* his receivers, it was clear he wasn't comfortable planting his foot. After the issue was even more obvious during a Thursday night loss to the [Tampa Bay Buccaneers](#) the following week, the Panthers shut him down. When the injury didn't heal with rest, the Panthers [placed Newton on injured reserve](#), ending his season.

While a Lisfranc injury can be disastrous for receivers, it's not typically a career-impacting injury for quarterbacks. [Matt Schaub](#) hit injured reserve with a Lisfranc injury in 2011 and returned to make the Pro Bowl the following season. [Taysom Hill](#) suffered a Lisfranc injury in college, and while it cost the BYU quarterback most of his senior year, he has been able to return and move just fine. Newton should be recovered from both the 2018 shoulder surgery and the 2019 foot surgery.

Is it possible Newton has simply taken too many hits and has grown brittle? I suppose, but we have plenty of examples of quarterbacks who suffered multiple serious injuries and were still able to rebuild their career. Tannehill, who is nearly a year older than Newton, comes to mind. Randall Cunningham dealt with an ACL injury in an era in which it was far more career-threatening and came back at 35 to deliver an All-Pro season for the [Minnesota Vikings](#). Steve McNair battled through injury after injury and was a Pro Bowl-caliber passer at age 32 and 33. I don't know whether Newton will get back to his old self, but it's premature to write him off.

1:53

How will Cam Newton fit with the Patriots? Dan Orlovsky breaks down how Cam Newton will be utilized with the Patriots, saying Bill Belichick and Josh McDaniels will find new ways to use his skill set.

What could the Patriots' offense look like?

A healthy Newton has to be considered the favorite to win the starting quarterback job in New England. Stidham was about to become the second player in league history taken after pick No. 100 to start for his team in Week 1 of his second season after not starting as a rookie. While the Patriots were optimistic enough about Stidham's chances to avoid making a more significant move before now, the most we can say about the 2018 fourth-rounder is that he represented something totally unknown.

Before the Newton signing, there was already evidence that the Patriots were going to change their offense. Even the most optimistic Patriots fan couldn't suggest that Stidham was going to be [Tom Brady](#). He wasn't going to have Brady's accuracy, experience reading defenses or ability to avoid turnovers. That was never going to happen.

What the Patriots did this offseason, instead, was build around a more run-heavy attack. They put the franchise tag on Thuney, meaning that the Pats are set to spend [nearly \\$28 million on guards this season](#), \$6.5 million more than any other team. They got back [David Andrews](#) after their starting center missed the entire season with a pulmonary embolism; signed fullback [Danny Vitale](#) to replace the retiring [James Develin](#); and then used a pair of third-round picks on tight ends [Dalton Keene](#) and [Devin Asiasi](#), both of whom are regarded as plus blockers.

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With Stidham, this offense would have likely looked something akin to a modern version of the attack the Patriots ran in 2001, when they had something closer to a 50/50 run/pass split. Brady's job was to convert friendly third downs and protect the football. It worked: The Patriots were [11th in offensive DVOA](#) and won a Super Bowl with a defense that was only 13th in DVOA. The 2020 Patriots should be much better than that on defense. That formula was going to be competitive with the [Buffalo Bills](#) for a division title even before adding Newton.

If Newton does win the job, the Patriots probably will build something closer to the offense he was working under during his time with Turner in Carolina. With the Panthers trying to get the ball out of Newton's hands quicker, the concerns about accuracy and efficiency that might have otherwise made him and the Patriots seem like a bad fit went away. Newton had just four interceptions and four fumbles over the first half of the 2018 campaign. That's an outlier given the rest of his career, but it's also the only time Carolina didn't have a healthy

Newton in an offense when the Panthers were expecting him to average 10 air yards per pass attempt.

You could also see the Patriots borrow concepts that have worked elsewhere. It wouldn't be shocking if they were to steal some ideas out of the Greg Roman playbook for [Lamar Jackson](#) and use heavy doses of motion to manipulate teams and create opportunities for Newton as a runner. New England has always been aggressive with trying to stay ahead of the offensive curve and attempting to build its offense around what is undervalued. In 2007, the team traded for Randy Moss and Wes Welker and incorporated a spread attack. Three years later, it drafted [Rob Gronkowski](#) and Aaron Hernandez, and the offense shifted into becoming 12 personnel. When Chip Kelly took hold with the [Philadelphia Eagles](#), the Patriots were one of the first teams to really emphasize pace and tempo, even before Kelly joined the league. The [Baltimore Ravens](#) might have beaten the Patriots to the punch, but Belichick isn't going to write off the league's most effective offense as a gimmick.

What it all comes back to for me is this: When the Patriots haven't been able to simply blow past teams with talent like they could in 2007, their core offensive concept has been versatility. Because they've had Gronkowski, Develin, [Julian Edelman](#) and a variety of versatile running backs, the Patriots have always been able to create a mismatch. They could go three- or four-wide and still have the blocking ability to run the football effectively. When they sent out 22 personnel and made it look like they were going to run the ball, they had the athletes to motion out or work off of play action and beat an opponent's base defense in the passing game. It's [how the Patriots won their last Super Bowl](#).

Last year, with Gronkowski retired, Develin injured and a replacement-level group of tight ends, the Patriots didn't have that ability to disguise their intentions with their personnel or the flexibility to shift from one concept to the other. They might have wanted to run the ball more effectively, but when [Sony Michel](#) was in the game, they ran it 67% of the time; only two players (who played 300 offensive snaps or more) were better indicators of whether their team was going to run the ball, and one of them was Ravens fullback [Patrick Ricard](#). When [James White](#) came in, the Pats threw the ball 81.8% of the time; only three other players were a more obvious tell. New England suffered both running and throwing the football.

Newton, the 2015 NFL MVP, could now be the successor to Tom Brady, who signed with the Bucs this offseason. Logan Bowles via AP

The Patriots didn't get Gronkowski back this offseason, but by replenishing at fullback and tight end, they were able to restore some semblance of versatility. By adding Newton to replace Brady, they've upgraded that versatility and added uncertainty at the one position where they didn't have it during the Gronkowski era. They were fine without Brady as a run threat given everything else he could bring to the table; but if Newton is healthy, he can give them a runner who can barrel through undersized boxes out of 10 or 11 personnel or someone who can take advantage as a passer when teams load up the box to stop the run. In that sense, he is less a replacement for Brady and more a replacement for Gronkowski.

The grade: A-minus

Having said all that, while the Patriots aren't incurring much financial risk by signing Newton, there is an opportunity cost that drops down this grade ever so slightly. Naturally, there's a chance he fails his physical, which would render this whole thing a waste of time while simultaneously jabbing at Stidham's confidence. If Newton stays healthy enough to soak up the majority of the preseason reps with the ones and then suffers a season-ending injury in Week 2, the Patriots will have wasted their time when Stidham could have desperately used those snaps.

Even if Newton does stay on the field and plays well enough to start, there's a chance this doesn't move the needle for the Patriots. If Newton is the 24th-best quarterback in football, they will probably go 9-7 and not be good enough to beat the [Kansas City Chiefs](#) in the playoffs, and they will likely move on from Newton after the season without having found their long-term quarterback. They would then enter next year with the same questions about Stidham and their future at the position, only with Stidham a year closer to free agency and the market much less likely to bear starting options.

1:33

The rise and fall of Cam Newton as a Panther Take a look back at the highs and lows of Cam Newton's time with the Carolina Panthers.

In that dream scenario in which Newton stays healthy and the Patriots compete for a Super Bowl, there's still some modest downside for the team. They were unable to convince Newton to sign a multiyear deal or get any sort of option on

him for 2021 if he excels as the starter. It's unclear whether the Pats will have the right to franchise him after the season if he does return to form. They'll be able to afford a tag for him, given that the Pats are projected with more than \$86 million in cap space, but if his camp negotiated a tag refusal as part of this deal, the Patriots won't have a lot of leverage in re-signing him.

This is an obviously smart move for the Patriots, even if it doesn't work out. Merely having Newton on their roster when he could have served as a high-upside backup for such rivals as the Bills, Ravens, Steelers, Chiefs and [Tennessee Titans](#) would have been worth what the Patriots are paying him. For the Patriots to add a starter with Newton's upside this late in the process is almost a cliché. This has a strong case to become the best free-agent signing of the offseason.