

Bruschi preparing for uncertainty

PATS LB HIRES BRAD BLANK TO REPRESENT AND COUNSEL HIM



By Bryan Morry

Tedy Bruschi is safe at home with his family, which all would acknowledge is most important after the Patriots star inside linebacker suffered what was classified as a "mild stroke" in mid-February. But with the draft fast approaching and the full-tilt, full-time fan favorite uncertain about his football playing future, the Patriots have to prepare to find a replacement.

Bruschi hired Boston-based agent Brad Blank last month to represent him moving forward in case some kind of settlement needs to be reached regarding Bruschi's salary and his financial and/or playing future.

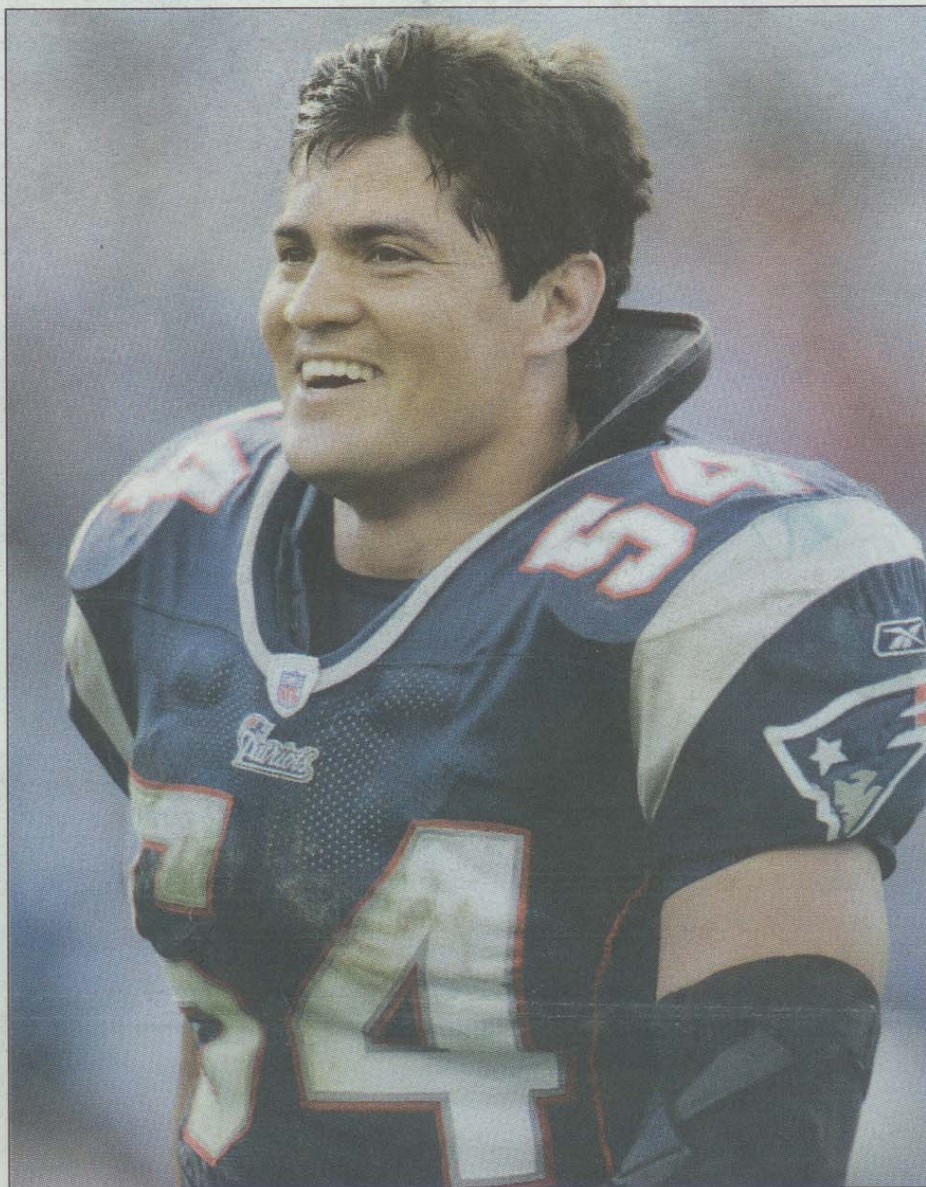
Blank told the *Boston Globe* that while no decision has been finalized, Bruschi is contemplating sitting out the 2005 season while he recovers from the stroke and the reported surgery to repair a hole in his heart that apparently may have contributed or even caused the stroke symptoms he felt a few days after returning from his first Pro Bowl.

Bruschi has represented himself in all contract negotiations since entering the league in 1996 and his decision to seek Blank's counsel shows that he is putting his ducks in a row in the event he walks away from the game either temporarily or permanently.

It's one thing to sit down and talk about money, but Bruschi's financial situation could change significantly if he doesn't play, and Blank is now in place because of his 25 years of experience as an agent and his knowledge of the collective bargaining agreement along with other legal issues, such as worker's compensation. Bruschi, while negotiating his own contracts, did not need to have a detailed knowledge of the CBA, but now needs to be clear on what he is entitled to under the agreement.

If Bruschi decides to simply sit out the 2005 season because of his medical condition, the Patriots have a couple of options in terms of his roster status.

The first is that he could be placed on the physically unable to perform list at the start of training camp and then either left on PUP or moved to injured reserve (IR) at some point. Either way, he would be guar-



THINKING IT OVER — Fan favorite and Pro Bowl linebacker Tedy Bruschi is contemplating sitting out the 2005 season and hired an agent to prepare for the possibility. PHOTO: DAVID SILVERMAN

anteed to receive his scheduled \$800,000 salary for 2005.

The second involves placing Bruschi on the non-football injury list (NFI) where the team would not be required to pay him all or any of his 2005 salary.

It seems unlikely, although that's pure speculation, that the Patriots would withhold Bruschi's pay given there was no known egregious behavior on the player's part that caused this medical condition. But Bruschi clearly felt he needed legal representation to protect his rights and advise him about other options or any litigation issues that might arise possibly independent of the team.

This is no easy decision since replacing Bruschi would come at a cap cost and the

team could use the relief to improve the roster. But electing not to pay Bruschi could be perceived as cold and callous in the court of public opinion given what he's accomplished and the rare loyalty he has shown.

The more likely scenario is that the Patriots place him on NFI and continue to pay him despite the fact that the \$800,000 would then count against the 2005 salary cap.

The Carolina Panthers did that in 2003 while linebacker Mark Fields was recovering from cancer, and the Patriots actually paid running back Robert Edwards bonus money it could have withheld back in 1999 after Edwards suffered a horrific knee

Bruschi's career by the numbers

| | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Years..... | 9 |
| Games played..... | 136 |
| Starts..... | 88 |
| Tackles..... | 768 |
| Solo tackles..... | 505 |
| Sacks..... | 24 |
| Interceptions..... | 11 |
| Touchdowns..... | 5 |
| Forced fumbles..... | 17 |
| Fumble recoveries..... | 4 |
| Postseason games..... | 15 |
| Postseason starts..... | 10 |
| Postseason tackles..... | 76 |
| Postseason solo tackles..... | 58 |
| Postseason sacks..... | 4.5 |
| Postseason interceptions..... | 2 |
| Postseason forced fumbles..... | 1 |
| Postseason fumble recoveries..... | 3 |
| Defensive captain.... | 2002, 2003, 2004 |
| Pro Bowls..... | 1 |
| Super Bowls appearances..... | 4 |
| Super Bowl championships..... | 3 |

injury playing in an NFL-sanctioned beach flag football game during Pro Bowl week in Hawaii. The team apparently took a sizable cap hit for doing so.

The Patriots could also hire Bruschi in some other capacity within the organization if his playing days are indeed over. But a front office job would almost certainly pay Bruschi far less than his playing salary calls for. That's one of many issues for which Bruschi is likely to rely on Blank's experience, legal background and negotiating skills.

In any event, this latest development should push the Patriots to aggressively pursue a replacement for their star middle linebacker, who may sit out 2005 before deciding on his long-term future.

Back in June, Bruschi signed a four-year contract extension that's worth \$8.1 million and included a \$3.5 signing bonus. If Bruschi retires, the unamortized signing bonus money would accelerate and count against this year's cap, leaving the Patriots with \$2.63 million in dead money for the player. His cap charge for 2005, if healthy, would be in the \$1.6 million to \$2 million range.

He could wait until June 1 to make any decision regarding retirement, and that would allow any cap acceleration to be spread out over two years leaving the club with a \$1.3 million hit in 2005 and again in 2006. **PFW**