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**RAVENS**

**Feature Clips**



**AFC Divisional  
Ravens at Bills**



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# Inside The Ravens' Defensive Meeting That Sparked A 'Dramatic' Turnaround

BALTIMORE SUN | DECEMBER 9, 2024 | SAM COHN

The meeting lasted about 90 minutes on a Tuesday in November. It included the entire Ravens defense. Walking out, Ar'Darius Washington felt a renewed sense of energy wash over the team. A turning point, perhaps?

"Excuse my language," the safety said, "but it was really like, '[Forget] everybody. [Forget] everything else that's going around. Let's play together as one.' That was the main focus, for sure."

Until that point, Baltimore's defense had sunk to the bottom of the league. They were 32nd in pass defense and the bottom 10 in points allowed per game. They were a maddening partner to the league's most prolific offense. The catalyst for the meeting was a narrow "Thursday Night Football" win over the Cincinnati Bengals, having given up 470 total yards and five touchdowns.

Defensive coordinator Zach Orr didn't sleep much. He was back at the Owings Mills facility early the following morning. Four days later was the open-forum meeting that, should the Ravens defense finish the year on a high note and prove this statistical turnaround isn't a fluke, could come to define their season.

There were a lot of hard truths shared between those four walls, linebacker Malik Harrison remembers. Guys were more willing to take accountability and hold others to the standard. Linebacker Tavarius Robinson said energy and accountability were the two main themes. Such meetings are commonplace but this one came with a greater sense of urgency.

"We had to do some deep soul-searching," Orr said. "And it was a long meeting."

"I think it was good — from a player and coach standpoint — that we expressed what we wanted to get done; they expressed how they felt, and we were able to come together and figure out solutions, because that's all we're about," Orr continued. "Everything that we do is trying to come to that solution, [and] I definitely think that meeting had a part in it."

For one, Orr changed the parameters of how his defense congregates. Where they used to focus their time trickling down film study and dialogue to positional groups, now everything has become group-oriented.

One or two guys being out of position on a given play can snowball the entire defense. Linebacker Roquan Smith has talked about that frustrating trait this season. Defensive end Brent Urban doubled down, saying one guy taking a risk to make a play can put someone else's job in jeopardy.

Each frustrating Sunday cast more doubt on the group's ability to turn things around. They often cited communication impeding execution. Hence, more panoptic film study.

"The meetings were kind of changed in a way that we're going through every single detail. It's not like we're passing things off to individual position meetings. We're all gonna focus on what each guy needs to do," Urban said, noting that's not common to this degree in the NFL. "And that's kind of brought about a bigger amount of accountability, too, just in terms of, we're all there hearing what each other's job is supposed to be. Because a lot of times it's set up, we're all in our individual position groups and that type of thing. [Orr] has done a good job of bringing us all together. I think that's made things more cohesive."

Orr took some onus, too. "It's not just them," he said. The first-year defensive play-caller asked what he could do better or if there was anything he could cut out to help solve why what they were doing in practice wasn't translating into games.

Over their first 10 games, the Ravens allowed an average of 25.3 points and 367.9 yards per game. Weeks 5 through 10, Baltimore's strongest defensive performance was holding the Washington Commanders to 305 yards. Over those six weeks, the defense's best day, in terms of total yards, was still worse than any game since the meeting that Harrison described as ushering in a "dramatic change."

The corner-turning stretch included three games giving up 21.7 points and 280 yards allowed per game. And of the 23 passing touchdowns scored against the Ravens defense, 22 of them happened before the meeting.

Humphrey, Smith and Kyle Van Noy were some of the vocal leaders mentioned. "I think for certain guys, that hits home more," Urban said, as it's a different voice from the coaches they hear harp on issues every day.

"Marlon, he was the one who said the energy thing," Robinson said. "It was big for him, just playing with that energy. ... When your boy makes a play run in there and hype him up. We all just feed off each other. I think it just makes us closer and makes us play with that swagger."

Humphrey picked off Steelers quarterback Russell Wilson in the back of the end zone days later. There was a little extra juice in his step as he got up. Robinson remembers everyone on the defense coming over to share in the elation. They're chasing more moments like that, he said.

That's part of the Ravens' defensive standard, which Humphrey admitted after the Bengals loss he felt like they lost. "Something has got to change," he said on Nov. 7.

Baltimore has four more games on its regular-season schedule before the scintillating lights of playoff football. Two of which will be against top-12 scoring offenses. It remains to be seen whether 90 minutes on a Tuesday in November truly rewrites the Ravens' season.

But walking out of that room, something felt different.

"For me," Washington said, "I'm thinking like, 'Damn, I need to do better. Imma go out there and let it out for these guys 'cause they're gonna do the same thing for me.' After that meeting, I'm like I'm gonna do whatever I can for the rest of the 10 guys knowing they're gonna do the same thing."

# Ravens Defenders Embrace Their Nigerian Heritage And Their Shared Bond

BALTIMORE BANNER | OCTOBER 15, 2024 | GIANA HAN

When they're not at work, Ravens players Nnamdi Madubuike, Odafe Oweh and David Ojabo can be found lounging and eating jollof rice together to the sound of Burna Boy singing in the background.

It's very chill, and it's very Nigerian — just how they like it.

But when it's time to go to work, they're not so chill anymore. Outside of the occasional dance break, they can be seen running extra laps together after practice or attacking reps and discussing how to get better. They're hardworking, aggressive players who take pride in their craft — and that's very Nigerian, too.

"Culture, pride — we have a lot of pride — confidence, music, love to dance, respect. ... The way we do things, it goes back to family, big on academics," Oweh said when describing what it means to be Nigerian.

And food — "We got the BEST food, man" — Ojabo added.

Their Nigerian heritage shapes them as men and as players. As they've come to embrace their culture and their true selves, this trio of Ravens hopes they're showing other Nigerian Americans — or immigrants or first-generation Americans from any culture — that they can be themselves in any environment, too. For two of them, that meant a name change, and it's already having an impact.

"I think it's now becoming cool to be African, cool to be Nigerian," said Chukwunonso "Vincent" Iweanoge, the chair of the Governor's Commission on African Affairs in Maryland. "So a lot of kids now more identify with Burna Boy and all the other stuff. ... And now you throw out people that also have made it, that answer to their [Nigerian] names. So that's helping their psyche to be proud of what their names signify and who they are."

Although they all ended up in Baltimore, breaking bread and sharing some of the same traditions, the three Ravens have had varied experiences with their cultural identities.

Ojabo was the only one of the three born in Nigeria, although his family moved to Scotland when he was young. He then moved to the U.S. without his parents and siblings to focus on his basketball career. At Blair High School in New Jersey, he found Oweh, who directed him to football and whose mother's cooking helped stem Ojabo's homesickness.

Oweh was born in New Jersey to Nigerian parents. Although his heritage played a huge role at home and at school, a younger Oweh was less inclined to be different. Instead of going by Odafe or Dafe, as he did at home, he went by his English middle name, Jayson.

"It took some time," Oweh said about getting used to being called Jayson. "But it was better than people saying oh-DA-fee or oh-doh-fay or OH-da-fay, botching it. When you're younger, you shouldn't be that impressionable, but you are."

It wasn't just Oweh who did that, though. He grew up in a diverse town in New Jersey, and he remembers lots of other students from different backgrounds who went by one name at school and another one at home. It took him maturing as he went through high school and college to become OK with being different and proud of his heritage in every way.

So, when he was selected by the Ravens at 31st overall in the 2021 NFL draft, he started going by his Nigerian name.

"It's so funny that this new season in his life, he made that announcement that he wants to go back to the name where it all began," his mother, Tania, told The Baltimore Sun at the time. "He may not understand it now, but it has some spiritual implications, also. And so it's a very exciting time."

When Oweh made that decision, one of his new Ravens teammates took notice. Madubuike, drafted the year before, went by Justin at the time, but he was always called by his Nigerian middle name, Nnamdi, at home.

Like Oweh, Madubuike is a first-generation American. However, unlike Oweh, he grew up in a much less diverse area, a suburb of Dallas. When Oweh met him, he said, Madubuike was not yet loud and proud about his Nigerian culture. Oweh himself was just delving into the idea of repping his heritage at the NFL level. But, through their friendship, Madubuike started on a similar journey.

And then, when the Ravens drafted Ojabo in 2022, he rounded out a trio that could all vibe together. Recently, the Ravens added Adedayo Odeleye, a British Nigerian pass rusher, to the practice squad. He said the other three made it easier for him to fit in.

"It's big," Oweh said. "It's just like we understand each other. So it's easier to come into that, too. ... I thank EDC [general manager Eric DeCosta] every time that he brought in David, because it made me be more comfortable in my culture and in just bringing it up."

After four seasons in the league, followed by a huge contract extension, Madubuike started thinking more seriously about the name he wanted to be known by. His mentors always told him to "keep it real," and he started thinking about what his "real" name is. His loved ones called him Nnamdi, making it his real name in his heart, so he decided to soft launch it on the nameplate above his locker during preseason.

Just before the 2024 season kicked off, he made it official, saying “It’s important to know where you come from and your roots.” He thinks his decision can help set a trend to embrace more ethnic names.

“I think it’s a good movement. If it’s really in your heart to do that, you should do that. ... Do you. I don’t want to judge,” he said. “But it was something that was in my heart.”

Little did he know how quickly he made an impact.

Iweanoge explained that many Nigerians of the Igbo tribe, like Madubuike and Oweh’s mom, or the Urhobo tribe, including Oweh’s dad, are Christians and have English names because they are biblical. Even outside the United States, it is common to have an English and a Nigerian name.

When Iweanoge, a Nigerian immigrant and principal at the Washington-based financial firm Havit Inc., saw the Madubuike news, he immediately shared it with his children.

“My daughter, who is a huge Ravens fan, was so proud because he is one of her favorite players, and she could identify with him,” he said. “Also, because she doesn’t have any English names, all her names are African.”

Like Oweh, Iweanoge’s children weren’t always thrilled about having such different-sounding names from their peers, despite growing up in a diverse area.

“Of course, the kids also had issues when they went to school that they didn’t want to be identified by their African names because it wasn’t cool,” Iweanoge said.

After moving from D.C., where he went to law school, to Prince George’s County, Iweanoge began working with local government to figure out how to get African immigrants more involved. He has helped establish advisory boards and proclamations, which are ceremonial recognitions, in multiple counties and at the state level.

On Sept. 10, Gov. Wes Moore declared September to be African Heritage Month in Maryland. The governor, whose maternal grandparents are immigrants from Jamaica and Cuba, was also excited to hear about Madubuike’s decision to change his first name.

“As the proud son of an immigrant,” Moore said, “I know how important it is for someone’s culture to be embraced.

“Here in Maryland, we celebrate the mosaic of the African diaspora and its rich presence in our state and the African immigrant community’s vital role in shaping our future — and that’s why we proclaimed September as African Heritage Month for the first time in the state’s history.

“We want everyone to know that, in our state, we don’t shy away from our diversity — we welcome it.”

“I think it’s a good movement. If it’s really in your heart to do that, you should do that. ... Do you. I don’t want to judge. But it was something that was in my heart.”

Nnamdi Madubuike, on his name change

As much as Iweanoge, Moore and their colleagues have done to further recognition and education, they’ve struggled to reach the younger generation and help them bridge the gap between what they see at home and what they experience at school, Iweanoge said. Government proclamations can’t force kids to think Nigerian culture is cool.

“But the name changing, actually, I believe, does more for especially the younger generation because of that sense of identity,” Iweanoge said.

Society is coming around, though. Afrobeats are gaining popularity. Non-Nigerians are discovering how good Nigerian food can be. And prominent athletes in the region are declaring their heritage on television — in addition to the Ravens, the Washington Commanders had three players wear Nigerian flags on their helmets last season as part of the NFL Heritage program.

For now, there are no more name changes in the works at 1 Winning Drive. Ojabo said he prefers to go by David, although he has a Nigerian middle name, Adakole.

Otherwise, Madubuike, Oweh and Ojabo are repping Nigerian culture just by being themselves and living simple lives. They praise God and order catered food from a suya spot in Owings Mills (they wish they could cook, but this is better), getting pounded yams, egusi, chin chin and puff puff. They listen to their music, with Asake, Wizkid and Ruger also in the playlist.

And they wouldn’t hate it if DeCosta continued to fill the pass rush with Nigerians. It’s worked out so far. Madubuike is coming off a 13-sack season and has a half sack and five quarterback hits this season. Oweh is finding his final step and has made 3.5 sacks with seven quarterback hits. And Ojabo is healthy and getting his burst back, starting the year with three quarterback hits.

“It’s kind of like just a cherry on top,” Ojabo said. “That little chemistry we have, we can take from off the field and bring it on the field and, most importantly, just have fun with it.”

# How A Popular Netflix Miniseries Sparked A Ravens Obsession

BALTIMORE SUN | **DECEMBER 23, 2024** | BRIAN WACKER

Four years ago, “The Queen’s Gambit” — a Netflix miniseries and coming-of-age drama about protagonist and orphan Beth Harmon’s obsession to become the best chess player in the world — shot to popularity for, among other things, its escapist entertainment that explored personal struggle and triumph.

It also ended up sparking what has become something of an obsession within the Ravens’ locker room.

Which is why, on any given day, left guard Patrick Mekari can be heard disseminating various strategies to left tackle Ronnie Stanley that have nothing to do with the practice they just finished or the next game on their schedule.

“Ronnie was definitely the worst for a while, but he’s gotten better,” said Mekari, whose looks are more bearded bouncer than Garry Kasparov. “The chess levels are insane, so I would not consider myself a good chess player, but I’m probably the best amongst the guys in here.”

Mekari’s lockermate, Pro Bowl center Tyler Linderbaum, overhearing the conversation, nods affirmatively, though he quickly points out that he beat Mekari the first time the two played.

“Once I saw the show, I downloaded the [Chess.com] app and I think I’ve played every day since,” Mekari continues. “I would watch shows on chess on YouTube religiously. I don’t do that as much anymore, but I find myself here and there watching a chess tutorial — how do you play this opening, how do you defend this opening, what’s the best move here.

“In the show, it was intriguing how much thought and how much work goes into a simple board game. Each move matters within the millions of moves there are, and there is one right move. There is a correct move, which is cool to try to find. Chess is different.”

It has also bonded — the games are a way to get away from The Game and they elicit plenty of conversation, too, with Mekari the ringleader.

In addition to the sixth-year veteran, Stanley and Linderbaum, tight end Charlie Kolar and linebacker Chris Board, along with a few staff members, have taken to playing against one another daily using the Chess.com app on their phones.

The games last anywhere from a few minutes — Mekari’s preference because it allows him to play more games which in turn allows him to become more familiar with formations and strategies — to all day, which allows more deliberate thinkers plenty of time to counter an opponent’s move.

“I’ve only been playing since training camp,” Stanley says. “I knew how the pieces moved, but I never looked at the different openings. I like just how far you can think ahead. There’s different ways of attacking, so many different variables and ways to go about it. Every game is different.”

Of course, he also could have been talking about football since the correlations between the two are obvious if not omnipresent.

There are patterns, offensive moves and defensive moves. The goal in both is to understand what the other is trying to do before they do it. And even some of chess’ strategies — absolute pin, X-ray, desperado, diagonal battery, interference, flagging — could be swapped in for footballs.

“It’s not just a game that rots your brain,” Linderbaum said. “There’s strategy to it, critical thinking, you’re trying to see one, two, three moves ahead. Just like sports.

“The other team’s defense is trying to find the best matchup and we’re trying to find the best match-up in terms of plays. You can find some similarities with the offensive coordinator vs. the defensive coordinator, too. Like football, you’re trying to figure out what they’re trying to accomplish.”

As a unit this season, the Ravens’ offensive line, which has three new starters, including Mekari playing left guard for the first time, rookie Roger Rosengarten at right tackle and tackle-turned-right-guard Daniel Faalele, has had their moments.

Though they struggled in a loss earlier this month to the Philadelphia Eagles, the group has made strides from its early-season struggles. In pass blocking, Pro Football Focus grades the Ravens’ offensive line the ninth-best in the NFL. In run blocking, they’ve slipped to 20th in recent weeks, but PFF rates them the eighth-best overall line in the league.

Linderbaum, coming off a Pro Bowl season in what was just his second year, has been perhaps the unit’s best and most consistent performer, with a 79.4 grade from PFF, fourth-best among all centers. Stanley, an All-Pro in 2019 who has battled injuries every year since until this one, is finally healthy and, in a contract year, has been a tour de force, not allowing a sack until recently giving up two after surrendering a career-high five last season.

Mekari had easily his worst game of the year against the Eagles’ talented defensive tackles with nine pressures allowed to draw a frightening 11.3 pass blocking grade from PFF, but has graded out at 64.5 or higher in 11 other contests (though his run blocking has rated slightly worse). Faalele, meanwhile, has graded similarly to Mekari, with Rosengarten slightly better, particularly in pass sets.

Behind them, Baltimore has produced the NFL’s top offense with 423.7 yards per game and is No. 3 in scoring at 30.1 points per game, which is perhaps why coach John Harbaugh is resolute about not shaking up the offensive line as he did earlier in the year.

“I think we’re pretty well set there,” he said. “I’m not down on anybody on the offensive line.”

Meanwhile, the chess games continue, during breaks, after practice and whenever there's free time.

"I'm happy to say that after the show, millions of people bought chess sets," actor Anya Taylor-Joy, who played Harmon in "The Queen's Gambit," cracked on "Saturday Night Live" a few years ago following the show's enormous rise. "And dozens of them actually learned how to play."

At least a few reside in Baltimore's locker room.

"It gets you thinking," Mekari said. "We compete so much physically; that's what we've always known. But in chess, it's, 'Can I just understand the position and be better than you at something not physical,' which is kind of cool."



# Reborn Ravens A Reflection Of John Harbaugh's Trust In The Program

SI.COM | OCTOBER 7, 2024 | ALBERT BREER

With everyone spent, and jubilation washing over the victorious locker room, Baltimore Ravens coach John Harbaugh stood in front of his team with a bunch of game balls to hand out.

That first ball went to head strength coach Scott Elliott. Sunday's marathon 41–38 win over the Cincinnati Bengals took place with temperatures in the 80s and the humidity that often accompanies the Cincinnati riverfront, with the Paycor Stadium turf baking under the sun. Going on the road to win this one wouldn't have been easy for Baltimore in regulation. It took a little (or a lot) extra, from just about everyone, to go another round in a classic AFC North heavyweight fight.

"The idea that we were going to be stronger at the end," Harbaugh told me over the phone on his way out of the stadium. "It was hot out. It was hot. This turf, October, it was 85 degrees, it was hot. We're going no-huddle. Our guys are puking. It was tough, and our guys executed in that scenario. It's the strength coach, but really it's giving a game ball to all the guys for the way they practice and train throughout the week."

As for that other game ball? Derrick Henry wouldn't even let Harbaugh hand it out.

In postgame, the coach mentioned to his star tailback, one of Sunday's heroes, that he'd be getting it after scoring his 100th career touchdown in the first quarter and hitting 10,000 career rushing yards in the second quarter. Only Jim Brown, Emmitt Smith, LaDainian Tomlinson and Emmitt Smith have reached those twin milestones as fast as Henry—Sunday was his 124th career game—and Harbaugh wanted to recognize it.

But the jackhammer of a tailback wasn't having it. Not on this day.

"He said, 'No, no, no. This is a team win. This is a team win. Don't do that,'" Harbaugh says. "He didn't want me to say anything about it. That's how he's been."

Five games into the season, it's really how all of the Ravens have been.

It would have been easy for doubt to creep in after back-to-back losses to start the season—one on the road to the Kansas City Chiefs, and the other at home to the Las Vegas Raiders—that followed last year's devastating finale in the AFC title game. Similarly, it'd have been easy for the Ravens to chalk up Sunday to facing a red-hot Bengals offense, with Cincinnati taking 10-point leads on three separate occasions in the second half.

Instead, Harbaugh's group kept swinging, and eventually, it was the Bengals who found themselves on the canvas. And when it was over, to Harbaugh, there were so many people, Henry and Elliott among them, that personified what it took to gut out his sort of win. The result should give the Ravens, reborn at 3–2, a puncher's chance at getting back to where they were a year ago—and maybe even further.

As Harbaugh sees it, what's happened over the past month is very much a story about people, and how the program he's helped establish over decades in Baltimore develops them at every level.

This year, in particular, was one in which the Ravens needed that machine to hum.

Mike Macdonald, Baltimore's young wizard of a defensive coordinator, landed the head coaching job in Seattle. Starting guards Kevin Zeitler and John Simpson left in free agency, and right tackle Morgan Moses was traded to the New York Jets—the three of them taking 24 years of NFL experience, and 60% of the team's starting line from the AFC title game, out the door. Former first-rounder Patrick Queen, who'd come into his own since pairing with Roquan Smith, left too, as did veteran pass rusher Jadeveon Clowney.

Other teams in that position would've scrambled to find experienced stopgaps. The Ravens effectively did the opposite, operating like a baseball team in love with the prospects it had coming up from the Triple-A club.

To replace Macdonald, Harbaugh promoted 32-year-old linebackers coach Zach Orr, once a player in Baltimore who had his career cut short by injury. Along the line, Harbaugh trusted the job to the late Joe D'Alessandris (who died at age 70 this summer), bringing along third-year guard Daniel Faalele and second-year guard Andrew Vorhees. He also had long-time utility man Patrick Mekari ready to go and believed offensive line coach George Warhop would have rookie right tackle Roger Rosengarten ready.

And on defense, Harbaugh challenged 2023 third-rounder Trenton Simpson to fill Queen's void, and young pass rushers Odafe Oweh and David Ojabo to replace Clowney's production, trusting that GM Eric DeCosta and his staff got more of these things right than they got wrong, which historically is a good bet.

In a certain way, it mirrors how the organization once gambled on Harbaugh, seeing something in a charismatic special teams coach that others might've missed.

So when things got tough in September, Harbaugh wasn't about to flip the script.

"I've been head coach for 17 years, and there are things I could have done better today," he says. "When you don't come out on top, it's real easy to start looking at that stuff and start saying this isn't going to work. If you believe in the person, or the people, and they're working hard and you think they have the ability to do it, you give them a chance and you keep sticking with them, usually, it works out—if they're high character people."

Which is what Harbaugh saw that others couldn't. A bad day for Orr against the Raiders mirrored Week 2 of Macdonald's first year as Ravens DC when Baltimore yielded 42 points and over 500 yards to the Miami Dolphins. Early struggles for the offensive line were due to three guys with one start between them adjusting to playing a ton of snaps. Similarly, new roles on defense would settle with time.

These things were always going to take a little time.

"You got to give people a chance," Harbaugh says.

On Sunday, it turns out, that went for everyone.

John Harbaugh's little brother Jim said earlier in the season that his favorite football word is stalwart because of what it represents—someone who is there, and can be counted on, no matter what. It's fair to say that the Ravens have more than a few of those players.

Some of the names the Ravens have come to rely on came up huge when it mattered most in Cincinnati.

Start with the spot Baltimore found itself in at the very end of regulation. Baltimore had battled back from deficits of 24–14, 31–21 and 38–28 in the second, facing a red-hot Joe Burrow and an even hotter Ja'Marr Chase. After a Houdini scramble touchdown throw from Lamar Jackson to Isaiah Likely cut Cincinnati's lead to 38–35 with 5:24 left, Burrow picked up the dagger, poised to finally drive a stake through the Ravens' comeback effort.

The first play, 19 yards to Chase. The second play, 11 more to Tee Higgins. The fourth play, another nine yards to Higgins, and another first down. Tick, tick, tick.

After a false start, the Bengals lined up for second-and-15 with 3:05 left, the Ravens down to one timeout. A first down would likely end the game. And it was there that, on this 10-catch, 193-yard, two-touchdown day for Chase, the Ravens would finally get the best of the Bengals' big star—with one of their bedrock players. Marlon Humphrey, the homegrown, three-time Pro Bowl corner in his eighth season, undercut Chase's route and somehow outmuscled one of the NFL's strongest receivers for the ball.

"They were having an unbelievable day. They're making catches on the sideline. They're making stop catches with corners draped all over them," Harbaugh says. "They're running good stuff, getting guys open, got the big play at the end of the half. And then all of a sudden, Marlon gets one."

Eight plays later, it was time for the Ravens to put their faith back in a guy who's been around even longer than Humphrey, and who's faced bigger questions than anyone early this year.

Because Justin Tucker's been so outrageously automatic over the years, the fact that he missed a field goal in each of Baltimore's first three games—in seven of his 12 previous seasons, he missed three or fewer the whole year—was cause for concern. But when it came time to decide whether to go for a fourth-and-6 from the Bengals 38 with 1:43 left, and no timeouts, Harbaugh sent Tucker out for a 56-yard field goal to tie it.

"That's just another example of what you're talking about. He goes out there and he drills it after all the adversity he's been facing," Harbaugh says. "That was a tough kick. You saw how tough it was later on the [Bengals] miss."

Harbaugh then brought up Mark Andrews's effort—another of his Ravens stalwarts—on a four-yard catch to get Tucker a little closer on the play before.

After that, it was time to talk about Jackson. The reigning MVP threw for 348 yards and four touchdowns, ran for another 55 and made a strong statement on who the Ravens are in how he reacted to his mishandling of a snap in overtime, one that looked like it had cost Baltimore the game.

He wouldn't throw another pass. But his demeanor set a steady tone.

"I just saw him staring straight ahead, just locked in," Harbaugh says. "He shows his emotions sometimes. I didn't see him get mad or anything. Just locked in, focused. There's something about this team. We'll see how it plays out, but they don't flinch. They keep believing."

In the following moments, one of the newest Ravens would give the rest of us a reason to join them in their belief.

After the game, I mentioned to Harbaugh what so many people have thought the past few years—if Henry ever was to leave Tennessee, there were few better fits in football than the physical, hard-running Henry and the tough-minded Ravens.

He responded with a story from the spring of 2016.

“Doing the draft, I was watching the running backs that year. I just fell in love. This guy should be a Raven. This should be our guy. This needs to be our guy. There’s just no way he’s going to fall to us,” Harbaugh says. “And he didn’t. So every time we played him, I’d look at him, with that ponytail sticking out the back of his helmet. The girlfriend you could never get.”

Harbaugh laughed. I mentioned how then-GM and Alabama legend Ozzie Newsome must’ve loved him.

“He was the pie in the sky for us,” Harbaugh says. “He was the high school girl that you never had a chance at.”

So, no one in Baltimore had to be asked twice when Henry became available this offseason. And after a bit of a slow start—he rushed for 130 yards on 31 carries over the team’s 0–2 run—Henry has confirmed that the fit many saw as obvious is very real. He’s amassed 442 yards on 54 carries through Baltimore’s three-game winning streak, averaging over eight yards per carry— with no carry more impactful than his last one.

The Ravens closed the Bengals out in the most Ravens of ways, taking a toss sweep left behind pullers and with 311-pound fullback Patrick Ricard leading the way down the sideline. It was the first play after Orr’s defense stiffened up after Jackson’s fumble to force a 53-yard field goal attempt that Evan McPherson missed, and it went for 51 yards to give Justin Tucker a 24-yard chip shot to win the game.

“Our perimeter blocking has been really, really good, at a high, high level all year,” Harbaugh says. “Maybe they packed in there a little bit, like they do for an inside run, and I think [OC] Todd [Monken] made a great call. It was hard sledding running the ball. It really was. They were playing good run defense the whole game. To hit that run right there was really massive.”

And it typified what Harbaugh’s starting to see in his team: one that’s pulling together.

He could see it Saturday night, too, at the team hotel. As he and his coordinators addressed the team, Harbaugh saw backs straight and eyes forward. “Every guy is staring holes through me,” he says.

That, as the team’s 0–2 start showed, doesn’t guarantee anything. But that level of engagement does give the Ravens a heck of a chance.

“I think it means you got a bunch of guys that believe in the right thing,” Harbaugh says. “We got the right kind of people in the room, high character people, which is what we really value. It’s just intentionality about doing things the right way on a given day. They don’t get caught looking left or right, being distracted by the road signs or what they hear. They hear it. They see it. But they keep their eyes straight ahead, look neither to the left nor to the right. We talk about let the Lord direct your path. They’re on their path as directed.

“O.K., the ball doesn’t come your way? We rush for a bunch of yards and you don’t get the ball? All they’re talking about is celebrating the blocks that they made in the team meeting on a Tuesday afternoon, roaring and clapping for each other for those blocks. That’s just joy to a coach.”

It also gave the Ravens enough to ride out an 0–2 start, and three separate double-digit, second-half deficits Sunday on the road. And a whole lot to build on.

# Mark Andrews, Ravens' New Franchise Leader In TDs, Is Driven To Be His Best Self

THE ATHLETIC | DECEMBER 18, 2024 | JEFF ZREBIEC

The time to engage Mark Andrews is early in the week. That's a known fact around the Baltimore Ravens' facility.

The closer it gets to game time, the less inclined the 29-year-old tight end is to small talk. He's neither rude nor ornery. There's just a force field around him that's hard to penetrate. Andrews' piercing stare and no-nonsense demeanor send a clear message.

The pleasantries can wait. There's a game to prepare for and distractions are unwelcome.

"Mark's just an intense guy," fellow Ravens tight end Isaiah Likely said. "Everything he does, he has a (purpose) for why he does it."

His teammates are in awe — and often amused — by Andrews' unwavering intensity. Some, such as standout safety Kyle Hamilton, watch how he approaches practices and meetings and try to emulate him. Baltimore players and coaches, past and present, view Andrews as a quintessential Raven, a guy whose personality and playing style perfectly mirrors the franchise he's long represented.

The mere suggestion that he's attained that status provokes a grin from a guy who doesn't smile easily.

"It couldn't be any better said," Andrews said last week. "I was born to be a Raven. The way we like to play football here, the style we play, there's no place in the world I'd rather be. I just want to keep on winning games for this team and start hitting our stride."

On Sunday, Andrews hauled in a 13-yard touchdown pass from Lamar Jackson, the first points in the Ravens' 35-14 rout of the New York Giants at MetLife Stadium. It was the 48th touchdown of Andrews' career, surpassing ex-Ravens running back Jamal Lewis to set a franchise record.

After he made the catch, Andrews immediately pointed to Jackson to acknowledge the quarterback's perfectly placed throw over the shoulder of a Giants defender. His teammates, wary of Andrews' enthusiastic headbutts, gave him a wide berth in the end zone.

"Nobody is trying to be the first one when Mark scores after the spike, because that's like the strongest headbutt that's going to happen the whole game," Likely said.

Andrews sprinted toward Jackson and the two celebrated with a leaping chest bump. It was a fitting gesture between two guys who were part of the Ravens' prolific 2018 draft class and developed an immediate chemistry. They've become kindred spirits on the field, bonding over their love of competition and their insatiable desire to win. There's a simple understanding between Jackson and Andrews that transcends X's and O's.

"Just get open," Jackson tells Andrews.

The how and the where depend on what Andrews is seeing on the play. They have a well-earned trust that they know what the other guy is thinking and doing. Improvisation is their superpower.

"I love the way he sees the game because it's very similar to mine," Andrews said of Jackson. "He loves to play football and have fun. Just get open. That's all that really matters to him."

Sometimes, Andrews doesn't even need to get open to get the ball. Against Philadelphia in Week 13, Jackson threw to Andrews when he was surrounded by three Eagles defenders in the end zone. The 14-yard touchdown throw had an 18.1 percent completion probability, according to NFL's Next Gen Stats. Andrews caught it anyway.

"Mark," Jackson said, "is that guy."

For the better part of seven seasons, Andrews has been Jackson's go-to target, the player he looks for on third downs, in the red zone or whenever the quarterback is in trouble. Andrews is a three-time Pro Bowler, but he's probably been under the radar nationally. Such is life when Travis Kelce, one of the best pass-catching tight ends in NFL history, is playing for an AFC rival. Only Kelce has more receptions among tight ends than Andrews since the 2019 season. Only Kelce and San Francisco's George Kittle have more receiving yards. Andrews, however, has the most touchdowns during that span.

From a team perspective, Andrews is already one of the most prolific pass catchers and playmakers — never mind just tight ends — in Ravens history. He ranks first in receiving touchdowns (48) and third behind Derrick Mason and Todd Heap in receptions (426) and receiving yards (5,371).

Playing one of the game's most demanding positions, Andrews hadn't missed extensive time until he cracked his fibula and sustained ligament damage in his ankle in a Week 11 game against the Cincinnati Bengals last year. He missed Baltimore's final six regular-

season games and the divisional-round playoff win over Houston before returning for the AFC championship loss to the Kansas City Chiefs.

Otherwise, Andrews has been durable, consistent and productive since arriving on the scene as a third-round pick in 2018 — the Ravens drafted another tight end, Hayden Hurst, in the first round that year — and immediately finding a place on a tight end-friendly offense.

“Just one of a kind,” Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. “He has the nickname ‘Man-drews’ for a reason, because that’s what he brings. He’s all ball all the time. You can just tell he thinks about it driving home, driving into work, probably while he’s sleeping. He probably dreams about it. That’s really who he is. As a coach, you kind of like that. You kind of like players that breathe it, and live it, and eat it, and want to be part of it and can’t wait to get back out on the practice field. That’s what it takes.”

Hamilton called the tight end the “pinnacle” of intensity, competitiveness and preparation. Hamilton makes sure to sit next to Andrews in meetings to get a close look at how he’s preparing for games. Just last week, Andrews gave Hamilton advice on how to combat the bumps and bruises that came up through the course of the season.

“He’s super intentional about everything he does,” Hamilton said.

Friendly and easygoing off the field, Andrews becomes a different person when he steps inside the Ravens’ facility. The intensity ratchets up even more when the Ravens hit the practice field.

Andrews has yelled at defenders, slammed his helmet and flipped off a referee. All of that happened during a training camp practice. He practices at full speed all of the time, treating July workouts as if he were an undrafted free agent trying to open some eyes on the coaching staff and make the team.

“You never want to take that fire away from Mark,” Likely said. “I feel like that’s what makes him go. That’s what makes the offense go.”

The Ravens’ decision-makers have talked about giving Andrews the occasional practice off, or at least limiting his reps. Andrews isn’t interested.

“An elite competitor,” offensive coordinator Todd Monken said. “I think that’s the best way to put it. Football is important to him. Everything we do is important to him — meetings are important to him, his body is important to him, how he plays. He’s a top, top-level competitor — one of the top competitors I’ve ever been around.”

Teammates joke with him, try to make him laugh and lighten up. Andrews is not humorless and is an extremely popular teammate, but relaxing is a tough sell.

“I take this very seriously,” Andrews said. “There’s always room for improvement. There’s nothing like being out there and playing football with the guys. If you don’t get those real looks in practice, if you don’t feel good, if you don’t feel exactly right, I think it’s hard to play well.

“Every week, if you don’t perform, it’s like, ‘What have you done?’ I’ve had bad games, I’ve had great games, but I’ve learned that you have to bring it each and every day, each and every week, each and every play. That focus is really what sets people apart.”

This hasn’t been the easiest of seasons for Andrews. He sustained a leg injury during training camp that has lingered. He got into a major car accident near the Ravens facility on Aug. 14 that Andrews believes could have been fatal if he hadn’t been wearing his seatbelt. Both instances provided mental and physical hurdles that Andrews had to overcome.

In the first four games of the season, Andrews had just six catches (on nine targets) for 65 yards. He was held without a catch in back-to-back games for the first time in his career. The questions began. Was Andrews no longer one of the go-to guys in the Ravens’ offense? Had he recovered from last year’s major injury and the training camp tumult? Had all the hits he’s taken over the years and the physical manner in which he plays or practices caught up with him?

There was even some talk, at least outside the building, that the Ravens should trade Andrews to feature Likely and Charlie Kolar more. That there was even that discussion still rankles Jackson, who has brought it up unsolicited on several occasions this season

“He got injured last year, came back, people were talking about this and that. ‘We need to trade Mark,’” Jackson said after Sunday’s game. “I didn’t forget that, and I know he didn’t forget that, and he’s just showing it each and every game.

“Like I said, I have a guy with me. He is a guy, right there, one of the GOATs to just play football ever, I believe. Just entering the league together, and from then to now, it’s like each and every year, we’re just trying to get better and perfect our craft from years previous, and I believe we’re doing that.”

Andrews acknowledged that there was a time earlier in his career that the criticism and questions might have bothered him. However, he handled this year’s slow start by just continuing to work and staying positive. It’s paid off, too.

Over the past 10 games since enduring the back-to-back no-catch contests, Andrews has eight touchdowns. He's also averaging just under 45 receiving yards per game. He's not getting the volume of targets that he has in the past, and his receptions and receiving yards at season's end will likely reflect that, but the Ravens have the top-ranked offense in football. They've also been the best red zone offense in football, partly because of Andrews' exploits.

"Throughout the years, I've been able to have a big impact, but there's also been some maturity within my life," Andrews said. "Last year, I went through some things with a big injury. I don't think it had anything to do with how I was playing. I was definitely doing some really good things to help the team win, blocking and in different areas. It was just kind of how things were at the time. It's not that we weren't trying to get me the ball or whatever. This is an incredible team with great coaches. I was just trying to find my rhythm being out of football for a while. I feel like I'm doing that."

Andrews was asked last week what continues to drive him, and what inspires the effort and attention to detail that he puts into the week. Never particularly comfortable talking about himself, Andrews stared forward and offered a quick response.

"I like to compete and I love this game," he said. "I've always wanted to be the best at my position. I've always wanted to become the best version of myself. I know how good I can be. I feel like I'm just scratching that. I'm always trying to get there and get better. And I want to win a Super Bowl."

# Fashion Provides Now-Healthy Ravens WR Rashod Bateman ‘Peace Of Mind’ While He Works For Bigger Offensive Role

BALTIMORE SUN | JULY 22, 2024 | BRIAN WACKER

*“The foot is healed, and it’s not a problem anymore thank God.” — Ravens wide receiver Rashod Bateman*

That wasn’t always the case for the enigmatic former first round draft pick, which perhaps explains why he has a LinkedIn page, titling himself “Creative at Without Lords.”

Under the “about” section, he lists:

- Receiver for Baltimore Ravens
- Owner-Without Lords
- Owner-Without Musik

In the “experience” section, it reads: *Clothing Designer-Without Lords-Full time.*

There was a time when most NFL players held jobs in the offseason to supplement their income. But that was decades ago, long before Bateman signed a two-year contract extension worth nearly \$13 million this offseason (though former Baltimore safety Matt Elam was once a shoe salesman at Finish Line in the offseason because he was interested in owning a sports retail store).

Bateman’s interest in other endeavors, meanwhile, stems from his love of fashion beginning at a young age combined with the scare of an uncertain future after injuries, including a Lisfranc surgery on his left foot, derailed most of his first two seasons in the league.

“Just having another outlet helps me with peace of mind,” Bateman told The Baltimore Sun. “When I got hurt, I didn’t know what it was gonna look like so I started to go really hard at [fashion]. It’s very important to me.”

Which is why he says he decided this offseason to launch his own clothing line with a small group of close friends, including former University of Minnesota teammate Demetrius Douglas, who gave up football during the pandemic in 2020 and eventually turned to studying fashion.

It’s also why Bateman spent part of his offseason — when he wasn’t training in the heat of Phoenix summer working out what he said was “three, four times a day every day” — at fashion week in Paris. The trip was coincidental, but it provided inspiration as much it did an opportunity to escape and unplug from social media, a chance to “get away” as Bateman told The Sun, for the often polarizing but gifted pass catcher Ravens fans are still waiting to break out.

Bateman, now entering his fourth NFL season, put up his best numbers as a rookie in 2021 — an at-best pedestrian 46 catches and 515 yards.

In 2023, he played essentially a full season (he was inactive for one game), for the first time but still finished with just 32 catches for 367 yards and a single touchdown. For his career, Bateman has just four touchdown catches.

In addition to his foot injury, which lingered into last summer, he also struggled mentally in the wake of the death of his grandmother in January of last year, followed shortly thereafter by the trauma of a teenage cousin who killed himself not long after finishing high school.

“It was a whole mental up and down for the past couple years,” Bateman said in an interview with the team’s website earlier this offseason. “I’m definitely better now.”

He said the trials and tribulations also made him stronger, and he added in the same interview that he didn’t do enough in practices last season to earn the trust of new offensive coordinator Todd Monken, who said this offseason that injuries were also a concern early in the year.

A lack of trust perhaps also explains his disconnect with quarterback and eventual NFL Most Valuable Player Lamar Jackson last season. Despite being open often, Bateman was targeted just 56 times in 2023, with only four games in which Jackson targeted him at least five times. His season high for receiving yards was 54 against the Miami Dolphins in Week 16 and in two playoff games he had just four catches for 41 yards on six targets, including just one catch for 2 yards in a 17-10 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs in the AFC championship game at M&T Bank Stadium.

Still, the Ravens are bullish on the 24-year-old, who also had one of the best separation marks in the league last year, according to Pro Football Focus.

In the offseason, with one year left on his rookie contract general manager Eric DeCosta signed him to a two-year extension, a move that surprised even Bateman. Coach John Harbaugh said that he expects the receiver will “take a big step” in 2024 and that Bateman is “expected to be a top receiver in the league for us.”

"I expect a tremendous year [from] him," Monken added. "We certainly could have found a way to get him the ball more."

Yet, the timing between Jackson and Bateman has yet to align even early in the 2024 process.

When Bateman was at some of the voluntary organized team activities in the spring, Jackson was not. When Jackson was there, Bateman was not. And while both were in attendance for last month's three-day mandatory minicamp, Jackson often threw elsewhere during the practices, with Bateman at times becoming frustrated before he saw an increase of targets and catches on the final afternoon.

Sunday, Bateman was on the field for the first day of training camp, but Jackson was out sick.

Jackson was still absent Monday, though Bateman had some nice plays on the rainy afternoon, including plucking one underthrown deep ball off the grass. He made the grabs in a new pair of gold cleats he's been sporting, a nod to his personal style and the product of shoe artist Salvatore Marcum, whose payment from Bateman has been helpful for the designer's ongoing cancer treatments.

"Obviously, this year is different than last year," Bateman said. "I'm healthy, 100%, and that's all I can say about it. I don't really want to keep talking about my injuries. It's past me. That's the past now, so we're onto bigger and better things now."

"It's not about me. I need to do what's best for this team — whatever that is [and] whatever my role is. I expect my role to be bigger, and I'm ready to take on that role."

What does he feel he needs to do in order to fulfill that promise?

"Continue to stay healthy," Bateman said, "and I've just got to go out and show consistency, so Lamar can trust me, so the team can trust me, so Todd Monken can trust me."

"I feel good. I feel good."



# The Sentimental Meaning Behind Ravens 'Joe D' Helmet Stickers

ESPN | NOVEMBER 7, 2024 | JAMISON HENSLEY

For the previous seven seasons, when Baltimore Ravens offensive linemen left the field after a drive, they would head to the sideline to hear a trusted voice. Then, Joe D'Alessandris would get down on one knee and instruct "my boys" on what needed to be improved.

When the Ravens host the Cincinnati Bengals on Thursday (8:15 p.m. ET, Prime Video), the unit will get together after each series at the same spot at M&T Bank Stadium, but their longtime offensive line coach won't be there.

D'Alessandris died of a heart attack at the age of 70 on Aug. 25. The loss of the man affectionately known as "Joe D" 11 days before the season kicked off devastated a group that was already undergoing the biggest changes on the team. Now, as the Ravens head into the second half of the season, the sadness of not getting to say goodbye to D'Alessandris has been replaced by the motivation to make him proud.

"His presence is always felt here," right tackle Roger Rosengarten said.

All they have to do is look at the wall behind their bench or glance at the back decal of their helmets -- where the "Joe D" is displayed prominently in white lettering, in white lettering, along with "Jacoby 12," which honors former Super Bowl star Jacoby Jones, who died on July 14.

Others see D'Alessandris' imprint in the old-school work ethic and toughness that has made the Ravens' offensive line the muscle behind a team that leads the league in yards per game (445.9). The line is clearing paths for Derrick Henry, the NFL's rushing leader, and blocking pass-rushers from quarterback Lamar Jackson, who is the second-favorite to win his third NFL MVP trophy.

When you ask the Ravens how D'Alessandris might react to their success, they smile.

"He would still be getting on us in the meeting rooms," Pro Bowl center Tyler Linderbaum said. "He certainly would. He'd be still impressed. He'd always be impressed with Lamar and the things he's able to do. He would love watching Derrick Henry run the football, just saying, 'Hey, we got to block for this guy. He's going to make guys miss.' But he's certainly going to find a lot of things that we can work on, that's for sure."

Hard work and discipline were instilled in D'Alessandris while growing up in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, a blue-collar town outside of Pittsburgh. When he was a teenager, D'Alessandris spent his summers with his father working at the steel mill. The grizzled workers taught him that one shot of whiskey got you ready for your long day of work.

It's no surprise hard work was the trademark of D'Alessandris' offensive lines over his 45 years of coaching. Under D'Alessandris, the Ravens' offensive line was the first group on the practice field and typically the last to leave it.

"He was a very serious coach," left tackle Ronnie Stanley said. "He always wanted to do more. I don't think it was ever enough. He was always looking for an advantage."

The first time Ravens coach John Harbaugh spoke with D'Alessandris was when he interviewed for the offensive line coaching job in 2017. Harbaugh was immediately impressed with D'Alessandris' concepts to pick up blitzes.

"He's an old-school coach, but he's got this really flexible system that is really kind of new-school relevant," Harbaugh said. "I think his No. 1 superpower was pass protection."

In the previous seven seasons, Baltimore tied for eighth in fewest sacks allowed with 268. Over that time, Ravens quarterbacks had an average of 2.53 seconds in the pocket, which is the fourth-highest rate in the league.

Every Wednesday during the regular season, D'Alessandris announced, "It's time to get back to basics." Every lineman knew what that meant.

D'Alessandris would get out the chute. The linemen get in their stance and charge under the 4-foot high metal apparatus and block a teammate, which was a way to emphasize staying low and balanced.

The drill wasn't the players' favorite, but they couldn't argue with the results. From 2017 to the 2023 season, the Baltimore offensive line ranked in the top 10 in win rates for run and pass blocking.

"He loved to coach for coaching's sake," Harbaugh said. "He was a teacher and a developer of talent."

D'Alessandris' passion was connecting with players and getting the most out of them. He mentored five Pro Bowl linemen in Baltimore in Marshal Yanda, Orlando Brown Jr., Kevin Zeitler, Stanley and Linderbaum. But D'Alessandris beamed as much about the mid- to late-round picks and undrafted players who became starters like Patrick Mekari, Bradley Bozeman, Ben Powers, Matt Skura and Daniel Faalele.

D'Alessandris used tough love in the meeting room and on the practice field. He wasn't known as a screamer but would raise his voice when ticked off enough.

When Mekari was an undrafted rookie, one of his first meaningful interactions with D'Alessandris was asking him about a combination block that he thought was called "a ping."

"A ping? A f---ing ping?," D'Alessandris responded. "It's called a f---ing plug."

Every year, D'Alessandris would tell the rookies this story.

Still, no matter how much D'Alessandris would criticize or correct a player, he'd pull up a chair next to him in the cafeteria a half hour later and ask about their family. He had a knack for remembering the names of everyone's wife, cousin and even pets.

"He never wrote a player off," Harbaugh said. "He always gave every player the same attention, whether he was the All-Pro player or the guy that was the free agent that nobody thought would make the team. He was genuinely interested in people."

D'Alessandris was in charge of the biggest question mark on the Ravens. Baltimore revamped its offensive line this offseason, replacing three starters.

The Ravens didn't re-sign right guard Kevin Zeitler and left guard John Simpson in free agency and then traded right tackle Morgan Moses to the New York Jets. Baltimore eventually replaced their starters with Mekari at left guard, Faalele at right guard and Rosengarten at right tackle.

But there was another change that no one expected. When the players reported to training camp in July, D'Alessandris revealed he had "a procedure" and it could limit what he could do in drills.

D'Alessandris underwent heart valve repair surgery when minicamp ended in June, which allowed him to get back for the start of training camp. Doctors had been monitoring the situation for 10 years, and the procedure wasn't considered a big concern. He had to pace himself and limit the number of late nights at the facility.

D'Alessandris didn't want to burden others with his issues. If he had a doctor's appointment, he would say things like, "I got to go see a guy about a dog."

"The last thing I think he wanted is for someone to worry about him," Linderbaum said.

D'Alessandris' wife of 42 years died in May 2022, but his three daughters were there to help him. He also took comfort in his other family with the Ravens.

It went well for a few weeks until the preseason opener at home against the Philadelphia Eagles on Aug. 9. D'Alessandris was sitting down more than he normally would.

"He wasn't himself," Rosengarten said. "We could tell something was wrong."

After the game, Mekari told D'Alessandris to go home and take it easy and offered to drive D'Alessandris from the stadium. "No, I'm good," the coach responded.

A day later, D'Alessandris was absent from the early-morning meetings at the facility. He had collapsed at his condo and was rushed to the hospital.

The Ravens announced on Aug. 14 that D'Alessandris was taking a leave of absence and hired George Warhop, a 27-year offensive line coach, as the temporary fill-in.

"The prognosis was positive," Warhop said. "I just thought I would hold the fort down for him. When he came back, we'd work together."

Linderbaum was woken up by his girlfriend. It was the morning after the Ravens had finished the preseason, and the players had the day off.

She needed to tell him the news a teammate's wife had told her: D'Alessandris suffered a heart attack and had died.

"I was speechless," Linderbaum said. "It was sad. I mean, the last I heard, he was getting better."

Doctors had diagnosed D'Alessandris with an infection, and he was getting better with medication. The update from D'Alessandris' family had been that he was getting strong enough to redo the heart valve procedure.

"I was just in shock. I couldn't really believe it," Stanley said. "And then just kind of thinking that I didn't get to say bye. I didn't get to see him. So that was kind of the whole emotional kind of roller coaster in that moment."

The Ravens lost their season opener to the two-time defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs 27-20 on Sept. 5. The next day, the team attended D'Alessandris' funeral.

Baltimore then fell to 0-2 after a 26-23 upset loss to the Las Vegas Raiders. The offense was struggling, and the reworked line took the brunt of the blame.

The Ravens made a lineup change, moving Mekari from right tackle to left guard to replace an injured Andrew Vorhees. That allowed Rosengarten to start at right tackle.

But the bigger challenge was the emotional weight of losing D'Alessandris.

"It was definitely uneasy when he passed and just getting the whole thing rolling on the season," Rosengarten said. "We started out pretty slow and then kind of started to pick it up. I definitely could say that there was some change within the start of the season with that. But now it's just all about taking that momentum and running with it."

The Ravens felt fortunate that Warhop, who coached offensive lines for eight NFL teams, was available. Warhop remembers being in the World League of American Football with D'Alessandris in the 1990s, and he worked under Ravens offensive coordinator Todd Monken when they were both with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers six years ago.

Harbaugh praised Warhop for how he has handled the unusual situation of coming into a situation where the scheme and calls were already in place. Over the last three months, Warhop has leaned on the players to explain some terminology to him while he has slowly made changes to fit how he coaches the offensive line.

The players talk about D'Alessandris every day. They'll bring up one of his quirky sayings like, "don't mix your mashed potatoes with your peas and carrots." They'll refer to run blocking as "snowplowing," as D'Alessandris would.

"It's still his room," Warhop said.

Since the two season-opening losses, the Ravens' linemen have become the unsung heroes of an offense that leads the NFL with 445.9 yards per game. In a 35-10 win over the Buffalo Bills, the linemen blocked so well that Henry went untouched on an 87-yard touchdown run. In a 41-10 victory over the Denver Broncos, Jackson was hit one time by the then-No. 3 defense in the NFL, which allowed him to record a perfect passer rating.

At the midway point of the season, Jackson leads the NFL in QBR (77.3) and Henry tops the league in rushing yards (1,052). After nearly every game, Jackson and Henry have thanked the offensive line, which has been playing for a higher purpose this season.

"They always wanted to make him proud and happy," Harbaugh said. "Joe was always easy about letting them know when they didn't do it right and he let them know when they do it right. He was an open book that way. The guys respect that. His approval was really valuable to those guys."

# Cover Story: After The Highs And Lows, Zay Flowers Is Ready To Fly Higher

BALTIMORERAVENS.COM | AUGUST 29, 2024 | CLIFF BROWN

Zay Flowers could handle feeling disappointed after last year's AFC Championship Game. His greatest challenge was disbelief.

The thought of losing to the Kansas City Chiefs never crossed Flowers' mind until the fourth-quarter clock reached zero and the Ravens had no more plays to run. That's when the tears flowed, and Flowers realized his rookie season was ending one game sooner than he imagined.

"I just couldn't believe we lost," Flowers said. "I wasn't even thinking about the fumble, because there were so many things that happened in that game, before and after that.

"But when it was over, we couldn't change it. It was like, 'Damn, we really just lost?' It was such an odd feeling."

Eight months later, that one disappointing chapter of Flowers' career has been closed. His fumble near the goal line early in the fourth quarter was one of the biggest plays of the Ravens' 17-10 loss to the Chiefs. But he's not reliving the past.

Anyone who thinks Flowers doesn't handle challenges well doesn't really know him.

## Adversity Doesn't Defeat Him

Flowers' mother died when he was five years old, and one of his older brothers, Martin, was murdered when Flowers was in high school. He learned early how to cope with heartbreak.

Flowers grew up as the 11th child in a family of 14 children. He learned early that it's never all about him.

The Ravens and Chiefs start the NFL season next week on Thursday Night Football, a much-anticipated rematch that will give Flowers and the Ravens a chance for payback.

But for Flowers, starting the 2024 season against the Chiefs isn't about the past. This season will start a fresh chapter, one which Flowers insists will be better than 2023 when he set franchise rookie records for receptions (77) and receiving yards (858) as the top target for two-time MVP quarterback Lamar Jackson.

Longtime NBC football analyst Cris Collinsworth is a former NFL wide receiver who will be part of the Thursday Night Football broadcast team. He understands the highs and lows of winning and losing big games. Collinsworth thinks Flowers is built with the tenacity and talent to become a star.

"Yeah, he had a couple of major mistakes in that [Kansas City] game, but I loved watching him play," Collinsworth said. "I thought he was just fighting his tail off to try and go win the game.

"If Zay's what I think he is, which is a very, very special player, and can provide that explosiveness on the outside that they've been waiting for? ... I thought Zay Flowers, in many ways, was that missing component for them. I would expect him to come back pretty angry this year."

## Building to Be Better

Flowers was playing his best football at the end of last season, becoming more familiar with how defenses tried to defend him and finding more ways to counter successfully.

People who focus on his fumble against the Chiefs often forget that he was a problem for Kansas City in that game, finishing with five catches for a season-high 115 yards, including a 30-yard touchdown that tied the game in the first quarter.

In Week 16, when the Ravens clinched the best record in the AFC with a 56-19 rout of the Miami Dolphins, Flowers topped 100 yards receiving (106) for the first time in his career, roasting Miami with a 75-yard touchdown. Flowers feels ready for whatever comes in Year 2, because he has worked so hard to become a better player. This isn't a revenge tour that starts with beating the Chiefs. Flowers believes his rookie success was just the start of a stellar career.

"I've got more experience under my belt," Flowers said. "I've been through ups and downs. I think I'll be able to control things better after the things I went through last year.

"I felt like I was playing my best football toward the end of last year. As the season went on, I was learning more about how to get open, how to run my routes to get open faster. I'd say the last seven games of the season, that's when things started to come together. That's what I'm bringing to this season from the start."

## **Simpatico With Lamar**

The connection between Jackson and Flowers is obvious, two South Florida natives who have a simpatico friendship on and off the field. They speak the same lingo, can finish each other's sentences and read each other's body language.

Before he ever caught a pass from Jackson in a game, Flowers worked on getting on the same page with his quarterback during summer workouts after the Ravens drafted him in 2023.

Perhaps no one expected Jackson to target Flowers 108 times in his rookie season, but neither of them was surprised. Puka Nacua of the Los Angeles Rams (160 targets) and Jordan Addison of the Minnesota Vikings (108) were the only rookie receivers targeted as often as Flowers. Not only did he enter the NFL with talent, but he entered with Jackson's trust.

Jackson said his chemistry with Flowers is even better this year than last.

"Zay Flowers is a different kind of animal. He's hungry going into Year 2," Jackson said. "He's so explosive with how he gets out of his routes. He can have an out-breaking route and a guy have him outside leverage. Usually, you would move on from a receiver knowing that corner is outside leverage, but with him, he still has a chance to win. So sometimes I hang on a little bit because I know he's going to win."

Flowers had six touchdown catches last season, but he'd like more success in the red zone this season. His joystick quickness in tight quarters makes him a threat to juke his way into the end zone, or to find soft spots in the end zone when Jackson extends plays. They've worked on that during training camp with positive results.

## **Bullish on Baltimore**

Flowers has developed an affection for Baltimore that extends beyond his teammates and coaches. He is becoming more involved in the community. Fans have embraced the excitement he brings to the offense and the smile that often lights up his face.

The Ravens are Flowers' new family, but his work ethic comes from his family back home in Fort Lauderdale. The rock of the Flowers family is his father, Willie Flowers, who accepted the challenge of raising 14 children and became an example of perseverance for 10 sons and four daughters.

Loyalty is big with Willie. When Zay was choosing a college, Willie said he would only accompany his son on one visit. After Flowers and his father visited Boston College, Flowers had invitations to see other schools. But his father wouldn't go on anymore visits, and Zay chose Boston College.

When the Ravens drafted Flowers, Willie was thrilled, and Flowers believes he's found another home that's built to last.

"My dad loved Ray Lewis and Ed Reed when they went to Miami (Fla.)," Flowers said. "That's all he used to talk about, Ray, Ed, Devin Hester. Now I'm with the Ravens? He loves it.

"My dad wanted me to find a place that treats you like family, a place that takes care of you. That's all he's ever wanted for me. He likes the city of Baltimore, the character, a city with strong community. He likes Coach [John] Harbaugh. He knows I can blossom here."

## **More Leadership, No Beef**

Flowers believes he needs to be more vocal this year, even though he was far from silent as a rookie. He often leads the receiving drills in practice, setting the pace for the entire group. Flowers, Rashod Bateman, and Nelson Agholor are all returning for their second year in Offensive Coordinator Todd Monken's system, and Flowers believes there's no reason why the passing attack shouldn't be more precise.

"I want us all to be together, to have a bond, to feel like we do more than just play football together," Flowers said.

While doing his research for Thursday night's opener, NBC play-by-play broadcaster Mike Tirico said he's been getting rave reviews about Flowers from people he asks.

"I'm hearing stories about Zay Flowers being very intentional about his work to be a better route runner this offseason," Tirico said. "I'm hearing about his leadership, really stepping up after what happened at the end of last year. It kind of shows you what he's made of. I'm excited to see all the things we're hearing about him brought to reality once the season gets going."

If you ask Flowers about last year's Chiefs game, he doesn't dodge questions. What about the 15-yard penalty Flowers got for unsportsmanlike conduct before his fumble? Flowers lost his temper because he took exception to the way former Chiefs cornerback L'Jarius Snead made the tackle.

"He grabbed my leg and when I was trying to get up, he still had my leg," Flowers said. "He wanted the time to run out because the quarter was about to expire. I was in a weird position, and I was like, 'What are you trying to hurt me?' That's when I pushed him, and I saw the ref running in with the flag. I don't think he was trying to hurt me, but that's what I felt."

"That's all over with. There's no beef with me and Snead (now with the Tennessee Titans), there's no beef with me and the Chiefs. I just want to win."

The Ravens didn't play their top offensive playmakers during the preseason. But Flowers, Jackson, Derrick Henry, Mark Andrews, Isaiah Likely, Bateman, and Agholor are all primed for the trip to Kansas City to see how their offense stacks up facing the strong defense of the defending Super Bowl champs.

There will be a new Ravens-Chiefs game to talk about once the season opens on Thursday. Flowers is ready to roll, and he's looking for a different outcome, not only with how the season starts, but how it ends. If anything, he's even more determined.

"I missed out on a lot of opportunities as rookie that I'm going to capitalize on this year," Flowers said. "Lamar's a free player and he wants us to play free. We thought we were supposed to win that game last year, but we didn't. But we're back. This year, it's time for us to get L.J. that ring."

# Ravens All-Pro Safety Kyle Hamilton Is Still Chasing Perfection — And Everything Else

THE ATHLETIC | OCTOBER 24, 2024 | JEFF ZREBIEC

There was homework and then there was the work Tyler and Kyle Hamilton were assigned at home. That applied to the summers, too. Even though school was out, Jackie Hamilton's class was always in session for her two sons.

Her daily assignment was simple: open the dictionary and find a new word. Then, share what you've learned by pronouncing and spelling the word and using it in a sentence.

"It felt like I was at a damn spelling bee, but over time, we learned to embrace it," said Tyler, 28, four years older than Kyle, an All-Pro safety for the Baltimore Ravens. "It sort of became second nature for us to go out of our way to do that little bit to get better."

There was a saying in the Hamilton household that initially felt harsh to two kids already excelling in school and sports: Good wasn't good enough.

Ultimately, it became a way of life.

"It's always been like that," Kyle Hamilton said. "Whether it's football, basketball, academics, whatever we're doing, it's like, 'All right, do it again and do it better.'"

If you ask Hamilton about gaining entry into a prestigious "brain camp" by scoring highly on his ACTs as a 12-year-old or about being a member of Mensa International, an organization for people with high IQs, he's liable to make a self-deprecating joke about how he still hasn't graduated from Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business.

If you bring up his other talents, like how he occupied the second chair in the high school band as a trombone player or how he's a 6-handicap in golf and once shot even par, he may tell you how he was cut from his ninth grade baseball team. As he recounts the story through gritted teeth, it's clear it still bothers him.

And if you want to talk to him about his standout 2023 season, when he achieved All-Pro status and convinced many he was one of the best defensive players in football, the do-it-all safety will shrug. He'll then rattle off all the areas of his game that need to get better. Just how good does Hamilton think he can be? He ponders the question and then channels an award-winning actor.

"I feel like I'm never going to get to that point," Hamilton said. "Matthew McConaughey had a quote when he won an Oscar. He said, 'My idol is myself in five years,' or something like that. I'll never be that person, but I'm always chasing it, and when I get there, I'm chasing myself in five years. I feel like I'll always be chasing perfection, because I know what I can be."

In just his third NFL season, Hamilton is already considered one of the league's best safeties. He hasn't consistently made the "splash plays" that he produced last year, but he's second on the team in tackles and makes a thunderous hit just about every week. His status as a locker room leader for an organization with a rich defensive history is growing. Smart, well-spoken, charismatic, self-deprecating and blessed with movie star looks, Hamilton has all the makings of the face of an NFL franchise.

Yet, football has never "defined" him. That's partly because there are so many other things he's good at or interested in.

"Everything looks like it comes easy for him," said Tyler. "But he doesn't get jaded with it."

Unicorn: something unusual, rare or unique.

The Ravens are constantly chasing a positionless defense, putting as many versatile players on the field to better match up with offenses. In Hamilton, they have the ultimate chess piece.

"Kyle could play every position on the defense, except nose guard, because he can't put on as much weight as Michael Pierce," Ravens cornerback Marlon Humphrey said.

Hamilton, who is 6-foot-4 and 220 pounds, can play the deep part of the field or move closer to the line of scrimmage. He can play nickel cornerback or dime linebacker. He can match up with tight ends or slot receivers. He blitzes and terrorizes screen passes.

"One of the top players in the league," defensive coordinator Zach Orr said.

Versatility has been more of a command for Hamilton than a choice. He fostered NFL dreams when he was a young boy, only to be told he was too young to play organized football. When he hit the required age to play a few years later, he alerted his mother. She had no idea he was counting down the days the whole time.

If the NFL didn't work out, Hamilton believed the NBA would. His father, Derrek, was drafted by the then-New Jersey Nets in the third round in 1988. He played overseas for well over a decade (Kyle was born in Greece). Kyle's brother, Tyler, played college basketball at the University of Pennsylvania and William & Mary. Kyle and Tyler were in the gym most days by 6 a.m. getting up shots before school. Kyle competed against future NBA stars Anthony Edwards and Evan Mobley when he was younger, and he still believes he could have made the NBA if he committed to it at an earlier age.

Jackie, however, warned Kyle to have a Plan B, C and D. She reminded him of the long odds of becoming a professional athlete. Any chance she got, she exposed him to other things. She took her boys to museums and art exhibits. She emphasized education, creating her own workbooks that her boys needed to complete at home, and encouraged them to embrace music and the arts.

Hamilton learned quickly that it wasn't necessarily about being the best student or best athlete. It was about being the most balanced and diverse, and exploring every opportunity and resource available.

"I was definitely fighting it a little bit at first, but Mom was always saying, 'It's not your decision,'" Hamilton said. "All of that stuff just made sports more enjoyable for me, because it wasn't the only thing that I did. It made me more well-rounded as a person."

As his friends were hanging out by the pool and getting ready for their freshman year of high school, Hamilton was at a three-week brain camp as part of Duke University's Talent Identification Program. He spent part of his summer dissecting frogs, performing thinking exercises and learning how the brain works.

The most eye-opening part of the experience, though, may have been taking the required ACTs for admission. Barely a middle schooler, he found himself in a classroom surrounded by high school seniors. It wouldn't be the last time Hamilton would encounter an overwhelming situation and need to persevere and adapt.

"We start in the seventh grade at Marist, and it was early fall and my assistant football coach, Dan Perez, had a PE class. After the class was over, he came to me and said, 'I just witnessed the best athlete that's ever been at Marist,'" recalled longtime Marist High (Ga.) football coach Alan Chadwick. "I said, 'Yeah, sure.' I blew it off. Sure enough, as it transpired through the next three, four, five years, Kyle was the best we had in a lot of aspects."

Physicality: involvement of a lot of bodily contact or activity.

Proof comes in the form of a picture that still circulates within the Hamilton family. It features a young football player careening toward an adjacent fence, courtesy of a punishing hit by Kyle near the sideline. The impact of the collision caused the boy to roll out of bounds and settle under a fence surrounding the field.

"One day, driving to a game, he told our mom that he was going to make a kid quit football," Tyler said. "He made three kids quit that year."

There was a striped carpet at the Hamilton household that provided a battleground for the brothers. The stripes were a perfect replication of yard markers. Tyler and Kyle played one-on-one football games on that carpet and occasionally invited friends over to take part.

"We knocked each other into walls," Tyler said.

Derrek always told Chadwick that his son's future was in football, but Chadwick was skeptical. He knew of Derrek's professional basketball background. He also saw Kyle's long and lean physique and figured basketball was what Kyle would ultimately focus on.

"Every year, I worried about that phone call or that knock on the door and him saying, 'Coach, I'm sticking to basketball,'" Chadwick said. "I didn't even want to bring it up with him because I was afraid of his answer."

Baseball may have been Hamilton's best sport when he was younger. He turned a triple play as a 6-year-old. However, he got bored with baseball and gave it up when he was about 10. He hadn't played in a few years when he decided to try out for the ninth grade baseball team at Marist, simply because his best friends played.

"Only time I've ever been cut," he said. "Humbling experience, for sure."

He didn't stay down for long. He joined the lacrosse team despite never playing before until that season. But his sports hierarchy was clear: football, basketball and then everything else.

"He could shoot from 30 feet away when he was like 7," Tyler said. "His basketball coach would be like, 'Look where you are shooting from.' And he'd turn around and say, 'Well, I made it.'"

The physicality of football, though, gripped him. He loved the competitive aspect of it, how the result of a team sport was decided by so many individual matchups. He prided himself on winning those matchups by using his mind, talent and athleticism. A little brute force never hurt, either.



"We used to go to Riverside Military Academy for our two-week fall camp," said Green Bay Packers tight end John FitzPatrick, a former high school basketball and football teammate. "I was on offense and he was on defense and I ran some sort of go or over route. He came out of nowhere and just smacked me.

"Kyle is special. You saw that early on."

Butterfly effect: when an action or change that does not seem important has a very large effect, especially in other places.

Ravens coach John Harbaugh had a simple question for Hamilton when he arrived at the team facility a few days before the 2022 NFL Draft.

"What are you doing here?" Harbaugh asked.

The Ravens had the No. 14 pick and Hamilton, considered one of the most talented players in the draft after a standout three seasons at Notre Dame, was expected to go before they were on the clock. The Ravens did their due diligence anyway.

A few of the teams drafting in the top 10 were against taking a safety — even one as versatile as Hamilton — when they had other "premium" position needs. There were also concerns about his 4.59 40 time at the NFL Scouting Combine. Hamilton's pro day performance didn't ease the angst.

"I was always like, 'If you want to draft me off the combine, go ahead,'" Hamilton said. "'If you want to draft me off tape, then go ahead.' I think it all worked out."

His demeanor didn't surprise those who know him best and don't remember him ever getting worked up about anything, except the time the 13-year-old was in the same elevator as his idol, LeBron James, at an AAU tournament in Las Vegas. Hamilton, who said the last time he cried was when James' Miami Heat were beaten by the Dallas Mavericks in the 2011 NBA Finals, clammed up and didn't say anything to James.

"He was by himself and he stood in the corner and freaked out," Tyler said. "You would have thought he saw the second coming of Jesus. He texted us and it was like, 'GUYS, GUYS, GUYS, I JUST SAW LEBRON.'"

Years later, Hamilton was so calm during the first round of the 2022 draft that he sauntered to the bathroom just as the Ravens were on the clock. About 10 seconds after he sat back down, Baltimore general manager Eric DeCosta called to tell Hamilton that he'd be a Raven. A slow 40 time led to Terrell Suggs falling to the Ravens in 2003. Nineteen years later, it contributed to Hamilton doing the same.

"Shoutout to him for running the 40 in zig-zags," Tyler joked.

The Ravens were confident in how Hamilton's skill set would translate to the NFL, but they'll concede that they weren't anticipating how relentless and physical Hamilton is. Those are areas Hamilton takes pride in, which is why one of the highlights from his 2023 season was standout defensive backs Denzel Ward, Minkah Fitzpatrick and Pat Surtain II telling him at the Pro Bowl that they respected his style of play.

If you ask him his favorite play from last year, he doesn't bring up his three sacks against the Indianapolis Colts, his interception return score against the Cleveland Browns or either of his two interceptions on Christmas night against the 49ers. He brings up a play that preceded his second interception against San Francisco.

"I missed a tackle in the flat on Deebo (Samuel) and got back up, tackled him and tried to get the ball out. It was a 3-yard gain. On the next play, I got that pick," Hamilton said. "It was like the football gods were rewarding me for running to the football."

Hamilton is eyeing more rewards in the future. This will be the first offseason where he's eligible to sign a contract extension, and given the Ravens' history of keeping their core homegrown players, it seems more a matter of when than if a deal gets done.

There's that elusive under-par round of golf, which has become one of his biggest passions. He's nine credits short of getting his degree at Notre Dame, and he'll finish them after the season. Then, there's a whole life to look forward to, on and off the field.

"I feel like I've always had a bigger purpose," Hamilton said. "I love football and it's the biggest thing in my life besides family, faith and everything like that. I'll be devastated and sad when it comes to an end, but at the same time, people always joke that when I'm done playing, I'm going to be crushing Excel sheets or something. I do want to see the business side of life, to be able to assimilate to society."

Jackie Hamilton has long told her son that he's going to be the next Michael Strahan and host "Good Morning America." Tyler could see his brother coaching. Kyle has thought plenty about eventually owning his own company and being a chief marketing officer.

As always with Kyle Hamilton, the possibilities seem endless. Why define oneself when there's still so much to see and do?

# How Ravens Safety Kyle Hamilton's Golf Obsession Helps Fuel His All-Pro Football Game

BALTIMORE SUN | SEPTEMBER 2, 2024 | BRIAN WACKER

It was the day after last season's AFC championship game and the mind of Ravens safety Kyle Hamilton was already on his top offseason priority as he cleaned out his locker in the grim quiet of the team's facility in Owings Mills.

Perhaps he was thinking about how to slow down Travis Kelce after the Kansas City Chiefs tight end racked up 11 catches for 116 yards and a touchdown against Hamilton that helped set the tone for a long January afternoon for the Ravens at M&T Bank Stadium. Or maybe he was contemplating the All-Pro and Pro Bowl season he just had and how he'd need to be even better for a defense in 2024 that would have significant turnover on the roster and amid the coaching staff. Not quite.

"Golf," he said.

Indeed.

"My brother doesn't have the patience for it, but I love it," Hamilton told The Baltimore Sun in a recent interview. "If I'm not playing football, I'm trying to get on a golf course somewhere."

Born in 2001, Hamilton and his older brother, Tyler, were introduced to the game by their father, Derrek, a 1988 New Jersey Nets draft pick, who played professionally in Europe for 15 years and took up golf during the peak of the Tiger Woods era in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The youngest Hamilton's obsession with golf, which he started playing around 5 years old, has only blossomed since. At home in suburban Atlanta this summer, he played three to four times a week, usually at venerable Peachtree Golf Club, which was co-designed by legendary amateur Bobby Jones. And amid the mundanity of training camp, Hamilton worked in rounds at every opportunity, including one recent occasion at Baltimore Country Club, where he nearly made his first hole-in-one, hitting a gap wedge from 140 yards to within a foot of the cup.

On the surface, football and golf could not seem more disparate endeavors.

But Hamilton's curious mind sees the many correlations between the two, including the endless and necessary attention to detail, as well as the plotting and angles and mental acuity, all of which have also helped him in just two seasons become perhaps the best player at his position and one of the best overall in the NFL.

"Short memory, especially at DB, you're gonna get beat sometimes," he continues. "You're gonna hit bad shots in golf. The best ones forget about it quickly."

"It may not be as physically taxing as football, but mentally that's one of the toughest sports. You're out there alone against [over a hundred] dudes in the field and it's about who gets hot doing it over four days consistently. Sleeping on a lead on a Saturday night in a major, it doesn't get more intense than that."

Patrolling the Ravens' secondary as a position-less player who will again be counted on to do it all this season is up there, too.

Examples of Hamilton's exploits abounded last season, in particular during that 17-10 loss to the Chiefs in the conference title game. After Kansas City raced out to a 17-7 halftime lead, Baltimore's defense stiffened, holding the Chiefs to 98 total yards and quarterback Patrick Mahomes to just 4.8 yards per pass attempt while sacking him twice, something no other team managed last postseason. Though he gave up a touchdown on the game's first drive, Hamilton was often at the nexus of the Ravens' success defensively.

On one play, there he was blowing up Chiefs running back Isiah Pacheco in the backfield. On another, he fights off a blocker to drag Kelce down with one arm. Then he races backward to break up a deep pass intended for speedy receiver Rashee Rice. He later mangles a tunnel screen to Rice. Finally, he blitzes Mahomes from the backside to force a hurried incompleteness.

"Kyle is a unicorn," Ravens passing game coordinator Chris Hewitt said. "He's a one of one."

Which is why first-year defensive coordinator Zach Orr gives the 23-year-old a certain degree of autonomy within the defense and calls him "the ultimate chess piece."

"My goal for him is to one day win [the] defensive MVP — here — of the league," Orr said. "The thing about him being the ultimate chess piece, depending on what the offense does, he can play anywhere. He can play safety, deep safety, box safety; he can play corner, he can play nickel, he can play backer, he can even play outside linebacker, too, and you guys know he can rush the passer."

"The thing that you appreciate about Kyle Hamilton is, is he works at it. He's a smart player, so he can handle all the different volume that you get him. I think he's eager, going into his third year, to do more, so we'll see."

That much has manifested itself, not just in games, but in practice.

Early in training camp, quarterback Lamar Jackson lofted a long pass for Mark Andrews with Hamilton in close coverage. Both men went up for the ball with Andrews snatching it. But before he could secure it, Hamilton knocked it free with his leg as the two were crashing to the turf and then hauled it himself for the lone interception of the two-time NFL Most Valuable Player that afternoon.

Other days, Hamilton will spend time running routes as a wide receiver because, in his words, if he can move like a receiver then he should be able to guard one. That kind of study extends to golf as well.

Some of Hamilton's favorite pros include Min Woo Lee, Scottie Scheffler, Rickie Fowler, Cam Smith and Brooks Koepka. All have vastly differing skills and styles of play, but the beauty — in golf and in football — he says are in the details. Golf is also an escape for him, he says, allowing him to clear his head and refocus his mind.

"There's so much little stuff in golf that I feel is the same in football," Hamilton told The Sun, adding that he often also studies the nuances of safeties, cornerbacks, linebackers and even defensive ends around the league. "It's not one size fits all."

He says the difference between his first year in the NFL and his second was akin to showing up at a course he hadn't played compared with one he had and knows where all the trouble is, acknowledging that sometimes he "hit it out of bounds" as a rookie.

As one example, Hamilton said he had to learn patience in zone defense.

"College and high school, you could just go make a play," he told The Sun. "In the NFL, they're doing stuff on purpose, putting something in front of a young rookie safety's face to go drive it, then do something behind you going deep.

"It's like everyone wants to go to the range and hit driver, but you gotta go work on your short game and putting. To equate that to how I watch film intently, am I watching to see what personnel they're in to see what guys do, or am I watching to get a good idea of formations and what they're trying to run and what I can eliminate by just looking at a formation?"

That was the case during last season's key Christmas night victory over the San Francisco 49ers, when Hamilton read their first-and-10 play from Baltimore's 15-yard-line on their opening drive so well that he quickly moved off tight end George Kittle to streaking receiver Deebo Samuel to easily cut off the route and intercept a would-be touchdown pass in the end zone.

It was one of four interceptions on the year for Hamilton, who also had 13 passes defended, three sacks, four quarterback hits, a forced fumble and 81 tackles, including 10 for loss.

When Hamilton was on the field last season, the Ravens' defense was one of the best in the NFL in yards allowed per play, expected points added allowed per play and success rate. When he wasn't, they were below average.

"There are not many guys who [can] come along like that," Hewitt said. "He's like a generational-type player. You don't see many guys who are 6-foot-4, who can run and change direction the way he does. He still plays with violence; he's not a finesse player. He's got it all."

Once a star high school basketball player before he decided to focus solely on football and with a golf handicap currently around 6, it's hard to argue otherwise.

Hamilton still has a few goals, though, with the Super Bowl at the top of the list. When it comes to golf, attending the Masters, making a hole-in-one and playing Pebble Beach — which he'll do on a buddies trip next March — top the list.

"It's not something I'm not necessarily that good at," he demures. "A bunch of my friends are better than me."

The same at least can't be said about his football.

# A ‘Great Dane’ And A ‘Bully Dog,’ The Unlikely Duo Of Kyle Hamilton And Ar’Darius Washington Has Sparked A Turnaround

BALTIMORE BANNER | **DECEMBER 30, 2024** | GIANA HAN

## The Ravens safeties look different, but teammates say they play the same way

Kyle Hamilton and Ar’Darius Washington are both dawgs — which would make Hamilton a Great Dane and Washington a cowboy pit bull, according to linebacker Roquan Smith, allegedly the worst perpetrator of jokes about the height gap between the two safeties.

When asked if that’s his favorite comparison to describe the duo, Smith proudly said he came up with it on the spot — but then he amended it. Washington is actually more like a small bully dog: “They look normally low to the ground, compact, but they pack a big punch.”

Smith might make the most jokes (“Roquan has to make them because he’s borderline short himself,” Hamilton said), but metaphors abounded in the Ravens’ locker room when players spoke about the new safety duo featuring 6-foot-4 Hamilton (90th percentile in height among safeties) and 5-foot-8 Washington (0th percentile).

Nose tackle Michael Pierce and rookie safety Sanoussi Kane compared them to former Seattle Seahawks safeties 6-foot-3 Kam Chancellor and 5-foot-10 Earl Thomas (“So I guess you can call them the Second Legion of Boom if you want,” Pierce said).

Cornerback Jalyn Armour-Davis also went with a “little pit bull” for Washington. He called Hamilton “just an alien.”

Hamilton had his own duo in mind. He said they’re like SpongeBob SquarePants and Patrick Star, two friends in a cartoon Hamilton likes to reference who get into scrapes but feed off each other to get through them. They appear to be quite different but are surprisingly similar at their core. Hamilton claimed Patrick because he’s taller, but the point of his comparison was their similarities.

Because every single person agreed that, if you take away the height difference, Hamilton and Washington are a lot alike. Teammates used the words aggressive, versatile, smart, instinctual, funny, communicative and unselfish to describe both.

“Honestly, Kyle’s just a smaller version of me, you know what I’m saying?” Washington joked with a grin.

Perhaps that’s why this duo, which emerged after a tumultuous few weeks, has helped the Ravens’ defense after a disastrous start. They’re similar players and people and thus on the same wavelength, helping the defensive back end to jell.

## Signs of trouble

Baltimore’s secondary came into this season with expectations, both internal and external, of greatness. While Hamilton figured prominently into those expectations, Washington was a background character.

Coming off a season when the Ravens finished tied with the Browns for fewest yards allowed per pass attempt, the secondary was returning almost every major piece outside of Geno Stone, who led the team in interceptions.

Besides the All-Pro Hamilton, they had a former Pro Bowler in Marlon Humphrey, who returned to health. There was Marcus Williams, whom the Ravens signed to a five-year, \$70 million deal in 2022 and who also returned healthier than the season before.

Cornerback Brandon Stephens emerged last season, cornerback Arthur Maulet was a reliable veteran, and 2022 fourth-rounder Jalyn Armour-Davis (another cornerback) was progressing. Then they added two cornerbacks and two safeties to the room through the draft and rookie free agency. And they signed veteran safety Eddie Jackson late.

Things did not go as planned. Early on, the Ravens were stout in defending the run but terrible against the pass. As the weeks passed, they dwelled at the bottom of the league’s stat sheets when it came to passing defense and team defense.

The secondary’s starting lineup didn’t seem to have any red flags. In the first game, Stephens and Humphrey started at cornerback, with Williams and Hamilton at safety. Jackson, Armour-Davis, first-round draft pick Nate Wiggins and Washington rotated in. And yet they gave up 291 yards through the air to quarterback Patrick Mahomes of the Kansas City Chiefs.

The Ravens started using different lineups. They moved Hamilton to nickel. They paired Williams with Jackson, who saw the biggest jump in participation. They temporarily got an injured Maulet back and added him to the cornerback rotation, which featured Humphrey, Stephens and Wiggins.

Although Washington also saw increased opportunities, he remained at the bottom of the rotation.

In Week 8 he got his first big chance. The Ravens benched Williams and paired Jackson and Washington deep. The secondary’s performance did not improve. The Ravens gave up 321 passing yards to a struggling Browns offense. But it was Jackson and the cornerbacks who gave up the worst plays.

So, the next game, Jackson was benched and Williams returned to play alongside Washington. Things temporarily stabilized, but the win over the Denver Broncos provided false hope when the secondary held them to 197 passing yards. A combination of Williams, Washington and Jackson yielded 421 passing yards the next week to Joe Burrow and the Cincinnati Bengals.

The Ravens tried another combination for their Week 11 road game in Pittsburgh. They moved on completely from Jackson and Williams and moved Hamilton back next to Washington while shifting Humphrey into Hamilton's role as nickel. Finally, they struck gold.

The Ravens, who ranked 25th in scoring defense (25.3 points per game allowed) and 27th in total defense (367.9 yards per game allowed) over the first 10 weeks, have led the league in both categories over the past seven weeks (16.3 points and 267 yards, respectively). Their pass defense's turnaround since the Hamilton-Washington duo took over has been staggering: from 32nd in pass defense to second; from 30th in expected points added per drop-back to first; and from 32nd in explosive-pass-play rate to 11th, according to TruMedia.

### Stabilizing effect

With Hamilton's intelligence and athleticism, the Ravens like playing the former first-round pick in the slot, where he can help in all phases of the defense. But Humphrey, who is having a fantastic season, can play there as well, and it turns out in the 2024 iteration of the Ravens' defense, Hamilton's skills are most needed at deep safety.

Coaches and teammates credit his return there as key to the turnaround.

"Honestly, if I had to just pinpoint one thing, I would say it's putting Kyle [Hamilton] back there at safety," Humphrey said. "That guy is just different. His play, obviously, you guys see the play, but the communication getting guys right. There are plays that I'm on the field ... I get the call, I ask Kyle 'What do I do in this call?' I hear Kyle give somebody else what they need to do in this call. His smarts, how he keeps the guys calm — he's just a piece you can put at any position. But him going back to safety has seemed to really stabilize everybody else in all of their spots, whether it's corners, communicating to the nickel, communicating to the 'backers."

Two things have helped unlock the secondary: simplification of the defense and Hamilton's chemistry with Washington.

While the defense hasn't changed its playbook, the way plays are communicated has been streamlined. Calls go from defensive coordinator Zach Orr to Smith, who wears the green dot. He relays the calls to the rest of the defense. Now those calls are shorter, and one word encompasses more things. It's helped everyone, Pierce said, but it's made the most difference for Smith and the secondary.

"It does cut down on the time that Ro has to spit out 8,000 different words to communicate to us, to communicate to the linebackers themselves and then to communicate to the secondary," Pierce said. "I'm sure it's cut down the thinking a lot for them. For us, it's pretty cut and dry."

Once Smith relays the call, Hamilton disseminates the information among the defensive backs. He's an extremely smart player and an effective communicator, so it's taken a lot of stress off Smith. The linebacker said he mainly just worries about the linebackers and the front now that Hamilton's back there.

Hamilton is communicating with everyone in the secondary, from the nickelback to the corners on the edges, but there's also a constant stream of communication between him and Washington. Although they have not been paired together often, chemistry built quickly.

The two text every day, Hamilton said, and Washington said they always check with each other about what they're seeing when they return to the sidelines or to the locker room. Cornerback Tre'Davious White — acquired Nov. 5 before the trade deadline — noted how impressive their communication is in meetings, as they go back and forth with each other and everyone else.

It translates on the field, and Hamilton said it's so effective that they can switch positions between free and strong safety, depending on how they feel play to play. Hamilton has taken some hard hits this season and said Washington will take over as down safety while he collects himself and vice versa.

"Offenses can't get tips on who's doing what because we can do everything," Washington said. "Both of us can do anything and any job. That's the main thing. Like we can play sides, whatever is being called, we can just do it and handle it whichever way we need to."

They can do that because of their similarities as players, they both said. The Ravens have played both at nickel at different times in their careers because they bring a similar versatility, able to help in coverage, stuff the run or rush the passer. Both safeties, as well as all their teammates, say they play with the same aggressiveness and are both superior athletes — just packaged in different bodies.

And both are willing to do it all, "unselfish" in their assignments, Smith said.

That has made the game easier for everyone, from the cornerbacks to the nose tackle.

The duo has yielded results, both for the team and for themselves. No opposing quarterback has surpassed 218 passing yards since Hamilton and Washington took over. Washington has come through with big momentum plays, including an interception against the Giants and a forced fumble in a goal-line stand against Russell Wilson of the Steelers. He had another goal-line stop against the Texans, which Hamilton matched with an interception.

Despite the dramatic improvement in the defense, Hamilton and Washington feel there's more the secondary can do to reach its potential. But, by combining Hamilton's leadership and Washington's heart, the Ravens seem to have found a winning formula.

"Those guys look to him [Hamilton] for answers and he's a real smart player, so he gets everybody lined up quickly, and then I just think the emergence of Ar'Darius Washington," Orr said. "... I think, when we finally gave him his opportunity, he went out there and made the most of it, and I think he's really become a real good NFL starting-caliber safety. I think the combination of those two things — those two guys work well together. They both can cover man coverage, play zone [coverage] and tackle really well, so I think the combination of that is really what you've seen."

# Derrick Henry Has Been Everything The Ravens Hoped For — And He's Just Getting Warmed Up

THE ATHLETIC | **DECEMBER 12, 2024** | JEFF ZREBIEC

The Baltimore Ravens' offseason signing of running back Derrick Henry has already been a home run. The 30-year-old is second in the NFL with 1,407 rushing yards and is tied for the league lead with 15 touchdowns. His next score will set a franchise record for touchdowns in a season, and he's already posted the second-most rushing yards in franchise history.

If Henry's past is any indication, he's just getting warmed up.

This is typically Henry's time of year, as the weather gets colder, defenses get worn down and games rise in physicality and importance. During his nine-year NFL career, Henry has more touchdowns, more rushing yards per game and a higher yards per carry average in December than in any other full regular-season month.

The Ravens, who annually fancy themselves as Super Bowl contenders and constantly preach the importance of running the ball and playing physical in December and beyond, were well aware of Henry's propensity to get stronger later in the year when they signed him to a two-year, \$16 million deal in March.

They've also made sure to not put too heavy of a workload on Henry's broad shoulders over the preceding three months. Henry has had more than 20 carries in a game just five times all season. It's happened just twice since Week 6. He's also played only 55 percent of Baltimore's offensive snaps.

"Derrick hasn't had a lot of carries, a lot of wear and tear on him this year, so I think it's set up perfectly for him to finish the year like he's capable of and what we expect out of him," said Ravens running backs coach Willie Taggart. "Derrick is fresh right now, and that's great. ... I think the way he trains himself, the way he practices, the way he prepares, he's going to be ready to finish the year like we need him to."

The Ravens (8-5) may not need Henry to be at his best Sunday when they go on the road to face the struggling New York Giants (2-11). The Giants are allowing the fourth-most rushing yards per game (141.7) and the third-most yards per carry (4.9). With three games in 11 days, the Ravens would probably like nothing more than to get out to an early lead on the Giants and not have to tax any of their offensive standouts. That formula could mean a heavy workload for Henry early in the game.

Six days after facing the Giants, the Ravens play the Pittsburgh Steelers in a matchup that figures to go a long way in deciding the AFC North. Four days after that, they head back on the road for a Christmas afternoon tilt against the AFC South-leading Houston Texans.

With the league's second-best run game, the Ravens have reaped rewards from the Henry addition all season. It would hardly be surprising if they lean on him even more to get them through this upcoming stretch.

"We're going to try to run the ball as much as we can, and so much of running the ball has to do with how many plays you get, and getting in a rhythm, and getting an opportunity to call more plays," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "Derrick is our lead back, obviously, and he only gets stronger as the game goes on, so we want to run the ball."

Henry reported back to the team facility on Monday following the bye week. Gone were his trademark long dreadlocks. In were tight cornrows. It's a fresh new look for a player whose reputation this time of year is hard-earned.

Henry is a finisher, and that not only applies to his ability to break off a decisive late run to help seal a game. It applies to his penchant for being in top form late in the season. In 31 career December games, he's rushed for 2,769 yards on 545 carries, which equates to 5.1 yards per carry. He also has 30 December touchdowns.

There has been plenty said and written about Henry's maniacal workout regiment and just how meticulous he is about preparing his body and mind so that he's at his best through the long football season. That's a good starting point in explaining his December success. He's also been quite good in January, averaging 5.9 yards per carry and 144.3 rushing yards in four career games.

The other part of the explanation is based on common sense. It can't be a lot of fun for defensive players, already tired and banged up from a long season, to have to tackle a sculpted 6-foot-3, 247-pound running back 20-plus times, particularly in cold temperatures and on hard fields.

The Ravens have been on the other end of that. Now, they have the opportunity to unleash Henry after three months of consistent yet measured workloads. Harbaugh said from the beginning that Henry wouldn't be a 30-carry guy in Baltimore's offense. It's not that the Ravens didn't believe he was capable of that. They just were determined to maintain a more balanced approach and get several players consistently involved.

Henry's only reached 25 carries once so far this season. There have been games where Henry has even been outsnapped by his veteran backup Justice Hill, whose ability to pick up blitzes and be a receiving threat has been utilized by offensive coordinator Todd Monken in two-minute and third-down situations.

Henry is third in the NFL behind the Philadelphia Eagles' Saquon Barkley and Los Angeles Rams' Kyren Williams with his 240 rushing attempts, an average of 18.5 per game. Still, he's not been asked to carry as heavy of a burden as he assumed for a chunk of his time with the Tennessee Titans. From 2019 to 2022, Henry averaged just over 23 carries per game. He also was on the field for 67 percent of the Titans' offensive snaps during that span.

The Ravens, though, have taken the longer view, while Henry has made it clear he'll be ready for whatever the team needs. On one of the first nights of last week's bye, he texted Taggart to tell his position coach that he was still mad about the mistakes he made in the loss to the Eagles. He's now had over a week to stew over them.

For Henry, it's bring on the Giants. It's bring on the rest of December.

"He wants the ball," Taggart said. "Derrick wants the ball whenever. Whether it's the beginning of the game, at the end of the game, at halftime, after the game, he wants the ball."

# Cover Story: Derrick Henry Is Pursuing Perfection

BALTIMORERAVENS.COM | **AUGUST 4, 2024** | RYAN MINK

It was the first play of 11-on-11s at a Ravens training camp practice when Josh Johnson slung a pass out to Derrick Henry. The ball bounced off Henry's fingertips and was wrestled away by safety Marcus Williams, who took it the other way for a pick-six.

As the offense gave chase and the defense streamed down the field to celebrate, Henry remained face down on the turf for a few seconds, disgusted with himself.

"Oh, he was hot. He was hot," Running Backs Coach Willie Taggart said a few days later.

Taggart told him it was OK. Henry told him it wasn't. Henry asked Johnson to go to the other side of the field and run that same play. They did that over, and over, and over again – dozens of times.

Henry's pursuit of perfection has no limits. In a league that's in a hurry to discard 30-year-old running backs, it's Henry's chase that makes him the exception as he enters Year 9.

Not only is Henry a physical freak. The way he approaches the game is freakish, especially for someone so accomplished.

"It's like the damndest thing ever. He wants to be perfect on everything. We love it," Taggart said. "He'll eventually come around, but probably the first two plays after a mistake, he's going to be ticked off."

A ticked off Henry doesn't sound like a bad thing. "Hell yeah," Taggart said.

## **'AS STRONG AS HE'S EVER BEEN'**

Henry's days during Ravens training camp start with a 5:30 a.m. wakeup, even though team lift at the Under Armour Performance Center doesn't start until 7:30. He gets there early.

Henry has always been a physical marvel, dating back to when he dominated kids in Yulee, Fla., not far outside Jacksonville. But at 30 years old, he's far more fit now – perhaps the fittest of his NFL career.

Henry's offseason trainer for the past eight years has been former NBA player Melvin Sanders, whose SandersFit Performance Center in Dallas has become home to some of the top athletes in the country.

During the offseason, Henry trains there twice a day, five days a week. They go for an intense hour and a half each morning, then come back for another session at 4 p.m.

His workouts often include sprints on a 100-yard hill and hammer curls of 80-pound dumbbells. He has leg day three times a week, where he does Bulgarian split squats with 120-pound dumbbells.

"I just love working out, staying healthy," Henry said. "Working out is one of my hobbies, so it just comes natural."

Even though he works with athletes such as Micah Parsons, Von Miller, Dak Prescott, DeAndre Hopkins, Victor Wembanyama and many more, Sanders said Henry is "one of one."

"He's the most consistent. He just doesn't skip," Sanders said. "It's relentless pursuit of perfection. He just wants to be great. He wants to be the best."

Sanders said he and Henry had a talk three years ago about anti-aging. That's the commitment that they made together, to make Henry the Benjamin Button of the NFL through the work they put in. Henry gets some kind of therapy (red light, sauna, hyperbaric oxygen chamber) every day.

"I'm not joking. I'm not hyping it up. I think he's better right now than he was in year four and five," Sanders said.

"He's a lot stronger now. He's a lot more mobile. He's able to move better. His lateral quickness is better. He's just a stronger athlete now. I can literally show you videos from like 2019 and you'd be like, 'Holy [crap].'"

Henry reportedly spends nearly a quarter of a million dollars every year on body maintenance, per his financial adviser. He has his own chef, who abides by a strict diet free of fried foods, sugars, gluten, and more.

After Henry's morning lift at the Under Armour Performance Center during training camp, he sits down for a breakfast bowl consisting only of avocado, spinach, and kale.



"That sounds terrible. I feel bad for him," fellow running back Justice Hill said with a laugh. "I'm over here eating my eggs, my oatmeal, and stuff."

Henry's standard lunch is chicken and rice, then he eats a full dinner at around 6:45. During the season, when he's not putting in such physically draining practices, Henry abstains from eating until 4 or 5 p.m. He started that routine in 2022 and will continue it this season.

"Before I was eating whatever I wanted – chicken wings, pizza – anything, and I was like, 'Dang, that's not going to sustain,'" Henry said. "So, I just challenged myself to try to see if I could do it, and then once I got used to it, it became easy, and now my body feels great. Just seeing how my body responded to it and the routine and the diet – I love it – and it's something I'll probably keep doing the rest of my life."

Sustainability for a running back is the big question, especially one with as many carries as Henry has on his resume. Eight running backs landed with new teams before Henry agreed to terms with Baltimore. Henry is older than any of them. He's the oldest pure running back to ink a deal this offseason.

During Henry's introductory press conference in Baltimore, he was asked about those who doubt he can still play at a high level at his age. "Tell them to keep watching," he said.

But doubters don't fuel Henry. He's not out to prove anything about his age or longevity.

"I know what I'm capable of, and I think that as long as I put the work in, the work will always show," Henry said. "Everybody can have something to say; that's just life, that's every day. But let your work talk because talk is cheap."

### **'ALL BUSINESS, 24-7'**

There are conflicting accounts about how close the Ravens and Titans were to pulling off a trade for Henry to come to Baltimore at last year's deadline, but there's no doubt that Henry knew the writing was on the wall when he was set to become a free agent.

Before he left Tennessee, the place where he became a star over eight years of his career, Henry left one final impression. In the regular-season finale against the Jaguars, Henry rumbled for a season-high 153 yards, including a 69-yard run in which he hit 21.68 mph – tied with Tyreek Hill for the seventh-fastest top speed any ball carrier recorded last season.

Too slow? Yeah right.

After the Titans' win, Henry went to the center of the field and grabbed a microphone. He thanked everyone from "Bob with the avocados" to the cleaning staff of Lyncoya, Johnny and Leroy, for "cleaning our locker when it smells like the Nashville Zoo."

"Titans fans, I just want to say thank you for the greatest eight years of my life," Henry said before jogging off the field to "Hen-ry" chants.

Uprooting to join a new team is never easy, especially when you have a three-month old daughter at home. The Henry family also moved to the Dallas area this offseason, only to be surprised when the Cowboys showed him no interest in free agency.

But Henry called it a breath of fresh air to be in Baltimore, and the Ravens have been thrilled with their addition.

After one of the team's first OTA practices, Henry wasn't pleased with his performance and texted Taggart at around 11 p.m. with questions. If he has a bad day, Henry texts Taggart to apologize and tell him he'll be better.

"I constantly get random text messages from Derrick wanting to know how to run a certain play or if he did it right," Taggart said. "To me, that says a lot about who he is and where he's trying to go."

"He's an awesome individual. Just to see how he's come here and fit in with our football team like it's nothing, it's like he's been here for a while. He doesn't want to come here and be a prima-donna or anything like that. He just wants to do like everyone else and get better and help our football team win a championship."

Even though he's entering Year 9, Henry feels more like a rookie in the Ravens' new system, which will feature more runs out of the shotgun formation than the single-back alignments he was so used to in Tennessee. He's asking a ton of questions in meetings, which has made it easier for his younger teammates to pipe up too.

"Derrick, he's all business, 24-7," Hill said. "I mean he obviously has a fun side to him, but when he comes to work, he comes to work. He'll make a mistake and be mad the whole rest of the day."

Henry said that mentality has always been there. He was recently talking to somebody from his youth about how when he played a video game or basketball in the street with his cousin, he hated to lose.

"I wouldn't say I was sore loser. I just didn't know how to handle it. The older you get, you kind of mature and you understand it, but it still sucks," Henry said.

Henry doesn't just expect perfection from himself. When Taggart messes up a turn of phrase or stumbles over his words, Henry is the first to call him out in the meeting room. Even though he's a quiet guy until you get to know him, Taggart and Hill both called Henry the ringleader of the jokes.

Henry has the most career rushing yards of any active NFL player (9,502). With another 1,000-yard season, he'll surpass former Titans legend Eddie George, who gave him career-changing advice in 2018 (Henry's third season) to start running like a big back. A couple of months later, he became "King Henry" when he ripped off a 99-yard touchdown run on national TV, stiff-arming three Jaguars defenders along the way.

After being on the other end of those stiff-arms, including in the 2019 playoffs, the Ravens can't wait to see it in purple and black. Hill said Henry bounced a run outside during practice on Tuesday and cornerback Brandon Stephens was out there waiting for him. Hill was salivating.

"All I could think of was the Josh Norman clips and all the other clips of all the corners trying to run him down," Hill said. "I was like, 'You should have put that arm up just to let him know!' It's going to be crazy to see that in person.

"I didn't know somebody that big could move that fast. Literally, he can hit 21 miles an hour in three steps. That's just freakish to see." The size, the speed, the power are all part of what make Henry a threat that defensive coordinators will struggle to stop – even at 30 years old. But they aren't what make Henry who he is. Age can't touch what drives Henry.

"I think there's been plenty people who have been blessed with physical attributes and incredible talent," Henry said. "But I think the willingness to put the work in, no matter where you are in life, if you're at your lowest of the low or the highest of the high, continue to keep that same drive, continue to want to get better at your game, no matter where you are, and I think that's what makes greatness great. That's the one where the elite separate themselves from the average.

"I just try to keep that same mindset, no matter where in life, just keep wanting to get better, keep working like you're just arriving and you haven't done anything. Just try to keep that mindset year after year and see where it takes you."

# How Justice Hill Became An Integral Part Of The Ravens Offense

BALTIMORERAVENS.COM | OCTOBER 3, 2024 | RYAN MINK

When Justice Hill said he was surprised to get a contract extension from the Ravens a couple weeks ago, it wasn't just because of the timing. It's also because of his journey. He could have never imagined this three years ago.

Fans know the story of how the 2021 preseason finale at Washington's FedEx Field altered the trajectory of J.K. Dobbins' Ravens career. Turns out, that night shaped Hill's journey, too.

Hill was entering his third year with the Ravens and was coming off a sophomore season in which he touched the ball just 17 times. He was competing for the No. 3 running back spot behind Dobbins and Gus Edwards with a couple of intriguing rookies, Ty'Son Williams and Nate McCrary. A high ankle sprain in the first preseason game wasn't helping Hill's chances.

At FedEx Field, there are two different locker rooms. As Hill described it, one for players that were going to make the team and one for players who were not. Head Coach John Harbaugh confirmed he was in the locker room for players soon on their way out.

"It was in the locker room, and Harbs came up to me and was telling me I was about to get cut," Hill said on "The Lounge" podcast. "So I'm just like, 'Oh, I guess I'm going to figure something out somewhere else.'"

Hours later, Dobbins suffered a devastating season-ending knee injury. So much for that. Hill wasn't just back in the team's plans but in position to have a prominent role. That, however, was short-lived.

A week later, as Hill tried to push back from the ankle injury to get ready to be Edwards' backup for the season-opener, he tore his Achilles during practice. Not only was his year done; his career was in jeopardy.

The Ravens were already preparing to cut him, and if they did, a fourth-round running back entering his fourth NFL season with very little production on his resume and coming off an Achilles tear probably wasn't going to be too enticing. Instead, Hill landed on the Ravens' injured reserve list.

"It was a blessing in disguise," Hill said. "I was able to be home for my daughter's birth and be able to be [at the training facility] just the whole season, the offseason, every single day. But yeah, that was a pivot point for me."

Hill wasn't too happy his first couple years in Baltimore. He felt like the offensive system didn't fit his skillset. He wasn't getting many opportunities. Other young players at his position had passed him, and he was on the cusp of being cut. Hill is a confident guy, but it was wavering.

That year rehabbing his Achilles changed his outlook. He got married and his daughter was born, which gave him new purpose and a renewed drive.

"It's definitely motivational – going from just a single bachelor to having a family," Hill said. "That's the No. 1 thing you want to do – is provide for your family and make sure they're living a good life. That just shifted my mindset and motivated even more than what I already was to just continue to go about and be great and do things."

There was another main driver. Hill wanted to show the Ravens that they should have never considered cutting him.

"I ain't got nothing to lose," Hill said. "Honestly, that's just been my mindset ever since I came back. I'm like, 'Shoot, nobody wanted me here so I'm going to just go ahead and prove everybody wrong.'"

Hill attacked his rehab. The very first day after his surgery, he was back in the Under Armour Performance Center with the training staff, buying into the process. Since he suffered the injury before the regular season even started, he had a long runway to get ready for the 2022 season. There was no rush this time, and he was determined to come back stronger.

Once he was cleared and the doctors told him his Achilles was not going to snap again, he woke up at 5 a.m. every morning to jump rope for 30 minutes to an hour. Hill did two to three thousand jump ropes a day.

"It would be sore as heck, man," he said. "But I was like, I'm going to keep doing it, just keep going. I was trying to get my spring back."

When Hill returned to the field the following May, he looked shockingly quick for a player coming off such a major injury. He followed it up with a solid campaign as the backup to Dobbins, Edwards, and, at times, Kenyan Drake, but Hill's biggest impact was on special teams.

Before last season, the Ravens signed Hill to a new two-year contract. Paired with new Offensive Coordinator Todd Monken, and after another season-ending injury to Dobbins, Hill had his best offensive season yet with 593 total yards and four touchdowns.

That was just an appetizer. With Dobbins and Edwards leaving for Los Angeles, Hill was, for the first time since those seven days before his Achilles injury, the clear No. 2 back entering this season. He's delivering.

Through the first four games, Hill has been one of the offense's best players. He's second on the team in receiving yards (161), just six yards behind tight end Isaiah Likely. He's averaging a career-high 5.4 yards per carry.

Hill led Baltimore in receiving in last Sunday's big win over the Bills, including a 19-yard touchdown in which he cooked a linebacker to break wide open. Hill said he has beaten his teammates on that play for two years in practice and has been begging for it to be called in a game.

"Whenever I get in the game and this opportunity to show myself, it's going to be wraps," Hill said. "When he called a play in the huddle, I was like, 'Bro, this is going to be a tuddy.' I see the ball coming. I'm just thinking about what my celebration is going to be."

Long a player that was overlooked, Hill is finally getting his shine. After Sunday's game, Harbaugh said Hill has been "very integral" to the Ravens' offense and (partly) joked that he's glad the Ravens resigned him before he broke out.

"[There is] nothing that can break him," Harbaugh said. "He just keeps coming in, he has a smile on his face, and he works hard. He's a really smart person, understands the game [and] understands the entire offense. ... Everything you ask him to do, he does well."

Derrick Henry is still the "King" and the player the entire league is buzzing about. He and Lamar Jackson are the headliners in the Ravens backfield. But Hill is feeling the appreciation now, too.

"It's definitely been an exciting time just because I feel like I put in a lot of work throughout my career here. Sometimes it goes unnoticed, or sometimes I just wouldn't get an opportunity," Hill said.

"So I just stay diligent and continue to work and get better every single week, every single year. And it's just really satisfying, even though I'm still extremely motivated, to finally get some play."

### **'He Didn't Want That Smoke'**

There's always been another motivator for Hill, constantly nipping at his heels – his little brother Dax. Younger by three years, Dax is a starting cornerback for the rival Cincinnati Bengals who has been a high achiever his whole life.

Justice was a three-star running back coming out of Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, Okla. Dax was a five-star recruit from the same school. Justice played at Oklahoma State. Dax played at Michigan. Justice was a fourth-round pick. Dax went in the first round.

So you better bet that while little bro has a more impressive resume on paper thus far, big brother doesn't give him an inch.

"Justice has always been extremely competitive," said their father, Derrick.

When Justice was in second grade, his teacher told his parents there was a problem. Justice kept finishing his work too fast and getting out of his seat to help other kids. When Justice was in middle school, they would start practice with a couple laps around the field. Justice would always finish first.

"The difference between him and Dax is Dax was faster than anyone on the team, but he didn't need the team to know that. He could finish middle. It didn't matter to him," Derrick said. "Justice, he wanted to finish first."

The brothers competed at everything. There was so much talk about which one was faster (they were both track standouts) that they finally had a race when Dax was a senior in high school and Justice was at Oklahoma State. They even made a whole polished YouTube video from it.

It appears Justice won by a hair, but he'll still take a rematch.

"I mean, I'm always the fastest one," Justice said. "We've got to race again, because I haven't really seen much from him lately."

The brothers will meet again Sunday at Paycor Stadium. There have been numerous brotherly battles in the NFL, but not too many when they are in direct competition. Last year, Dax tackled Justice on back-to-back rushing plays. The first was a 2-yard gain. The second was an 8-yard gain.

Justice said he didn't even know it was his brother who tackled him. It happened so fast, and Dax didn't say anything to him after the play.

"I didn't even know because he's quiet," Justice said. "If I was on defense and I was tackling him, he would know. I'm talking about stuff right then and there."

There was another play when Justice was slated to go out for a screen pass and Dax came off the edge as a blitzing right at him. Justice did his job, sidestepping a potential big hit on his brother to catch a flip from Jackson and pick up seven yards.

"He didn't want that smoke," Justice said with a laugh. "It's fun, but we'll see. We're going to have some opportunities this week."

Justice tries calling his brother during the week to talk smack but doesn't get an answer. When he playfully asked for the gameplan last year, Dax hung up on him. Between the two, there's only one trash talker, and he wears purple.

The Hill family goes out to dinner the night before the game when the Ravens and Bengals play each other. It's a time to catch up with each other in-person, but football is a subject they try to avoid.

"I do kid around sometimes. I'll tell Dax like, 'Hey, if you see your brother running your side, just let him go through,'" Derrick said. "He'll say, 'Dad, it doesn't work that way.'"

Derrick and his wife, Tia, will be at Sunday's game watching their boys. Tia will be wearing a half Ravens/half Bengals T-shirt. They cheer for both teams and root for no injuries.

"They never say who they want to win or anything like that. I don't think they have any favorites. I'm like, 'Yeah, I know we're going to win,'" Justice said with a smile.

"We never really played against each other until we got to NFL, and now we play each other two, three times a year. So it's starting to boil up a little bit. But after we're done, it's all fun and games."

After what Hill has been through, he's enjoying the ride. And he'll enjoy keeping it rolling in Cincinnati.

The Ravens' boast the NFL's top rushing game with he, Henry, and Jackson toting the rock. Once a player nearly left on the curb, Hill is now a key part of what could be the best backfield trio in the league.

"Yeah, I mean, we knew that before the season started," Hill said. "If the coaches utilize us all the right way, man, I don't think anybody really can stop us."

# With Ravens' Marlon Humphrey, Always Expect The Unexpected: 'There's Just No Replica Of Him'

THE ATHLETIC | JANUARY 7, 2025 | JEFF ZREBIEC

Marlon Humphrey was willing to talk, as long as it was on his terms. The longtime Baltimore Ravens cornerback can be elusive during game weeks. Despite his playful persona, he hasn't always had a warm and fuzzy relationship with the local media, and he seems just fine with that. Humphrey can retreat into his own world inside the Ravens' facility, and non-players and coaches aren't often welcomed in.

However, when Humphrey does talk and is engaged in the conversation, he's a fascinating listen. He's charismatic, colorful and smart. He speaks anecdotally, offers perspective, drops in self-deprecating humor and doesn't shy away from touchy subjects involving the team. He says what's on his mind with little concern of blowback.

A few days before the Ravens' Week 10 Thursday night game against the Cincinnati Bengals, there was plenty to talk about. Baltimore's defense was struggling, and first-year coordinator Zach Orr was shouldering much of the blame.

As Humphrey exited the Ravens' locker room and pulled up outside the equipment room, he was surrounded by reporters, creating a bottleneck in the main hallway. It was suggested to Humphrey by a Ravens public relations staffer that he head to the indoor practice facility, where there was more room and less disruption. Humphrey declined. It was either right here or nowhere.

"It really sucks when the product we're putting out there isn't what we're being coached, isn't what we're practicing," Humphrey said as part of a lengthy Q&A session. "That's kind of what hurts me."

The Ravens defense essentially hit rock bottom later that week in a 35-34 victory over the Bengals. Baltimore allowed Joe Burrow to throw for 428 yards and four touchdowns, including two second-half strikes to Ja'Marr Chase that covered more than 65 yards. Baltimore's defensive turnaround would start 10 days later.

Thus, it would be hard to cite Humphrey's public support of Orr as the factor that galvanized the defense or its play caller. However, the display of player accountability came at an important time and added to one of the themes of Baltimore's season. When the Ravens have needed Humphrey to make a play, settle things down or just say the right things, the 28-year-old has delivered.

"Marlon is a guy we count on," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said, "and Marlon comes through."

If you made a list of the team's biggest plays of the season, it would include Humphrey's late game-changing interception of Burrow in Cincinnati and his momentum-shifting forced fumble against the Bengals in Baltimore less than five weeks later. It would probably include his end zone interception of Baker Mayfield with the Ravens trailing the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in Week 7. His 37-yard, fourth-quarter pick six of the Pittsburgh Steelers' Russell Wilson in Week 16 was one of Baltimore's biggest plays all season.

There's no way the Ravens would be 12-5, AFC North champs, the conference's No. 3 seed and preparing for a home playoff game Saturday night against the Steelers without Humphrey being in top form all year.

"He's always going to be a vocal leader and kind of help us in that perspective, but man, the plays he's made have been in such big spots for us," said Ravens veteran defensive lineman Brent Urban. "His play has really done the talking as well. He's a guy who is influential whenever he speaks, but some of those plays he's made, the game has completely turned around."

In July of last year, there were legitimate questions about Humphrey's longtime future with the Ravens after an injury-marred, inconsistent 2023. After the season, the Ravens used first- and fourth-round picks on cornerbacks Nate Wiggins and T.J. Tampa in the 2024 NFL Draft. With Humphrey nearing his 30s and with a salary-cap hit that eclipsed \$20 million, this was viewed as a crucial year for the 2017 first-rounder.

He has responded with one of the best seasons of his career, earning himself a fourth Pro Bowl nod. He led all AFC players with a career-high six interceptions. He had a hand in seven of Baltimore's 17 takeaways. He finished fifth on the team in tackles and tied for fourth in tackles for loss. His ability to move inside and play the nickel role at a high level figured prominently in the secondary's improvement during the second half. And he's done it in typical Humphrey fashion: with flare, physicality and mercuriality.

"He definitely has a unique personality, but the thing I love about it is he's gonna be himself, and you're going to get Marlon, and he is going to tell you the truth," Orr said. "He is going to tell you how he feels, and it's always coming from a good place. I think Marlo really stepped up his leadership this year. He's always been a guy who's always been himself, but he's been a little bit more vocal, which I feel like he realized he has to because he's, what, Year 8? He's one of the longest-tenured Ravens here, so guys look up to him, guys listen to him."

About 90 minutes before kickoff of Baltimore's Week 18 victory over the Cleveland Browns at M&T Bank Stadium, Humphrey is sitting against the base of the uprights, using the padding as a backrest. He's writing in his journal, seemingly oblivious to the players warming up on the field. On an afternoon when temperatures are in the low 30s and the wind chill makes it feel much colder, Humphrey looks like he's sitting poolside in Cabo, Mexico, without a care in the world.

There might be nothing that the free-spirited Humphrey could do at this point that would surprise his teammates.

"It's something every day, just random stuff, so it's become normal," Ravens cornerback Jalyn Armour-Davis said. "You may see him walking around with an orange hat, an off-brand polo and some latex gloves. That's a regular day. You don't even ask him why. You're just used to seeing it because that's his normal. You know what you're going to get on the field, but off the field, it's a grab bag with Marlon."

“There’s just no replica of him. There’s no other Marlon.”

Ravens left tackle Ronnie Stanley, a teammate of Humphrey’s for the past eight years and his former podcast partner, calls the cornerback “the most authentic person you’ll ever meet.”

From his Instagram Live segments on team flights after wins to his offbeat posts on X — “(I) was today years old when I found out the Titanic was real” — to his constant chatter when he enters the team facility, the Ravens have learned to expect the unexpected with Humphrey. During a media availability last year, Humphrey acknowledged that he sought advice from owner Steve Bisciotti on his love life.

“He brings the brighter side out of a lot of people,” said Ravens safety Kyle Hamilton, one of Humphrey’s closest friends on the team. “He’s the same person every day. He’s unapologetically himself, and I think a lot of people learn from that.”

That doesn’t mean Humphrey doesn’t occasionally rankle team officials with some of his comments or social media practices, but they’re usually chalked up to “Marlon being Marlon.” Meanwhile, pretty much everybody at the Ravens’ facility has a story to tell about Humphrey’s eccentricity.

Hamilton met Humphrey and former teammate Geno Stone at a local golf course last summer. Humphrey showed up with six random clubs from different brands and no golf bag. His six clubs hung out of the golf cart for the round.

Former Ravens and current Steelers linebacker Patrick Queen invited Humphrey to his football camp in Louisiana before the 2023 season. Humphrey pulled up to the camp in a brand-new orange Corvette. When Humphrey stepped out of the car, Queen noticed he was wearing a button-down shirt that you’d sport with a suit, dress pants and dress shoes.

“That’s how he showed up for a football camp in the country,” Queen said last year. “It was storming outside, and his shoes were getting all muddy. I’m like, ‘You knew you were coming to a football camp, and you knew we were supposed to do stuff after, like go fishing. Why would you wear that?’”

“He took a deep breath and was like, ‘Yeah, I didn’t think this through.’ That’s Marlon. Marlon is freaking Marlon.”

Then, there’s Humphrey’s demeanor on the field. He chats plenty there, too. But he takes his craft extremely seriously. He trains hard and doesn’t like missing practices. He’s attentive in meetings. He plays with physicality and passion, and he takes a ton of pride in posting every week and being there for his teammates. That’s what made missing seven games last season so difficult.

“You never know what you’ll get with Marlon, but the good thing with him is he puts his business first, comes to work every day and just works,” cornerback Brandon Stephens said. “That’s what we all respect about him.”

None of his teammates would go as far as to say they’ve noticed a different or more focused Humphrey this season. They believe it’s just a matter of the cornerback being healthy again. But Humphrey did acknowledge that he reached an epiphany in the offseason. First, after dealing with a foot injury that required surgery in the 2023 preseason, he wanted to play at a weight about 10 pounds lighter than he had in recent seasons. He also decided he was not going to sweat the small stuff. He was going to avoid stressful situations as much as possible.

That meant showing up for the team plane 10 minutes earlier so he didn’t have to feel rushed. That meant packing for road trips the night before, rather than the day of.

“Just try to think about less stress,” Humphrey said recently. “Get here early even though you don’t have anything to do. You’re going to find something to do. That’s something else I’ve changed, which has helped, but just really enjoying life has been the biggest thing. It’s just so easy here (with) this organization, these coaches. I’m just grateful. All of those little things have really helped me just take stress off the body. You can just be able to play more free. I feel like it’s shown up this year.”

Humphrey split the week of the Ravens’ Dec. 21 game against the Steelers between a local hospital and the team’s practice facility. A few days before the game, Humphrey’s wife gave birth to a baby boy named Duke. The Ravens gave Humphrey a game ball to present to his son after the cornerback’s first career interception returned for a touchdown highlighted a dominant fourth quarter that pulled Baltimore into a first-place tie in the AFC North.

Meeting with reporters later, Humphrey was uncharacteristically emotional. He spoke about the new addition to his family and the craziness of the week. He talked about how much it meant to him to get the turnover and for the defense to play such a prominent role in a big win. And he expressed gratitude for how much he has experienced over the years with the Ravens and how meaningful it is to be able to play in big rivalry games.

Three weeks later, Humphrey is preparing for another, and he’s doing it his way.

“I don’t think there’s any corner who plays like Marlon plays,” Armour-Davis said. “He’s a cover corner with the physicality of a linebacker. There’s not many out there like him. Maybe him and Jalen Ramsey as far as physically. Marlon’s one-of-one, though. That’s what makes him who he is.”

# Adisa Isaac Followed His Mom's Plan And His Coach's Advice On Unlikely Journey To NFL

BALTIMORE BANNER | DECEMBER 11, 2024 | GIANA HAN

The second night of the NFL draft, Adisa Isaac sat in a bar chair, his mom beside him, his high school coach behind him, all anxiously awaiting a call.

His mom, Lisa Wiltshire-Isaac, is an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago who "saw" football but never watched it. But it made her son happy, so she learned it and encouraged him.

His coach, Kyle Allen, was once a young football player with NFL dreams. Those weren't realistic for him, so he turned toward coaching. In Isaac, he saw a player with the skill and the character to realize the dreams he couldn't.

The two of them, now family, were brought together by one important thing: love for Isaac.

Just before the draft started, Allen pulled Isaac, a standout outside linebacker at Penn State, aside with tears in his eyes. He thanked him and his family for allowing him to experience his NFL dreams through Isaac, a sentiment Isaac found funny.

If not for Allen's knowledge, Isaac isn't sure if he would have known how to get to where he was, anticipating a call from an NFL general manager. If not for Allen's kindness, he doesn't know if his family would have followed Allen's guidance.

Then the two brushed their tears aside to go join their families — Isaac's mom and siblings and Allen's wife and children — as they waited for the call.

It took longer than anticipated but, when it came, Allen saw the weight lift off the young man's shoulders, chased by the huge grin that spread across his face. And then Isaac turned to his loved ones and scooped up his mom in an expression of joy, ready for the next step in their journey.

Open to anything

Once upon a time, Isaac wore tap shoes instead of cleats. He'd also drawn a bow across the strings of a violin and raised his voice in song with the choir.

It was all part of Wiltshire-Isaac's plan to give him what she called a normal childhood.

"Normal" had a different meaning in their household. Many would call Isaac's "normal" unique. His three siblings — two older brothers and a younger sister — all have different diagnoses and are classified as nonverbal. To Isaac, that was just his family, and Kyle, Y'ashua and Tadj are just his siblings.

His mother always wanted her children to have every opportunity regardless of their abilities. So she exposed them to as many opportunities as she could, and she allowed Isaac to find his passion.

So what was Isaac like as a musician?

"Very compliant," Wiltshire-Isaac said, laughing.

That's because he had a similar mentality to his mother's. He was open to anything and forced nothing.

"I really just slid around and kept trying until I found the perfect fit," Isaac said.

For a while, he thought he would go into the medical field and maybe work with kids with disabilities (both of which are still options with the degree he earned at Penn State), but it became obvious that sports were where Isaac shined. He ran track, played basketball and wrestled.

One day, some of Isaac's middle school classmates brought their pads to school. Isaac was intrigued. Football was the one thing he hadn't tried. He was vaguely aware of it, but he didn't know much about the rules or the teams.

Upon hearing about her son's interest, Wiltshire-Isaac started asking around about how to get him involved. She talked to other parents, who told her how they traveled with their kids for practice and games. With four kids at home, three of them on very different schedules than Isaac, and a job of her own, traveling wasn't possible.

Isaac, knowing how busy his mom was, didn't push the issue. He figured he would wait until high school to try out.

College football?



Coach Allen of Canarsie High School in Brooklyn, New York, was in the middle of one of the final practices before the first game of the season when one of his new assistant coaches brought Isaac out to meet him.

Students were long past fitness testing and tryouts. But Isaac and his mother didn't know about those. Robert Palmer, the gym teacher and Allen's new assistant coach, had heard from one of the school's security guards that Wiltshire-Isaac had been asking how to get her son involved in football.

"We were literally four days away from our first varsity game," Allen said. "Since I knew he didn't have much experience, I just threw him on JV. Which, looking at it now, it's kind of funny he played JV at all."

Allen began to get to know Isaac as the kid he was at practice and at school. He didn't ask many questions about his family, and when Isaac said he had to go take care of his siblings, he always assumed they were much younger than he was.

When Wiltshire-Isaac first brought Kyle, Y'ashua and Tadj to the field, Allen had no heads-up that they might be different in any way. Although it was quickly evident, Allen was unfazed and unbothered.

"I didn't approach them with soft gloves," Allen said. "I just started talking to them regular, and I think that made his mother more comfortable."

His instinct was correct. Isaac described his mother as protective of her children and how people react to them. Allen's reaction, or lack thereof, helped build trust faster than normal, Isaac said. As a result, she allowed Isaac to go places as long as Allen was there.

But one day she called Allen to check on Isaac. Allen thought Isaac was with her. Because he wasn't, they learned Isaac had evidently skipped practice.

When Allen saw Isaac next, he lit into him, telling him this was his ticket to a better life for him and his family, that football was what would help him hand his mother the keys to a house one day.

Isaac calmly weathered the storm. Then he never missed another practice. Little did Allen know, Isaac had no clue what he was talking about. It wasn't until a few years later that Isaac told him he didn't know what college football was at the time.

'Enjoying the moment'

As Allen worked Isaac out in front of college scouts early one morning before school, he saw Wiltshire-Isaac peeking in. With a finger to her lips, she indicated not to alert Isaac to her presence.

"It was the cutest thing," Allen said. "She was so excited to watch this happen and to learn more about it."

Those early-morning visits became common, and they stayed under the radar. Isaac, absorbed in his task, did not notice his mom among those watching.

Wiltshire-Isaac chuckled when she thought back to those mornings.

"To see him just work out and just to see the process of what he's doing and how he's doing it, I was just enjoying the moment because you never get those moments again," Wiltshire-Isaac said.

Isaac, who was sliding around looking for the perfect fit, found it in football.

Palmer recalled a high school football jamboree where Adisa went up against an offensive lineman with a Division I scholarship and was "destroying him left and right." That was when the coaching staff truly started to understand what they had on their hands. Because Wiltshire-Isaac trusted Allen, she allowed him and his coaches to start taking Isaac on college visits. Those visits solidified what the Canarsie coaches thought — defensive coordinator Chris Sino said hearing Division I coaches talk about how special he was showed them Isaac was great outside the context of their team and their league.

The first college trip was to Rutgers, and Allen recalled Isaac was confused by the school. Isaac added he didn't really even know what Rutgers was. But his lack of knowledge didn't keep Rutgers from giving him his first scholarship offer.

Isaac didn't grasp that, either.

"At first, I didn't really understand the ins and outs and the offer," Adisa said. "Like, how did it work? Did I have to sign right now? What's going on? But I knew that I had an opportunity on the table as far as being able to go to college for free and being able to play football."

One day, a family friend of Palmer's who worked at Fordham University came to visit. After watching him, he knew Isaac was too good a player for the school. He had previously served as a graduate assistant for Penn State, so he made some calls.

His instinct was right. Penn State turned out to be the right fit for Isaac with its mix of football, school, environment and distance. It was close enough that his siblings could watch games but far enough that he would learn to stand on his own — especially away from the influences of the community where he grew up, another assistant coach, Dominic Fievre, said.

Football had helped Isaac come out of his shell — Wiltshire-Isaac said she saw him start to express himself more verbally and grow in confidence and self-esteem — but away from home, he learned what it meant to be Adisa, which is all his mother wanted.

“That’s the whole thing — for him to do his own thing,” Wiltshire-Isaac said. “I never wanted him to feel like he’s doing it for us. That’s one of my big things. You’re doing it for you, and we’re here to support you. We’re here to enjoy the moment with you.”

‘Can’t mess with her house’

After signing a four-year, \$5,648,034 rookie contract with the Ravens, Isaac has the means to buy his mother a new house.

There’s one problem — she doesn’t want one.

“I can’t mess with her house,” Isaac said, laughing.

She and Allen’s biggest request was a box of Ravens jerseys with the No. 50 on them and “Isaac” across the back.

“My daughter’s principal, because everybody — EVERYBODY— is in it with him, she’s like, ‘Did the jersey come out yet? Let me go and see. Let me go and see. I’m going to order. Everybody’s going to order!’” Wiltshire-Isaac said before the season.

They’re very different than Penn State’s simple blue-and-white jerseys with no names on them. Wiltshire-Isaac joked she would have to cover up the portrait of Isaac in his Penn State uniform and start putting black and purple around the house to help his siblings transition their fandom to Baltimore.

Baltimore was the best place for Isaac for many reasons. His oldest brother is afraid of flying. Wiltshire-Isaac’s first reaction to hearing Baltimore was “OK, good, we can still come to the games,” she said.

Baltimore was also where Isaac’s friend and mentor, outside linebacker Odafe Oweh, played. And, based on what Isaac had seen and what Oweh had experienced, Baltimore’s defense fit Adisa’s preferred style of play.

Allen and Isaac said it’s funny because they weren’t even considering he could go to the Ravens. They thought they might hear from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers at 92 or the Philadelphia Eagles at 94, so they were confused when his phone rang at the 93rd pick.

“I’m like, ‘Baltimore? Wait a minute. He’s on the phone with the Ravens?’” Allen said. “Sometimes things happen for a reason. You fall down in the draft and end up at the No. 1 defense in the league? That is a blessing.”

But just like the night of the draft, Isaac’s patience was tested when he finally got his shot. He suited up for rookie camp before aggravating his hamstring, an injury he’d been dealing with since the NFL combine.

Isaac missed all of organized team activities and minicamp, along with two weeks of training camp.

He finally returned to practice Aug. 6 and made his preseason debut Aug. 17 against the Atlanta Falcons. It was clear he was out of shape from his long absence, coach John Harbaugh said, but he still impressed.

“He was a factor, rushing the passer, in the run game,” Harbaugh said. “He’s a big guy. He’s explosive. He’s not as far along ... as far as the conditioning part of it — because he had the hamstring, so he’s going to be sore tomorrow, I’m quite sure. ... So I do worry about that a little bit with him, but I am happy about the way he played. He sure looked good. He’s kind of got a start there.”

After his setback, Adisa has a fight ahead to work himself into a significant role. The Ravens made him inactive for nine games, and when he does play, it’s mostly on special teams. But the Ravens see potential in him.

Regardless, he has a bunch of family ready to make the trip from New York to Baltimore— or from New York City to East Rutherford, NJ, where the Ravens will take on the New York Giants on Sunday.

Allen, an avid 49ers fan, has assured Isaac he’s pulling for the Ravens and will root for them even if they play the 49ers.

“He saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself,” Isaac said. “When you have somebody like that in your corner, it makes life a lot easier.”

And Wiltshire-Isaac, who didn’t know anything about football, can now proudly explain the game to her co-workers, throwing out words such as “edge” and “sack” and “tackles for loss.”

“She’s everything,” Isaac said. “Without her, this doesn’t work. This doesn’t go. I’m not here.”

# Lamar Jackson Chasing Another Level To His Game

SI.COM | **SEPTEMBER 4, 2024** | ALBERT BREER

Since Lamar Jackson's whereabouts are a popular topic of conversation every offseason, we can start by shedding some light on where the Baltimore Ravens quarterback, and reigning NFL MVP, spent much of the spring: in meetings with his offensive coaches.

The idea for Jackson, from those coaches, was to increase his ownership of the offense going into Year 2 in offensive coordinator Todd Monken's scheme. And the implication of the work was unmistakable.

Is there another level to Jackson's game, something new for him to tap into?

Posed with that question, the 27-year-old smiled broadly.

"Time will tell," Jackson said.

We already know a lot about the seventh-year pro, who won his second NFL MVP award last year. He is, without question, one of the greatest dual-threat quarterbacks to step on a football field—fourth all-time in rushing yards at the position, less than 1,000 yards from Michael Vick's career record, and ninth in career passer rating (98.0). All of that's come with incremental improvement over the years, as he's rounded out his game.

So it might be tough for some to believe there's another leap for his career to take. But if you listen to enough people around Baltimore, Jackson included—while the rest of us wait to get our first look at the 2024 version of Jackson at Arrowhead Stadium on Thursday night—you'll hear that it's coming.

"It's just in the mental [part of the game]," Jackson says, leaning against a wall in a hallway next to the Ravens' locker room. "Just being more of a student of the game, and not to model my game after Tom Brady, but Tom Brady's a guy I feel like we should all try to look at—What had him so successful? Seven Super Bowls. He won with another team. His mindset, his approach to the game, him just knowing where all the guys are, knowing to get a protection.

"He's not a guy who was a dual threat. He's going to throw the ball. He's going to protect it. I know I can get away from these guys, I know where the free rusher is, but let me protect it, let my guys work instead of going to run all the time. Small things. That's the 1%."

This summer, Jackson's been chasing that 1% with all that he's got, and setting the bar as high as he ever has. Which is where all the work with Monken, and everyone else, came into that bigger equation.

The way the Ravens have worked their coaching staff to evolve their schemes has been present since John Harbaugh first arrived in 2008. Harbaugh will move guys around, move guys out and promote guys, looking for the cutting edge he wants his program to live on.

Whereas some folks constantly seek continuity, Harbaugh knows when change is needed.

The Ravens have hit those points twice on offense over Jackson's time. The first occasion came after his rookie year, when Harbaugh promoted Greg Roman to take Marty Mornhinweg's place as OC. Where Mornhinweg was good with young quarterbacks, Roman would give them the best shot to lean into Jackson's strengths and build a quarterback-driven run game. Four years later, it was time to evolve the pass game and build it off that run game, which is why Harbaugh moved Roman out in favor of Monken, the former Georgia OC.

Jackson reaped the benefits. In doing my annual preseason quarterback poll (which will be published Thursday; here's the 2023 version), I heard resounding confirmation of it in how opponents saw the Ravens' star, saying that he was more consistent, more refined and more accurate as a passer last season than ever before.

The hope in Baltimore is that all of that was just the beginning.

Jackson, for his part, got the offseason going with that in mind.

"Last year, totally different system, different coaches, different mindset with the coaching, I just had to be around them a lot more," Jackson says. "Coming off that AFC championship game and watching film on that, I believe, going into my seventh year, I need to be a more vocal leader to the guys. I'm getting older. I'm not the young guy anymore. There are more guys younger than me on the offensive side of the ball. I got to step it up. It's my time to speak, it's me and Mark Andrews [as the veterans]."

"My mindset, this season, I'm seeing the new guys, I'm seeing them run their routes and do different things, and I'm gonna say, That right there probably worked in college, but in the league, it's totally different now. I approach those guys differently."

But before he could, he had to invest time with Monken to deeper understand the coach's offensive philosophy and make it his own.

So the two sat and looked back on the 2023 season, all that went right and also what went wrong. They worked through how Jackson saw the game. It might've been adjusting a route in a concept or adding an element to a play. Whatever the change was, it was always done with how Jackson sees and plays situations in mind.

"I'm going to let the coaches coach—that's their job," Jackson continues. "They're the teachers. We're the students. But sometimes we're on the field, and we see some things different. Sometimes what we see on film didn't happen on the field [the way it appeared to]. I just let coach know, Last time we did this and last time we played this team, this is what they gave me. I feel like if we do this, this will work. We pitch ideas off each other, and that's how we move forward."

And as Monken and Jackson moved forward in tailoring the offense more and more to Jackson, the two-time MVP became more comfortable as its conductor, not just with his arms and legs, but also with his mouth.

"It's just me being more vocal," Jackson says. "It was a new system. I wasn't making checks. Now it's, Let me flip this. It's knowing where everything is."

As a result, Jackson isn't the only one who's taken a big step this offseason. Third-year tight end Isaiah Likely and second-year receiver Zay Flowers have, too, and a big reason why is the chemistry they have with Jackson and how they're collectively putting the offense to work, the same way Monken and Jackson have together.

Jackson's leadership style helps, too, in how natural it comes across. According to those around him, he's always most comfortable as another one of the guys, seeing, in other words, his teammates as big brothers and little brothers from the start. When he won his first MVP, he had a lot more big brothers, guys that had more NFL experience than him, than little brothers. Four years later, through his second MVP season, that has flipped. But his approach hasn't.

Which has allowed him to do what he's intended—help everyone.

"I'm just talking to one of my big bros, or I'm talking to one of my little bros, that's how it's going," he says. "Nobody's trying to doubt anybody. We're trying to lift each other up because we're trying to win. We're all working together as a team. That's how we're approaching it."

And with Jackson at least becoming more of a teacher than he has been, even if he still sees himself as a student, the Ravens have gotten more efficient.

"We're speaking more ball out there," he continues. "When we see it on the field, we're talking about it, instead of waiting until we're inside the building. We talk about it right there. We go get extra throws then—I'm thinking this way. I'm thinking this way. Then I'm going to throw the ball this way."

Which is to say now, even if it is still Monken's offense, now it's Jackson's, too.

Jackson isn't dodging the elephant in the room.

He's 58–19 in the regular season, and 2–4 in the playoffs. When he's healthy, the Ravens invariably make it to the postseason. The results simply haven't carried over when they get there and, no, making it to the AFC title game last year for the first time wasn't any consolation, or even much of a step in his mind.

It wasn't good enough.

"We lost," he says, simply, when asked what he took from the experience. "That's what bothers me. There's a lot of things that you can nitpick in the game and say, We had a chance to win here. At the end of the day, it's a team game. All of us played a part in that." As for what bothers him most?

"Everything," he answers. "The mistakes we made throughout the game that put us in a situation to lose the game."

The result was another example, for Jackson, of how each individual team has only one shot.

Three of the five linemen who started in front of him in that game are gone. The backfield has been revamped, with Derrick Henry in, and J.K. Dobbins and Gus Edwards out. The defense has seen changes, too, with Patrick Queen and Jadeveon Clowney now elsewhere.

What won't change, even as the scheme evolves and the roster churns, is the foundation of how the Ravens maintain their standard.

That's the part of 2023 that Jackson isn't trying to erase. The Ravens finished the regular season 13–4. Their blowouts of the Detroit Lions, San Francisco 49ers, Miami Dolphins and Seattle Seahawks might've been the four most impressive wins any team posted last season. And whenever things went wrong, they quickly got fixed. The Ravens haven't lost back-to-back games that Jackson started and finished in the past four years, which underscores what Jackson looks back on fondly from 2023.

"How we battled, just the team overall," he says. "Things didn't go our way sometimes throughout the season, but we battled. And we had adversity. Toward the end of the season, people were like, These guys are going to beat them. The Dolphins, 49ers. We went out there and we showed what we were capable of doing, showed them what Raven football is about. That's what I'm most proud of."

That's another reminder that this isn't a guy, or a team, that needs any sort of overhaul.

But in looking for a different final result, Jackson's making his way down a new path, one he hopes will take him where the two MVP seasons didn't. The way there, now more than it's ever been, is to take his teammates with him—the same way Brady used to in New England and then Tampa.

Some quarterbacks see that as making a team, or an offense, their own, and that's happening in Baltimore. But more than that, Jackson sees it now as his responsibility.

"I see a lot of guys that see me being MVP; I don't talk about the MVP. A lot of guys look up to me. I'm seeing them look up to me, but at the same time, I still feel like a young guy," he says. "In this league, the quarterback is always the leader of the team, the leader of the offense, and I've just had to take a step forward, and step into doing what I'm supposed to do."

And in seeing him do so, the Ravens are pretty confident Jackson will take everyone where they're trying to go.

# Lamar Jackson Is Authentically Himself, And He's Not Going To Apologize For It

THE ATHLETIC | **SEPTEMBER 4, 2024** | JEFF ZREBIEC

Lamar Jackson has little interest in talking about other quarterbacks, both past and present. He sidesteps the questions like he does with blitzing linebackers bursting through the A gap.

Since he entered the NFL, reporters have tried to cajole Jackson to talk in-depth about his contemporaries, to reveal his admiration for other top quarterbacks, to wax poetic about the guys who he watched and emulated as a kid growing up in South Florida.

Those queries usually end up similarly to how Jackson answered a two-part question Sunday about his relationship with Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes, the guy he will share a field with Thursday night in the NFL's regular-season opener.

"I don't have a relationship with him. I don't think I have a relationship with any quarterback in the league," Jackson said. "I don't take anything from him. I just play my game, but he's a great quarterback. I'm going to say that. He has the accolades to prove it. He makes things happen on the field that make his team successful."

This is season No. 7 for Jackson. In some ways, he insists he feels like a rookie. He's determined to hold on to the youthful exuberance that most rookies possess. That helps him remember to cherish every day he has in the NFL.

In other ways, Jackson knows his NFL clock is ticking, particularly when it comes to accomplishing the one thing he's obsessed over since that late April 2018 night when he held up a Baltimore Ravens jersey as a newly minted first-round pick. It's also the thing Mahomes and the Chiefs have done three times over. Jackson has never led his team to a Super Bowl. The Ravens got close last season. That they couldn't finish the job — and the Chiefs did — ate at Jackson all offseason. He thinks about it all hours of the day, whether he's on the football field or not.

"I haven't gotten a Super Bowl yet. That's the only thing that bothers me," Jackson said. "I don't care what (naysayers) say because they still talk about Michael Jordan, they still talk about LeBron (James). They still talk about Steph Curry. Those guys got championships. I don't have one yet. So it's like, 'All right, cool, you're going to talk about me.' I need to get a championship, a few championships. But I know they're still going to talk about me. I have to live with it."

Jackson turns 28 in January, his birthday falling a few days after the end of the regular season and a few days before the start of the NFL playoffs. With two MVP awards and three Pro Bowl selections on his resume, with wins in 58 of the 77 regular-season games he's started since entering the NFL, Jackson is in the unenviable position of having nothing really to prove over the next four months of the regular season.

Jackson and the 2024 Ravens will be ultimately judged by what they do if they make the playoffs. They are just 2-4 in playoff games with Jackson as their quarterback. Their postseason issues, which were on full display during the team's home AFC championship loss to the Chiefs in January, have been numerous. However, Jackson has absorbed an abundance of blame with nine turnovers in those six contests — and Baltimore's much-ballyhooed offense averaging just over 10 points per game in the losses.

"I think the thing that gets lost about that narrative is one, it's real and it's true; and two, you earn your way into that narrative," said former NFL quarterback and current ESPN analyst Dan Orlovsky. "That is, I guess, a burden that you are in rare air to be in. There's not a ton of guys in the NFL that are grouped into that, that while we appreciate and love and admire the regular-season accomplishments, you don't get into a different level of conversation until that becomes what you do in the playoffs."

"I do think it's still important to say that the growth of Lamar last season was really high-end. The way that he developed as a passer in their drop-pass game and the full-field reads, how quickly he got the ball out of his hands in their quick passing game, the development of that. ... We can acknowledge the growth and also acknowledge the air that he's in."

Only four quarterbacks who will start in Week 1 have been starters for a Super Bowl winner. The list starts with Mahomes and also includes Aaron Rodgers, Russell Wilson and Matthew Stafford. Jackson's elusive pursuit has plenty of company from the likes of Josh Allen, Dak Prescott, Joe Burrow, Tua Tagovailoa, Justin Herbert, Brock Purdy, Trevor Lawrence and Jalen Hurts. Burrow, Hurts and Purdy have at least played in Super Bowls.

Yet, Jackson is the only guy in that group who has won multiple MVP awards and whose head coach said this in July:

"The vision that we have together is that Lamar Jackson is going to become and be known and be recognized as the greatest quarterback ever to play in the history of the National Football League," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said.

Since the NFL announced mid-May that Chiefs-Ravens would kick off the regular season, Jackson and Mahomes have shared the game's promotional marquee. They are two of the faces of the NFL and have combined to win four of the past six MVP trophies.

With three Super Bowl victories and another appearance in the past five years, Mahomes has put himself in his own stratosphere. That's been true on the field and Madison Avenue. According to Forbes, the Chiefs quarterback made \$20 million in endorsements alone last season, thanks to partnerships with Adidas, State Farm, Gatorade, Subway, Oakley and Coors Light, among others.

"Mahomes, right now, is head and shoulders above everybody. In second place right now is probably Travis Kelce, an upshot from Taylor Swift," said Bob Dorfman, a San Francisco-based sports marketing guru. "With Jackson, his upside depends on how well he does in the postseason. It's unlimited if he can finally get over the hump."

Mahomes seemingly embraces the limelight, or at least tolerates it. He's out and about at different events around Kansas City. He and his wife, Brittany, have financial stakes in three Kansas City sports franchises. The Mahomes family is pictured together often. Mahomes' professional circle, which includes his agent Chris Cabott and performance trainer Bobby Stroupe, is well defined.

That contrasts greatly with Jackson, who in a lot of ways is an NFL superstar hiding in plain sight. That's exactly the way he wants it. Jackson doesn't have a ton of endorsement deals, and that's seemingly been his preference. Given his fame and popularity, particularly with kids, Jackson would be an easy sell for several companies. His known investments are mostly in local ventures in his hometown of Pompano Beach, Fla., or his NFL home in Baltimore.

The role Jackson's mother, Felicia Jones, has played in his life is well documented. Jackson has spoken about his mother, siblings and his 3-year-old daughter, Milan, at different points of his career — even though the family stays well out of the public eye. Jackson doesn't have an agent or a high-profile quarterback coach or athletic trainer. Little is known about his inner circle and relationships beyond the fact that rapper Kodak Black has been a friend of his since childhood.

"You guys talk to us about football. My personal life, I leave that personal," Jackson said. "At the end of the day, it's about me playing football. It's not about anything else. It's not about who I knew growing up. That didn't help me get here. My mindset helped me get here. That's why I never looked at it like, 'Oh, yeah, when I get to the league, I'm going to be doing this, or talking about these people.' No, if I want to talk about these people, they would have been around me. You guys would have been seeing that."

Fiercely protective of his and his family's privacy, Jackson describes himself as a homebody who enjoys hanging out with loved ones, doting on his daughter, watching cartoons and listening to music. The author of a children's book — "I Dream, You Dream, Let Us Dream!" — that encourages kids to dream big, Jackson and his Forever Dreamers Foundation hosts an annual event in Pompano Beach called "Fun Day with LJ" that caters to kids.

Jackson would like to have a similar event for children in Baltimore, but he worries about safety concerns because his presence draws such a crowd. He joked that every time he goes out in public, an impromptu autograph show or photo shoot commences. He learned long ago that it's impossible to please everyone.

"You have to be with me to know me," Jackson said. "I'm going to show love to everyone. We're all humans at the end of the day, and I don't want anybody to get a bad rap on me. I'm not a bad person. I'm who I am. I'm going to just be me, but I see people saying, 'I love Lamar, he's like this or he's like that.' It's like, you don't know me. I just be chilling, for real. I'm not even outgoing. I'd just rather be in my house, but if I could go out and hang out with my family, I'd do that."

Those who know Jackson well even choose their words about him carefully with the quarterback already a lightning rod for scrutiny. They also understand that Jackson doesn't particularly care what "outsiders" know about him, but why give the "talking heads" another headline?

"That's something that I think is why this whole league respects him," said Ravens wide receiver Nelson Agholor, who spends time with Jackson in the offseason in South Florida. "For him to be as special of a talent as he is, he's also the most authentic man that we've seen. He's very consistent as a human being. He keeps everything real, he respects real and he embraces everybody to be themselves. That's what you love about him."

"He speaks life into everybody in here, because everything is about the ultimate goal."

Around the Ravens' facility, Jackson is the Pied Piper. His locker is a popular gathering spot for teammates. It's not unique to see Jackson locked in a light-hearted conversation with a defensive player, or even a member of Baltimore's practice squad.

As he thought this offseason about ways to help his team get to another level, Jackson first reflected on his play. He felt he got "fat" last year and lacked the elite explosiveness that had long been his trademark. He's lost weight and is as lean as he's been in years, prompting Roquan Smith to say recently that Jackson looks like he did when he was at Louisville and winning the Heisman Trophy.

Jackson also thought more about his role as a leader and felt like he needed to be more vocal. Part of that is being more open with teammates on what he expects. Jackson acknowledged that he's struggled to get on teammates in the past because he didn't want them to think he's lost faith in them. There's also an element of being more conversational with offensive coordinator Todd Monken and the rest of the coaching staff about what he likes and doesn't like.

"What I've noticed about Lamar really is more of an intangible thing: his urgency as a leader, his urgency with other players," Ravens general manager Eric DeCosta said. "He's just really in tune with the other players every single practice. He's so engaged with the

coaches. He's engaged with his teammates. Heck, he's engaged with me — we talk personnel. ... He's got great ideas and suggestions. He just really wants to win badly."

Jackson has an unwavering belief in himself and how he does things. He's had to, given the skepticism he's faced about his NFL quarterback prospects since he was young. His way doesn't always perfectly align with how the Ravens see things. For example, they'd surely prefer that he attends the team's voluntary offseason workouts, which Jackson has done in recent years only sporadically.

However, Jackson and the Ravens, who agreed to a five-year, \$260 million contract extension in April 2023, ending a difficult year-plus negotiation, are in lockstep in what's truly important to each other. Both sides understand there has to be a little give.

"Like I always tell you guys, I love competing and I hate to lose. I really hate it," Jackson said. "These are all my brothers here. They know what you see from me is what you get."

As the game played out on a screen in the quarterback room this summer, Jackson grew increasingly agitated. He has what some Ravens have described as a photographic memory, so Jackson didn't need to be reminded of some of the low moments from Baltimore's 17-10 loss to the Chiefs in the AFC championship. This, however, was teaching tape for quarterbacks coach Tee Martin — and there was something to be gained from watching it.

"I wanted to rip the (screen) in half," Jackson said while uttering a guttural sigh.

Jackson laid out all the Ravens' miscues: poor passes, costly turnovers, botched assignments, penalties. Jackson felt the Ravens put too much pressure on themselves and didn't react well to adversity, spending too much time dwelling on what had already happened.

"That was us. That was our doing," Jackson said. "Those guys had won championships. Those guys, I feel, they knew how to come out of those situations. We didn't. I felt we were kind of immature. It was like, 'We've got to make something happen fast,' and we got out of our bodies. We didn't need to. We can't get frustrated with adversity."

Jackson vividly remembers the eerie feeling in the locker room, how a group of guys who were convinced they were part of the best team in football was reduced to stunned silence and again forced to take a backseat to the Chiefs. For Jackson, that meant more questions about his postseason struggles.

"Lamar knows it. He's got to get past (Mahomes) when it matters most," Orlovsky said. "He's not going to run from that. I think it's a good dynamic. Obviously, the NFL is incredibly healthy with their young quarterbacks. I always say this: The great thing about Lamar — and I say this in spending time with him and spending time with the Ravens organization — he is unapologetically who he is. There's really nobody in the league like him at that position. There's just not. I think that lies the beauty within him outside his tremendous talent."

Jackson's confidence in himself and uber competitiveness are probably the best explanations as to why he has always been so reluctant to talk about other quarterbacks and embrace comparisons with past NFL stars.

But there's also the matter of him not wanting to add to a narrative out there that he believes is overblown. Sure, Jackson enjoyed and admired watching other players, including Michael Vick, Donovan McNabb and Reggie Bush. But he didn't grow up with the idea of being the next anybody.

All he's ever wanted to be is the best Lamar Jackson. He's well on his way, but Jackson understands there are still quite a few chapters that need to be written.

"The story will be told about me probably when I'm done playing," Jackson said. "I don't try and tell stories about my past. I'm living in the moment right now. I remember everything that has gone on — how I felt at the time and all of that. But right now, I focus on what's in front of me."



# Cover Story: Isaiah Likely Has Gone From Basketball To Baller

BALTIMORERAVENS.COM | OCTOBER 8, 2024 | RYAN MINK

Isaiah Likely's college coach, Jamie Chadwell, had an inkling that the tight end he lured from New England to Coastal Carolina might be special.

There was one problem. It seemed like every time Likely rose over his defender like a wave at the top of its crest, a crash followed. He was a big kid with unreal leaping ability, but he couldn't land. And the way he ran was a little funky, too.

"He'd go up and make a catch over the middle and you're like, 'Oh my!' And then he'd land and be hurt for whatever amount of days," Chadwell said. "We laugh about it now because, obviously look at him, he can go up and do almost anything."

No matter how it looks, Likely is a baller. In his third NFL season, he's turned into one of the Ravens' most dangerous weapons and Lamar Jackson's most trusted targets.

When Jackson needed someone to make a play Sunday in Cincinnati after stiff-arming a defender twice and scrambling to the sideline, he tossed a jump ball up to Likely, who was double covered. Likely rose up and came down with it, the second of his two touchdowns to help the Ravens score a wild 41-38 overtime win.

To say Likely is on the cusp of a breakout would be to forget the ridiculous plays he made down the stretch last season stepping in for Mark Andrews. And yet, it still feels like there's so much more Likely can do.

And it all started with an awkward-moving kid from a basketball town.

## First Love? Basketball

Looking at his background, basketball was more likely than football (no more puns, I promise).

Likely's uncle played at Providence College. His godfather was a 1,000-point scorer in high school and his grandfather was a 2,000-point scorer. Even though he grew up just outside Boston during Tom Brady's heyday, Likely rooted more for the Celtics than the Patriots.

"Where I'm from, Cambridge, Massachusetts, you gotta play basketball," Likely said. "They're not really known for football. I fell in love with basketball early."

Likely played point guard, shooting guard, and small forward. He was big and strong enough to guard the other team's power forward, then bring the ball down the court as a point guard, drive the lane, and dunk.

Likely started playing basketball and football when he was 4 but started leaning towards football early in high school. He swapped going to AAU basketball games for the weight room.

"My family loved when I played basketball but understood football was definitely the road I was going down," Likely said. "It was hard to give it up. But the more I played football, the more I put my own finesse on it, the more I fell in love with it, and the more basketball faded away."

Likely started as a running back in high school before moving to safety as a sophomore. He became a starting wide receiver and defensive end as a junior, finishing with 917 receiving yards, 11 touchdowns, and 17 sacks.

Likely preferred football because it was a better way to channel his competitiveness and physicality. He liked being able to hit somebody and tell them about it.

"Basketball, you can talk, but fans are right there," Likely said. "With football, when you get hit or when you do the hitting, you can talk and no fan really hears you. It's just you guys between the white lines."

Likely left basketball for good after his sophomore year at Malden High School, but the basketball moves stuck with him.

Going up for contested catches is like rebounding. Crossovers and dribble moves are like getting a release off the line of scrimmage. Boxing out is like shielding a cornerback or safety from the ball. Likely developed the soft skills of body control and special awareness to go along with the hard edge he loved about football.

Likely still shoots around on a mini hoop in the Ravens locker room. He welcomes all challengers, even though shooting was not his strong suit. But you can see his basketball moves every time he plays football.

"I feel like basketball helped a lot," Likely said.

### **Road Runner on a Walker**

Before his senior year, Likely transferred from Malden to Everett High School, a program with a richer football history and list of college football and NFL alumni.

Likely was a big wide receiver who doubled as a playmaking cornerback. His high school highlights look like a man amongst boys, with Likely making numerous leaping catches and monster blocks.

Likely led Everett to a 12-0 record and the 2017 Division I state championship. Yet, he still somehow was only a two-star recruit. He was primarily recruited as a wide receiver and received only a few Division I offers.

Ultimately, Likely was lured to Coastal Carolina, just 20 minutes from Myrtle Beach. It wasn't the surf that lured him. It was Chadwell and his staff who sold him on being a featured hybrid tight end in their offense and centerpiece of a program establishing itself after moving up to the FBS level the year before.

Looking back, it's hard to fathom how so many schools missed on a high school state champion with such physical gifts, but Chadwell doesn't claim to be a genius.

"He was a big receiver in high school, and he played there in Massachusetts, maybe not a hotbed," he said. "But you saw just a big athlete who you could tell was a really good basketball player on the field because he could just go up and make plays with the ball in the air. And at that size you just said, 'Man, this guy can be a matchup problem.'"

What gave Chadwell some pause was when he got a front-row seat watching Likely at Coastal Carolina practice. Oddly enough, it was the way Likely ran.

"We had no idea how good he was going to be because he runs weird," Chadwell said. "It's almost like the Road Runner. Before you get going fast, you almost run in place a little bit, kicking up dust but not really going anywhere. And his hands and arms look like they don't move much. So, it looks like a really stiff upper body, almost like he's walking on a walker."

Chadwell joked that Likely still thought he was a basketball player when he got to college. He liked to play pick-up games and relished the football team's dunk contest. He thought he was the best hooper on the team, Chadwell said, "but he dribbled like he ran – real stiff."

The story Chadwell, who is now the head coach at Liberty University, laughs about most is Likely's aforementioned leaping troubles. Chadwell said he was still growing into his body. Likely said it was because he was trying to do too much.

"Sometimes if you outjump your usual amount, sometimes you don't know how to land," Likely said. "If you want to just make a possession catch, you can land on your shoulder or arm or something. Every time I jumped up, I was trying to find a way to score."

Ultimately, Chadwell asked Likely to land on two feet or go down. Just make the catch. He also begged Likely not to hurdle. Likely remembers one play when two Norfolk State defenders were coming at him after catching a flat route. One went low and the other went high.

"I just tried to jump over both of them," Likely said. "One caught me in the air, but I didn't fall. I just looked at my coach and my coach said, 'Don't ever do that again.'"

Coaches couldn't argue with the results though. Likely delivered on the program's hopes, putting the Chanticleers on the map during his junior season, in which they finished No. 14 in the national polls.

He went off with 912 receiving yards and 12 touchdowns as a senior, including a 232-yard, four-touchdown game against Arkansas State. Likely finished his college career as Pro Football Focus' highest-graded tight end ever (95.1 career grade).

After that Arkansas State game, Chadwell knew Likely would be Coastal Carolina's first ever tight end to be drafted. But how high?

"Those catches, he showed speed, he showed going up to get it, he showed all these different things, and you could just see how well rounded he was," Chadwell said. "That's when the national people started realizing, 'Hey, this guy's pretty good.'"

### **He's Just a Playmaker-Type Guy**

The professional football community still needed some convincing, however. When NFL scouts came to Conway, S.C., Chadwell would warn them that Likely wasn't going to look fast. He might not even time fast. But he's fast.

Likely never cared about running track. The way he saw it, any time he had the ball in his hands and a lane, he won the race to the end zone. Coaches briefly tried to "fix" his running form when he got to college but gave up when they saw nobody was catching him.

The 40-yard dash is different, though. During the pre-draft process, coaches told him he was going to have to work to correct it if he wanted to clock a good time. He tried for a little, but they soon determined it wasn't something he could change.

Likely didn't run the 40 at the 2022 Combine. He only did the vertical leap and posted 36 inches – the best for a tight end in his class. He ran the 40 at his pro day and, sure enough, was among the slower tight ends with a time of 4.82 seconds.

His coaches told him he was just going to have to remind teams that he was a "football guy." He was projected to be drafted near the end of the fourth or start of the fifth round. The Ravens drafted another tight end, Charlie Kolar, with pick No. 128 in the fourth round.

Baltimore was targeting wide receiver Calvin Austin III with one of its five fourth-round picks, but the Steelers took him with the pick before Baltimore was on the clock. Ravens Owner Steve Bisciotti, a draft aficionado, had taken notice of Likely's game speed. The Ravens leaned on their "best player available" mantra and took Likely at pick No. 139.

That night, Likely told reporters, "Knowing what I bring to an offense, it really didn't matter whether a team drafted one tight end, three tight ends, or five. I know that what I do on the field is unmatched."

When the Ravens drafted Likely, Head Coach John Harbaugh wasn't yet sure whether he would be a wide receiver or tight end.

"It's not like an obvious position fit; he's just a playmaker-type guy," Harbaugh said at the time.

Likely has made that come to fruition. He tells people his position is "chess piece." He can line up anywhere, and it became evident early on that he could make his presence felt wherever.

In his second professional game in the 2022 preseason, Likely caught all eight of his targets for 100 yards and a touchdown. Andrews knew then that this kid was going to be good.

"That was a special moment," Andrews said. "He has a natural 'it,' a natural knack for football. He and I have a similar way of running routes and getting open. It's awesome."

### **Becoming a Game Changer**

Likely immediately gravitated to Andrews, trying to absorb as much as he could from the Pro Bowl veteran and Jackson's most trusted target.

Andrews, like Likely, was the second of two tight ends the Ravens drafted his year (2018). It didn't take long for Andrews to prove he was better than first-round pick Hayden Hurst.

Asked how often Likely asks him questions, Andrews smiled and said, "I feel like we think the same way now."

When Andrews went down with his ankle injury last season, Likely filled the void. In the seven games without Andrews, Likely averaged more than 50 receiving yards per game and hauled in six touchdowns.

His leaping catch over two defenders in Jacksonville and one-handed catch and run for a 42-yard touchdown on fourth down against Miami were signature plays of the season and proved to Likely, though he didn't need much convincing, that he could be a baller in the NFL.

His 111-yard season-opening performance in Kansas City, capped by a 49-yard step-back move touchdown, showed Likely is ready to take it to yet another level. He's turned into one of the NFL's YAC monsters. It's what makes Likely "special," Andrews said.

"One of his best qualities is being able to catch the ball, get upfield and make somebody miss. He does it time and time again." Andrews said. "I think he's one of the best in the league at that. He's extremely competitive."

Likely's competitive fire has long burned. It's another attribute he shares with Andrews, and part of why he's hit it off with Jackson. Whether it be at practice or walking the halls of the Under Armour Performance Center, it's often Likely and Jackson together. When a pass between them fell incomplete in training camp, they immediately connected afterwards to talk it over.

Likely remembers going on a visit to Boston College when he was in high school. He saw Jackson light them up with five touchdowns and 512 total yards. So, when Likely became Jackson's teammate, he knew they could be a dynamic duo, even though Likely uses that first sighting as a way to tease Jackson about being old.

"I talk to him every day. We can crack jokes whenever, or if he's feeling in a bad mood or anything, I always go talk to him and make sure he's alright," Likely said. "It's to the point where it's like I see him as a big brother, like a mentor."

There's a trust factor between Jackson and Likely, very similar to the one Jackson built with Andrews. When plays break down, Jackson often finds Likely. Likely's favorite play so far of his career was his leaping 26-yard catch in Jacksonville last season.

When the Ravens were down to their final play against the Chiefs, Jackson threw to Likely. He was a big toe away from an epic touchdown. When the Ravens were down to their final play against the Raiders a week later, Jackson heaved a bomb to the sideline for Likely. He caught it but couldn't hang on after a Vegas safety delivered a big high hit.

Their connection finally paid off with points Sunday in Cincinnati. When the Ravens were trailing by 10 with less than six minutes left, Jackson directed Likely mid-scramble to where he wanted him to go and threw it up. Likely's leaping touchdown catch completed arguably Jackson's greatest highlight of his career.

Asked about his connection with Likely, Jackson said "it's just magic happens."

"Ever since Day One, I've seen the potential in Isaiah Likely," Jackson said. "He shows it each and every day – each and every day he wants to be a better player."

One of the best battles at Ravens practices is between All-Pro safety Kyle Hamilton and Likely. They came into the league together and have been sharpening each other ever since. Likely won the majority of their one-on-one reps this summer, at times making Hamilton throw his hands up in exasperation as if to say, "What am I supposed to do with this guy?" Hamilton said Likely's one of the toughest players he's ever had to defend.

"His phone booth quickness is pretty unique for a guy his size," Hamilton said. "I don't know a ton of guys in the league who move like him, to be honest. It's almost like you're out there covering a receiver when you're playing him. He looks kind of goofy, but he gets open."

Wide receiver Zay Flowers refused to call Likely a tight end. He claimed him as one of his own.

"He's a receiver," Flowers said. "That's why every time he gets tackled by the first person, I get mad. I tell him all the time he ain't built the same as these boys out here."

When the Ravens went to a run-heavy approach versus the Dallas Cowboys and Buffalo Bills and he saw just three passes come his way, Likely stepped up as a perimeter blocker. He brings the same physicality and competitiveness to that part of the job, like a bullying basketball player setting physical picks. He's been one of the best blocking tight ends in the NFL this season.

Asked about how he envisions his future, Likely sees himself becoming one of the top multi-dimensional threats in the game.

"It's making that younger you proud. When you were in middle school, you dreamt about being in the NFL, but you always looked up to the superstars," Likely said.

"When you were younger, you obviously looked up to the Rob Gronkowskis, the Tom Bradys, the Ray Lewises, the Ed Reeds – the people in your city. Those are game changers. I always try to remind myself every time I come out here to be that kind of game changer I looked up to."

Likely was spitting mad coming off the field after he didn't get his toe in bounds in Kansas City. He expects to make that play. Four weeks later, he stuck the landing.

# Brothers Up Front, Tyler Linderbaum And Patrick Mekari, Are Ravens' 'Tom And Jerry'

THE ATHLETIC | NOVEMBER 11, 2024 | JEFF ZREBIEC

Their lockers are next to each other at the Under Armour Performance Center. After nearly every practice, they stay on the field together to get extra work in. They sit next to each other on the bench during games.

By now, there aren't many unknowns between Baltimore Ravens left guard Patrick Mekari and center Tyler Linderbaum. That includes understanding when the time is right to get under each other's skin.

As the Ravens were engaged in a tight road game with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on "Monday Night Football" last month, Linderbaum was ranting and raving on the sideline. Mekari saw an opportunity to pounce.

"I said, 'Bro, you've changed. Why are you yelling like that?'" Mekari said a few days later. "It got him fired up and he kind of needed that. It was fun. It gets us going again."

Mekari's go-to tweak on Linderbaum is to suggest that he's strayed from his blue-collar Iowa roots and allowed last year's Pro Bowl selection and burgeoning status as one of the league's top centers to go to his head.

Linderbaum's retort is to accuse Mekari of locker room shenanigans, like stealing underwear, and to call out his veteran teammates' "woe is me" moments.

The Ravens have a loose yet business-like locker room, where the tone is set in the near right corner. That's where team leaders Lamar Jackson, Ronnie Stanley, Roquan Smith and Derrick Henry reside. Across the room and closer to the entrance are the adjacent lockers of Mekari and Linderbaum, the team's version of "Tom and Jerry," the cartoon characters that specialize in hijinks and torturing each other.

They're engaged in almost constant banter on myriad topics. If one of them is locked in an interview, the other typically gets into a position where he can distract and interrupt by either making comments or facial expressions. They don't always keep their hands to themselves, either. As Linderbaum was speaking to a reporter a few weeks ago, Mekari decided it would be a good time to repeatedly flick his arm for no reason.

"They are definitely like the cat and the mouse, always running back and forth after each other," said guard Ben Cleveland. "You really don't know who is instigating what or starting what. But they both are just constantly going at it, and it sometimes gets more than PG-13. It definitely keeps it interesting."

It's an interesting dichotomy. They are two of the Ravens' most no-nonsense and edgy players on the field. Ask around the locker room which teammates you'd least want to mess with, and Linderbaum and Mekari's names come up frequently. Yet, they are also two of the biggest characters in the locker room. It just often takes them bringing the lighter side out of each other.

Linderbaum, a first-round pick out of Iowa in 2022, was mostly quiet and reserved in his first two seasons, but he's grown more comfortable in his role and in front of the media. Mekari has always been cautious around reporters, but he occasionally lets his guard down, particularly if Linderbaum is there prodding him.

Interview them separately and you'll likely get concise and general responses. Interview them together and an Abbott and Costello routine is primed to break out.

"He comes off like he's serious, but he likes to have a good time and joke around," Linderbaum said of Mekari. "He's a guy who likes to say that he doesn't love football. He loves the s— out of football. He stays after practice for 20 minutes every day working on stuff."

Indeed, Mekari and Linderbaum stay on the field together after just about every practice to get a few more reps in. They trade notes, critique one another and often try different techniques. Many of Baltimore's offensive linemen, a group led by Stanley, have joined them in recent weeks.

Mekari, 27, likes to joke that he has animosity toward Linderbaum, 24, for taking his starting center job. An undrafted free agent in 2019 who has stepped in wherever he's been needed up front — he's started games at all five positions along the offensive line — Mekari spent considerable time at center early in his Ravens career.

However, it essentially was Bradley Bozeman who Linderbaum replaced as Baltimore's starting center. Bozeman left in free agency in March 2022 and Mekari was a candidate to assume the job. However, the Ravens drafted Linderbaum, the nation's top collegiate center, a little more than a month after Bozeman's departure. He was a plug-and-play center.

Instead of coming to the 2022 training camp as the starting center, Mekari was tasked with mentoring Linderbaum, a role he embraced, just as he did this summer with helping rookie right tackle Roger Rosengarten get up to speed.

"It's very meaningful," Mekari said. "Being a first-round draft pick is a big deal. A first-round draft pick that comes in as an offensive lineman is a really big deal. The way he came in, he didn't want anything handed to him. His work ethic was there. Watching him play his first couple of games, I was like, 'This is going to be a guy. This guy's potential is through the roof.' He works hard, he cares. He's not a me guy. Since then, we just became friends. I learn a lot from him. I hope he learns something from me."

Mekari immediately sought out Linderbaum to make sure the rookie was feeling comfortable and to encourage him to ask any questions. Linderbaum wasn't bashful. If late Ravens offensive line coach Joe D'Alessandris was saying something that Linderbaum didn't understand, he'd approach Mekari for clarification.

"We hit it off right away," Linderbaum said. "He was the first guy I'd go to learn the center position here since he's been in the offense so long. Just asking him about certain calls and he'd explain in a half-serious, half-not-serious way. He's someone who really understands the game and likes to critique his craft. You just kind of naturally gravitate to that, especially guys who love football."

The two have taken dramatically different paths to get to this point. Mekari, whose parents immigrated to Los Angeles from the Middle East, wasn't a full-time starter until his junior year of high school. He attracted scant Division I recruiting interest, receiving a scholarship from the University of California only after another offensive line prospect de-committed on signing day.

Forty offensive linemen were selected in the 2019 draft, but Mekari was forced to go the undrafted free-agent route. He had to wait his turn in Baltimore, too. While he's started 46 games over parts of six years, this season marked the first time in his career that he was a Week 1 starter.

Linderbaum was a multi-sport star athlete at Solon High in Iowa, earning acclaim in football, baseball, wrestling and track and field. He was recruited to the University of Iowa as a defensive tackle but ultimately moved to center. He was a finalist for the Rimington Trophy, given to the nation's top center, in 2020, and he won the award the following year. He was considered one of the better center prospects to come out in several years when the Ravens made him the 25th overall pick. He hasn't disappointed.

"I think we do things a little bit differently, but overall, the objective and the mindset is similar," Mekari said. "I don't know about him, but when I watch the way he does things, I'm like, 'Oh, I like the way you did that. I'm going to try and do that.' Maybe he feels the same way about me. When you see a great player do great things, you're going to try it."

Linderbaum raves about how Mekari can play all five positions up front and says he's a guy who the younger offensive linemen on the team try to emulate. When the two are together, though, the compliments do not fly. It's actually quite the opposite.

They are part of a small group of Ravens who spend some evenings playing the Rocket League video game. Linderbaum tells Mekari he sucks at it. Mekari responds by calling him trash. The back and forth continues into the offensive line meeting room the next day, adding levity to otherwise serious preparation.

"When you have personalities like that, it just really helps loosen up the room a little bit," said reserve guard Andrew Vorhees. "It's a bunch of chill guys together. I've been in rooms in the past where it was not like that. Sometimes it was a little too serious. Having the balance with these guys, who know how to turn it on and off, when it's appropriate, it really takes the edge off everybody and allows us to be authentic."

Vorhees describes Linderbaum as "quick-witted" and always ready with a series of one-liners. Mekari, meanwhile, is the "silent assassin," content to quietly observe before jumping in with something clever at the opportune time. The two are great foils.

"A lot of what he does bothers me," Mekari said. "Just his overall demeanor. His fingers bother the s— out of me. They are tough to look at."

And what bothers Linderbaum?

"He's notorious," Linderbaum said. "I'll have two or three pairs of underwear on my loop and sometimes they'll go missing. He's notorious for stealing underwear. Everybody knows that."

Mekari is incredulous when he learns of Linderbaum's accusation before conceding that he's guilty as charged.

"I absolutely do. I steal his underwear and that gets him pissed off," Mekari said. "And when he gets angry at me for any reason on the field or for stealing his underwear, I say, 'Bro, you've changed. You're grumpy today. You need to get more sleep.' He gets angry at that, too."

"He really is just like a brother to me."

# Why Ravens Star Nnamdi Madubuike Finally Decided To Change His Name

BALTIMORE BANNER | SEPTEMBER 2, 2024 | GIANA HAN

When she needs her son to take out the trash, Maureen Madubuike yells “Nnamdi!”

If the Ravens Pro Bowl defensive tackle calls home, his father Festus Madubuike will pick up and say “Hey, Nnamdi. How’s your day?”

But until Monday, if Madubuike sacked a quarterback, the broadcasters and announcers would call him by a different name: “Sack made by Justin Madubuike.”

Those days are over. Moving forward, the Ravens’ star defensive tackle will be known as “Nnamdi Madubuike,” pronounced NAHM-dee.

Both names, Justin and Nnamdi, are the result of his Nigerian-American culture. Officially, his name is Justin Nnamdi Madubuike. His legal records state Justin is his first name— but Nnamdi is his first name in his heart.

“I think that’s a Nigerian culture thing, I guess, since we’re in America, they give us an American name,” Madubuike said Monday. “But if we were in Nigeria, we would have a different name.”

Nnamdi was, in fact, the first name anyone used for him.

“I think probably mid-elementary school, I started being more adjusted to ‘Justin,’” Madubuike said. “[...] That [Nnamdi] is the first name I answered to.”

So when he broke out at McKinney North High School in Texas, it was “Justin” who college scouts were telling their coaches about. When he won Defensive Most Valuable Player at Texas A&M, the award said “Justin.” And when the Ravens drafted him in the third round of the 2020 NFL Draft, they called out for “Justin.”

One year later, the Ravens drafted outside linebacker Jayson Oweh out of Penn State. Oweh, a fellow Nigerian, made the decision to officially go by his Nigerian name as he ascended to the NFL. Like Madubuike, his birth certificate name goes American name-Nigerian name-last name (Jayson Odafe Oweh). Like Madubuike, his parents solely refer to him as Odafe or “Dafe.”

And so the outside linebacker became known as Odafe Oweh by his teammates in the Ravens locker room and the NFL fans watching. Madubuike said he didn’t even realize Oweh had gone by Jayson until he followed him on socials.

Sure, Oweh’s college teammates might still refer to him as Jason, and a certain Ravens reporter (me) who covered Oweh at Penn State might slip occasionally, but it’s “Dafe” that rings out when he makes a big play and his teammates and the fans react. And it’s Odafe Oweh that general manager Eric DeCosta talked about in glowing terms when he decided to pick up his fifth-year option.

But when DeCosta took to the podium to explain why he placed the franchise tag on Madubuike, he talked about Justin Madubuike.

Madubuike had been thinking about changing his name for a while, and Oweh certainly had an impact on that.

“I guess Dafe felt that thing too, just keeping it real, being close to who you are, being true to who you are,” Madubuike said.

But he didn’t make the move for the next two years, although some of the advice from his mentors kept the idea alive in the back of his mind. His “brothers from another mother” told him to “keep your life real, figure out what matters to you most, people, things, places, whatever it is and just stick to that.”

Then Madubuike made NFL history. He tied a league record for recording at least half a sack in 11 consecutive games, and he finished the NFL season with the most sacks by an interior lineman that season. The name Justin Madubuike became known across the league.

It also happened to be a contract year. The Ravens placed the franchise tag on him, ensuring he stayed at least one more year, but contract negotiations ensued as they worked out an extension. Through those talks, Madubuike started thinking about that advice from his mentors.

“I think when I got my contract and all that stuff, I was like, you know? I’m going to just keep everything real,” Madubuike said.

And yet, he was still on the fence about it. On July 1, he posted “My real name is Nnamdi.” on X, formerly known as Twitter. He also changed his name (but not his handle) to Nnamdi. Then he deleted the tweet.

When he returned to the locker room, he decided to take a small step and asked for his locker room plate to say “Nnamdi Madubuike.” Teammates noticed and asked him if that was a name he made up. He assured them it’s his real name.

On the first day of locker room access, I noticed the new name and went up to chat about it. Madubuike told me that it was something he'd been thinking about, and he wanted to start with something he saw every day to test it out. But he hadn't made it official with the NFL yet.

For a few minutes, we talked about where Nnamdi and where Justin came from as well as the cultural implications. I mentioned that many kids who I went to school with in Howard County had American names that were different than what their parents called them, and Madubuike, who is known for being inquisitive, asked questions about my experience.

At the end of the chat, I asked if I could post on X about it even if it wasn't official. He said yes.

The response was overwhelming. Hundreds of X users replied or reposted with messages along the lines of "Nnamdi Madubuike is a DPOY name."

The next day, team officials pulled me out of the locker room so I could speak to Madubuike. He's making it official, they said.

"What changed in the last 24 hours?" I asked.

Walking quickly towards some Ravens offices, a slightly out-of-breath Madubuike said that he'd been wrapped up in camp, working 5 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. everyday and hadn't had time to give it much thought. "But when we talked about it, it kind of like reopened that thinking process I had before camp," he said.

Madubuike said he had considered doing it a little later but realized he should do it right now, before the season kicks off in three days. He also said he was being tagged in replies to the post and that, after seeing it, he changed his X handle to Nnamdi Madubuike. His Instagram name is also Nnamdi.

"So I guess you kind of sparked it — appreciate you, I guess," he told me with a laugh.

Beyond his own preference, Madubuike said he wants this to have a cultural impact. Between him and Oweh, he said they could start a trend — although he emphasized this isn't a situation where one or the other is a bad choice.

"I think culture's really, really important, just how you were raised. ... I think it's important to know where you come from and your roots," Madubuike said. "But it's your choice. At the end of the day, I could have stuck with Justin, but it was just in my heart for a long time to hit that button."

"I think it's a movement," Madubuike added. "I think it's a good movement. If it's really in your heart to do that, I think you should do it."

It had only been a few hours, but Madubuike had no regrets.

"I love my name," he said.

And don't worry, he's still cool to go by his locker room nickname, as well: "Beeks."



# Ravens DC Zach Orr Feels Right At Home After Rapid Rise Through Coaching Ranks

THE ATHLETIC | **SEPTEMBER 2, 2024** | JEFF ZREBIEC

Everyone gets a turn in front of the Baltimore Ravens' defense. That's how it works, with each defensive assistant delivering an aspect of the weekly game plan to the team. It promotes accountability within the staff and helps young coaches find their voice.

Zach Orr didn't need any help with the latter. Former Ravens defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald learned that quickly. As he watched Orr address players early last season, the voice of the inside linebackers coach rising with intensity, Macdonald made a decision.

"Zach was unique in the fact that it was like, 'I need to get this guy in front of our defense as many times as possible,'" said Macdonald, Baltimore's defensive coordinator in 2022 and 2023. "He just set the tone. It was so real and so passionate and authentic. I'm more of a steady presence. I felt like the guys needed to get hit between the eyes a few times, and Zach is so good at that."

When Macdonald was hired as the Seattle Seahawks' head coach in January, he wanted to bring Orr with him. He views Orr as an up-and-coming star and a future head coach. Whether the Green Bay Packers offered Orr their defensive coordinator job depends on whom you believe, but they at least interviewed him for their vacancy.

Orr was humbled by the interest, and there was maybe a day or two following Baltimore's AFC championship loss to the Kansas City Chiefs where he wondered if he'd still be with the Ravens when the next football season kicked off. Orr looks back on that uncertainty from six months ago, and it only reinforces his belief that he's exactly where he should be.

At 32, Orr is the second-youngest defensive coordinator in football. Ravens coach John Harbaugh tabbed him to replace Macdonald, culminating in a rapid coaching ascent following the premature and gut-wrenching end of Orr's playing career with Baltimore in 2017.

"It's definitely more special for it to happen here, just knowing — and trying to uphold — the standard," Orr said in a recent interview. "I'm a defensive guy and this organization is built on defense. I was a linebacker. And a linebacker, Ray Lewis, was the face of this franchise. The other thing is, this organization had my back with everything I've been through. It's only right. I'm trying to pay that back and I believe the only way to do that is to help this team get another championship."

That Orr's regular-season defensive coordinator debut comes Thursday night against the reigning Super Bowl champion Chiefs, pitting him against Andy Reid and Patrick Mahomes, one of the most prolific head coach-quarterback duos the game has ever seen, is a fitting continuation of Orr's young football life. Nothing has ever come easy.

He was lightly recruited despite playing at Texas prep powerhouse, DeSoto High School. He went undrafted in 2014 after garnering All-Conference USA honors in two different seasons. He was given little chance to make the Ravens' roster as a college free agent in 2014 and yet, he earned a core special teams role and ultimately became a starting inside linebacker alongside C.J. Mosley. Just as he was on the doorstep of a life-changing contract following a second-team All-Pro season in 2016, Orr learned that his career was over because of a congenital spine condition.

His coaching career hasn't been linear, either. Orr was an assistant with the Jacksonville Jaguars in 2021, when their season descended into chaos under Urban Meyer, leaving Orr and other staffers wondering where their next coaching job would be. Orr found his way back to Baltimore, and he's now directing the defense for a team with Super Bowl aspirations.

"When the odds stack against him, he thrives," said Tennessee Titans assistant special teams coach Anthony Levine Sr., a former Ravens player and coach and a mentor to Orr. "It's not that he wants to prove others wrong. It's more that he's going to prove himself right. That's just him. He's not stopping."

If you watched a Ravens training camp practice this summer from afar, it was a challenge to distinguish Orr from the players. He's certainly leaner than he was in his playing days, but the level of energy and emotion that he displays between the lines hasn't changed. He jogged from drill to drill, celebrated big defensive plays with shoulder pad slaps and chest bumps, and exhorted the players around him. Orr looked completely in his element and unfazed by the increased pressure and responsibilities his new role brings.

There was a time, though, when just being on the field so close to the action gave him a palpable sense of loss and regret. When he announced his retirement in January 2017 — Orr considered a comeback four months later but couldn't get the clearance from team doctors — he acknowledged that he didn't have a good feel for what came next. He figured he'd stay around the game in some capacity. It was unavoidable in the Orr family.

The family patriarch, Terry Orr, won two Super Bowls as a tight end for Washington during the 1987 and 1991 seasons. His oldest of four sons, Terrance II, is a high school coach. Nick Orr played at TCU and had a brief stint with the Chicago Bears. The youngest of the Orr boys, Chris, played a season for the Carolina Panthers. He's now a college coach.

"I'm not going to lie. It's all we do: talk football," Terrance II said. "And (if) it's not football, we'll talk about LeBron (James)."

Zach Orr never envisioned a life in coaching, but he didn't think his playing career would be over at the age of 24, either. In a medical exam to get a better look at herniated disks that he sustained late in the 2016 season, doctors discovered that Orr was born with a rare condition where his C-1 vertebrae wasn't fully formed. Continuing to play would have put him at risk of a major injury or even death. Orr was left without a choice.

"I don't think people realized how young he was," Terrance II said. "When he was forced to retire, he was at his physical prime. When he finally made All-Pro, it was the same day he found out he had to retire. He left the doctor and then he got into the car and he got the message about being an All-Pro. It was really a high and a low in a 10-minute span. It was hard for him. He hadn't accomplished what he wanted to do in the game yet."

Orr was offered a defensive analyst position by Harbaugh ahead of the 2017 season. Just as he did as a player, Orr put everything into the support role. However, his enthusiasm masked a mental struggle that he battled every day in his first year as a coach.

"The first year was pretty tough," said Orr, who had 133 tackles, three interceptions, a forced fumble and two fumble recoveries in his final NFL season. "I think it was because the team was still the team that I was a part of as a player. I had just been in the locker room with those guys. Sixty-five, 70 percent of them, probably higher, were my teammates just months ago. Being on the sideline, knowing that in my mind that I can still help these guys, but I couldn't go out there, that was pretty tough. By that second training camp, in 2018, I started to turn the page. I just needed time to process it all."

Orr has a tattoo on his lower left leg that reads: Hard work pays off. He carries the same mindset he had as a player into coaching, and he's not afraid to assert himself.

"You are who you are. It's not like you go from being a player to being a coach and you completely change. You have that same mentality," Levine said. "Zach had that Ravens mentality from the beginning. The type of player that he was, that's the type of coach he is. He's competitive, he's smart, he's aggressive, he's physical. Even when I was still playing and he first started coaching, he used to charge me up. It was like, 'Hold on, Zach. First of all, I'm older than you. Second of all, you were my rookie (mentee).' But to him, it was like, 'Man, this is my role now.'"

In 2020, Orr finished his fourth season as a coach when an opportunity arose to join Meyer's nascent staff in Jacksonville. Don "Wink" Martindale, the Ravens' defensive coordinator at the time, urged his former player to take the job. Martindale's reasoning was that the new job would help Orr grow as a coach. It would also help him further distance himself from the unfortunate end of his playing career. In Baltimore, he was the former player who went into coaching. In Jacksonville, he was just a coach.

"I think he needed that for his development," Martindale said.

The season was a disaster for the Jaguars. They won just three games and Meyer was fired in mid-December. However, it proved beneficial for Orr. For one, he was coaching the outside linebackers in tandem with the defensive line, so it gave him a better understanding of other positions on defense. And two, he learned to coach through adversity.

"Being there that season, you kind of had to find different ways to motivate guys and get guys going," Orr said. "And facing so much adversity, you've got to find ways to motivate yourself as well. I just think the experience made me a better person and a better coach as well."

When Macdonald returned to Baltimore in 2022 to succeed Martindale after one year at Michigan, he made sure Orr returned, too, to coach the inside linebackers. Seeing Orr's potential as a coach, Macdonald was determined to get him as involved as possible in the game-planning process. They watched film and worked on game plans together. Macdonald estimated that Baltimore's defense, which was arguably the best unit in the league last year, used 80 to 90 percent of Orr's ideas in the high red zone.

"This is Year 10 for him in the building," Macdonald said. "So really, if you look at it through that lens, he's kind of more qualified than I was in terms of years. In terms of just knowing the culture, knowing the expectations, he's a Raven through and through. Schematically and X's and O's, yeah, it's important to a certain extent, but how do you get the message to resonate with the guys? How do you get them to play together? How do you get them to play a certain way and cohesively? That's what's important."

"How you lead the room, how you connect with the players, that's Zach's superpower."

Orr prepared for this opportunity in his own way, too. He'd watch past Ravens games and pretend he was the defensive coordinator, making the defensive calls before each play. When he called his first game in the preseason, Orr said he felt nervous, not anxious. Nobody expects Orr to make massive changes with the defense, but he's vowed to put his imprint on it.

With so much to do and the prospect of having to contain Mahomes never far from his mind, Orr hasn't had a whole lot of time to reflect on the whirlwind of training camp or even the past seven years. However, Orr, a picture of positivity with an omnipresent smile on his face, acknowledged that he would have never imagined this, nor probably would those closest to him, who remember the uncertainty he felt when his playing career ended.

"It was definitely a turning point in his life," Nick Orr said. "He showed a lot of strength and determination to keep pushing forward. He looked deep inside of himself and it paid off for him."

Terrance II and other family members were in the car with Orr leaving M&T Bank Stadium in January following the AFC Championship Game when Orr spotted Macdonald. The two men, still coming to grips with one of the most disappointing losses of their young careers, shared an embrace and encouraging words.

Both of their professional lives would change dramatically within a matter of days.

"We knew it was going to happen in the future. We just didn't know it was going to happen this fast," Terrance II said. "It was a dream come true. Being the defensive coordinator of the Baltimore Ravens means something, but the job is not finished."

# How Ravens' Patrick Ricard Is Helping Lead 'Resurgence' Of NFL Fullbacks

BALTIMORE SUN | AUGUST 13, 2024 | BRIAN WACKER

On the first play of last Wednesday afternoon's Ravens practice in Owings Mills, Patrick Ricard cleared a path for running back Derrick Henry. Two hours later, he slipped out of the backfield and caught a short pass from quarterback Lamar Jackson. In between, he did just about everything else, lining up in several spots across various formations.

Such is life for Baltimore's versatile fullback, who's down to about 290 pounds this season from his typical weight of roughly 305.

"When I first got asked to play fullback, I didn't play offense in college, so for me, it was just like, 'Take it step by step and really be a sponge [and] really ask a lot of questions,'" said Ricard, who's now entering his eighth season with the Ravens and the final year of his contract. "I had to meet a lot with coaches and players."

For most of the existence of professional football, the fullback's role was as simplistic as it was barbaric: find a hole in the offensive line, locate man, hit man, repeat.

Those days are, of course, long gone, though today's fullbacks are having something of a renaissance. While only a dozen teams used a fullback on offense last season and only 10 played more than 10% of the offensive snaps, three of the four teams from the AFC and NFC championship games — the Ravens, San Francisco 49ers and Detroit Lions — fielded offenses that featured the use of a fullback. The Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs did not for the first time in coach Andy Reid's tenure, but he hasn't ruled out bringing one back into the fold this season.

And the upward trend appears to be growing still.

After the Pittsburgh Steelers went without a fullback on the roster last season, they have Jack Colletto, a former college quarterback who switched to linebacker and also played fullback at Oregon State in 2021 and 2022, after adding him to their practice squad last October. The Los Angeles Chargers, meanwhile, spent a fifth-round draft pick on 6-foot-2, 303-pound offensive lineman Jordan McFadden out of Clemson, who has also been getting work at fullback and jumbo tight end under new offensive coordinator (and former Ravens coordinator) Greg Roman during training camp. And The Associated Press added last season a designated spot on its annual All-Pro team for a fullback for the first time since 2015.

What's behind the rebirth? While defenses have gotten smaller and faster to combat offenses that have become smaller and faster with the rise of the passing game over the past two decades, fullbacks now have a chance to use their size to their advantage.

"Football is a very cyclic game," former New England Patriots fullback James Develin said in a recent interview with Not For Long Media. "The fullback position isn't dead ... now there's an opportunity to exploit defenses in these smaller packages and put 500 pounds in the backfield, put two tight ends on the field and run out of 22 [two tight ends, two running backs] and just smash mouth football again."

The Ravens have long operated with a fullback — before Ricard signed with Baltimore as an undrafted defensive end out of Maine in 2017, they had Kyle Juszyk, now an All-Pro with the 49ers. But when the team changed offensive coordinators last offseason from the run-heavy scheme of Roman to the more spread-out, pass-friendly attack of Todd Monken, there were questions about where — or if — Ricard would fit in. It didn't help that his return to the field was slowed by offseason hip surgery.

"When Monken got hired there were a lot of questions of, 'Is he gonna use a fullback? Is he gonna use me? How's he gonna use me? How much is he gonna use me?'" Ricard told The Baltimore Sun in a recent interview. "Because I had hip surgery, I couldn't show him anything. I already knew a lot of tight end stuff, so I thought why not meet with the offensive line and see what they do and if that's an opportunity to extend my career? It helped being in that room in terms of pass blocking and run blocking."

Yet, Ricard, a four-time Pro Bowl selection, saw a decrease in his playing time last season, lining up for 39% of the Ravens' offensive snaps compared with 64% in 2022. His five catches were also his fewest since his rookie season. Per Pro Football Focus, he logged 317 snaps at inline tight end, 65 in the backfield, 45 in the slot, 10 out wide and six as an offensive lineman. He also logged 66 snaps on kick returns and 20 against field goal and extra point tries.

That raises the question of whether Ricard's role will continue to decrease or trend in the opposite direction now that the 30-year-old is healthy, leaner and thus quicker.

"There's always going to be a requirement for a guy like Pat — if you have a guy like Pat," coach John Harbaugh said. "The questions last year were pretty much kind of debunked. He played a lot, and I think it's going to be the same thing this year."

"He'll be out there playing, and we'll find a lot of great roles for him to do. The nice thing is, he can actually run routes and catch the ball, and that's something that people kind of take for granted that he wouldn't be able to do."

That was evident in last December's blowout win over the Miami Dolphins when, with Baltimore on Miami's goal line, Ricard chip-blocked before leaking out across the formation into a vacant area to make a one-handed touchdown catch.

Earlier in the season, in a Week 7 rout of the Detroit Lions, Ricard similarly found himself with no one in sight and rumbled for a 28-yard gain after another short completion from Jackson.

And while the bulk of Ricard's snaps last season came from an inline position, that wasn't always the case. In Week 3 against the Indianapolis Colts, he had a dozen snaps in the backfield compared with just five at inline. Other weeks, he logged just one or two snaps in the backfield, and in others he had as many as five from the slot and three lining up out wide.

His versatility wasn't just week to week, but often play to play as he lined up at fullback, as a blocking tight end or extra offensive linemen, or motioned across the formation or to the outside for the Ravens, who had the sixth-highest pre-snap motion rate of any team in the league at 28.2% last season.

"You have to be a hybrid player," Ricard told The Sun. "You need to be able to catch, block in the run game, block in pass protection, move around, be in a bunch of different spots, be a smart player.

"It's hard to find guys like that."

And it's difficult to learn to be one.

"Last year was kind of [for me to] learn as much as I can, and I missed most of the offseason with my hip surgery last year," Ricard said. "But now, having the same offensive coordinator [and] a lot of the same guys in the offense, I was able to really have just a big foundation from last season and kind of just grow from that and kind of just keep learning different things [and] keep refining things I'm good at."

Still, some of those things trace back to his roots coming out of Maine, where he was a defensive end.

Ricard said his favorite thing to do within the Ravens' offense and his myriad tasks is to hit people. Specifically, anytime there's a downhill run, he relishes the opportunity to block a defensive lineman then proceed to crack the linebacker on the next level of the defense.

The player that gives him the most trouble in that regard is Steelers edge rusher T.J. Watt. Ricard said the four-time All-Pro and 2021 NFL Defensive Player of the Year is technically sound, works the edges well and punishes mistakes. "You take one bad step against him, he's gonna capitalize on it," he said.

The same could be said of Ricard, and he should get plenty of opportunities to clear the way playing alongside Jackson and now Henry, the Ravens' best running back since Ray Rice.

He also said he doesn't care whether he gets 5,000 snaps or five snaps, and that the fullback isn't going away.

"You kind of are seeing a resurgence," he said. "Once fullbacks started getting taken out of the game, teams started using tight ends, but they're not as good of blockers as fullbacks. So fullbacks have to evolve with the offense."

That evolution doesn't appear to be slowing down anytime soon.

# Ravens Trust LB Tavarius Robinson In Bigger Role: 'He's Just Scratching The Surface'

BALTIMORE SUN | **DECEMBER 19, 2024** | BRIAN WACKER

You can't see it when Ravens outside linebacker Tavarius Robinson is on the field, but there's a good chance he's smiling underneath his helmet.

"He's always smiling!" fellow linebacker Odafe Oweh exclaims, eyes widening. "He always has good energy. He's never mad at nobody. If something bad happens, he doesn't fret. He's always even-keeled. He's always smiling, though. I think it's a Canadian thing."

Defensive end Brent Urban — the only other Canadian on the roster — concurs.

"Canadians are generally regarded as nice, polite, friendly," he says, laughing, of course. "It's hard to generalize an entire country, but all the Canadians I know are happy-go-lucky."

It's not the first time this has been pointed out to Robinson, a 2023 fourth-round draft pick out of Ole Miss by way of the University of Guelph.

"I'm a happy person," Robinson grins. "When I'm on the field, I'm not smiling."

Baltimore certainly is these days when it comes to the progress the organization has seen in the rangy 25-year-old, who has ascended to starter status over the past four games — in part out of necessity, but also because of his improvements in his second season.

Statistically, Robinson does not particularly impress — he has 26 tackles, including four for loss, 3 1/2 sacks, 13 pressures and one pass breakup — but he has flashed in spurts and has quickly developed into a trustworthy defender.

In a blowout win over the Broncos last month, he sacked Denver quarterback Bo Nix twice, one of which came on third down. Against the Steelers two weeks later, he blew up a pulling tight end on one play. Last week against the New York Giants, coach John Harbaugh lauded him for retracing on a draw to make a tackle.

It's plays like those that have resulted in more playing time, with Robinson seeing his snaps per game climb from an average of 22.6 in the first 10 weeks of the season to an average of 43 over the past four games.

"He's always been a really smart player," Urban said. "Early on, he knew the playbook in and out. He'd always be on top of what's really going on. He's become a guy that's just dependable."

"He plays a lot more mature than he is — just being consistent and dependable. You don't see a lot of young players doing that, to be honest. That's a really hard thing to do in this league."

To the point, 2022 second-round draft pick David Ojabo, who was beset with injuries his first two seasons, was expected to be a meaningful contributor on the edge this season.

It hasn't worked out that way. He's been inactive for four games this year, has just four tackles in the 10 he has appeared in and has seen his snap count diminish.

Likewise, this year's third-round pick, outside linebacker Adisa Isaac, has also been injury-prone and has appeared sparingly in just four games.

"It's very significant," Harbaugh said of Robinson's role. "He has established himself as a three-down player. He's gone from a run-down player to a guy that's out there all the time."

Long and rangy at 6 feet 6 and 262 pounds, Robinson had all the physical attributes to be a stout defender, particularly against the run.

In his final season at Ole Miss in 2022, he finally broke through. Robinson tied for second in the FBS with five forced fumbles and had 44 tackles, including eight for loss, with seven sacks in 13 games.

As a rookie in Baltimore, though, his lack of pass rush moves was obvious. He was a hard-working but raw prospect who lacked polish. The Ravens, who led the NFL in sacks, takeaways and points allowed last season, could afford to let him continue to develop.

The speed of the professional game was also something that took getting accustomed to.

"Your brain is so cluttered," Robinson said. "My rookie year to now, it was more of trying not to make a mistake rather than trying to make plays. Having a year under your belt and another full [training] camp is huge, for sure."

He's still working on those pass rush moves, but they're coming along.

In college, he studied players such as Las Vegas Raiders star edge rusher Maxx Crosby. When he got to Baltimore, he had the Ravens put together a cut-up of the team's all-time sack leader, Terrell Suggs. He has also learned to study the tendencies of opposing offensive linemen around the league and what moves work best against them.

Teammates have also praised not just his improvements from Year 1 to Year 2, but his work ethic.

Veteran outside linebacker Kyle Van Noy describes Robinson as a “weight room junkie” and “gladiator.” Oweh added that he’s learning how to use his strength, specifically when it comes to dipping his shoulder to create space to bend the edge, something Oweh said Robinson didn’t do his first year.

And he’s a guy that enjoys mixing it up.

Said Oweh: “One thing everybody here knows about him is he’s not afraid of contact.”

Perhaps not coincidentally, about the time that Robinson was inserted into the starting lineup is when the Ravens’ defense began to show significant signs of improvement from its struggles earlier in the season. Much of that turnaround can be attributed to changes in the secondary as well as a more simplified scheme, but Robinson has played his part.

“I think now that the game has kind of just slowed down for him, and you’re able to see him just play even faster, play more aggressive and play more even more physical, and I think he’s even developed better as a rusher as well,” defensive coordinator Zach Orr said. “‘T-Rob’ is one of those guys who [is] a Raven through and through.

“[He’s] not talked about a lot, but just does his job consistently. He might not get the praise on the outside, but he gets the praise in our meeting room and our building because he does everything the right way. If he doesn’t do it right, then he’s trying to do it right and he’s going to correct it. ... I think he’s only going to continue to grow and get better, and he’s going to be very important for us down in these last four games.”

Off the field, Robinson and the rest of the defense have grown, too.

Last season, dinners among teammates were a staple of the schedule. But that had fallen by the wayside earlier this year until more recently, with most if not all of the defense dining together at a local Ruth’s Chris or other restaurants in the area. The camaraderie, he says, has made a difference.

“It’s been huge,” Robinson said. “It just makes us closer and that makes us closer on the field. I think it translates, for sure. These guys are like my brothers now.”

Now, Robinson is one of them, too.

“Where he’s come as a football player, it’s been remarkable,” Harbaugh said. “It’s been really fun to watch, but I think he’s just scratching the surface. I really think he’s going to be even better than he’s been so far.”

# Why NFL Assistant Coach Megan Rosburg Is ‘The Real Deal’ For The Ravens

THE ATHLETIC | AUGUST 5, 2024 | TASHEEN REED

In their final meeting before every game, former Baltimore Ravens defensive line coach Anthony Weaver imparted a “winning thought” to his position group. He typically handled the responsibility, but occasionally he let other coaches speak. On the Saturday before the team’s Week 4 contest against the Cleveland Browns last season, Weaver tabbed assistant to the head coach/defensive assistant Megan Rosburg.

Rosburg spent a significant portion of her childhood in Cleveland where her father, Jerry, worked as the Browns’ special teams coordinator. It was a sentimental moment for her. But it was also nerve-wracking given she was in her second year as an NFL coach and had never addressed the D-line room. When she stood up in front of everyone, however, that anxiety translated to raw emotion.

“Every good story needs a villain!” Rosburg shouted.

As the Ravens defensive line dominated the Browns in a 28-3 rout the following day, that message became their rallying cry.

“All the guys on the sideline were repeating her line,” Weaver said recently. “That stuck with us for a while.”

Rosburg, now 31, is one of 12 full-time female coaches in the NFL. Seeing the players galvanize around her message affirmed to Rosburg that they respected her just like any other coach on staff.

“At the end of the day, it’s all about the players. Whether you’re a female coach or a male coach, your resume is what they do on tape,” Rosburg said. “If you can give the players information or give them an advantage to help them win on Sunday, they will trust you and they will respect you. If you’re genuine and you do things that will help them win and help them prolong their career, it doesn’t matter what you look like. ... If you’re real with them and you can help them, they’ll trust you as their coach.”

Every day is different for Rosburg. Her primary responsibilities are focused on the defensive line and outside linebackers. She runs defensive line drills during practice, helps the coaching staff with film study and scouting and assists her fellow coaches during team meetings. Off the field, she helps head coach John Harbaugh plan travel, schedule meetings and practices and make sure communication is clear between the coaching staff, executives and players.

“Nothing’s beneath her, but she’s capable of so much,” former Ravens defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald said recently. “You didn’t have to think, ‘Oh, well, Megan, she’ll get it at some point.’ It was always like, ‘Oh, she gets it immediately.’ She’s the real deal.”

Rosburg quickly ingratiated herself with the Ravens staff through her work ethic, but her passion for the game made the team invest in her development.

“We really weren’t sure exactly what she was going to be capable of or what she was going to be able to handle, but very early on I realized that she was a football girl,” said Weaver, now the Miami Dolphins’ defensive coordinator. “So I was going to do everything within my power to help feed that.”

One of Rosburg’s first assignments was to study film to identify run or pass tells from opposing offensive linemen. The purpose was to use those pre-snap indicators to give their defensive linemen an edge.

“Once she gave those reports to me,” Weaver said, “we were like, ‘Oh yeah, this is 100 percent accurate,’ and I would have her present it to the players. I think at first that was probably a little bit intimidating for her, but I knew she could handle it.”

Heading into her third season in the NFL, Rosburg doesn’t shy away from the fact that she’s still deepening her football knowledge. That hasn’t impacted how she’s treated by the Ravens players, coaches and executives.

“I truly don’t think that coaches or players are opposed or appalled by the idea at all,” Rosburg said. “I honestly think it’s the opposite. It just goes back to, ‘Hey, it’s the NFL, this is the best of the best. Who can help me learn in the way that I need it the most?’”

From the time Rosburg was born to when she graduated high school, her father coached at three different colleges and for three different NFL teams. That meant a lot of moving around. Eventually, Rosburg wanted to know more about why her family went through so much transition. The reason was football.

“It’s truly all I’ve ever known,” she said. “My dad would come home, and we would obviously talk a lot about our days, but I was more interested to see how practice was going.”

Rosburg always felt like part of whatever team Jerry was coaching. She played youth flag football but eventually turned her attention to volleyball, playing collegiately at American University, where she captained her team to the NCAA Sweet 16. She took a corporate job in Detroit after graduating in 2014, but she longed for the communal feeling and competitive nature of sports. She approached her

dad about exploring a football career.

Jerry had developed a strong relationship with Harbaugh while working together, first as assistants at the University of Cincinnati and later when he served as the Ravens' special teams coordinator from 2008 to 2018. When Harbaugh heard of young Rosburg's interest, he approached her in the spring of 2022 with a job offer.

Jerry retired in 2022, but he has seen his daughter's progression firsthand.

"We always carve out time to talk ball," Jerry said. "I'm really impressed by her grasp of the defensive system. She's now at a point where we're talking about things, not (just) what they are, but how they're applied and how they can be utilized."

As important as X's and O's are, Jerry also knew it'd be important for her to find a way to connect with and gain the approval of players. That's true for any coach, but it was clear that pulling that off would be different for a woman in football.

"When there's a female college volleyball player coaching the defensive line in the NFL, it's unique. But she's gone into it with the idea that, 'I need to earn my way,'" Jerry said. "And, because of that, I think she's garnered the respect of the players."

Rosburg quickly struck up relationships with the players, particularly defensive tackle Michael Pierce and former Ravens edge rusher Jadeveon Clowney. While Rosburg is actively pushing for more female coaches in the NFL — she spoke at this year's NFL Women's Forum focused on increasing the number of women in football operations positions — she was just coach Rosburg in Baltimore.

"I could see that they weren't just treating her as an ornament or a fringe piece," Jerry said. "They respected her, and they consulted with her. Aside from the football piece, she's always had this emotional intelligence about her. She's been a leader even when she was young.

"She's been involved in big-time athletics from a female perspective, but to stand in the defensive huddle and command that kind of attention, it's something to be admired. And she does it because she approaches it the right way. She's not trying to make some kind of point for the oppressed females in the NFL. That's not what she's doing. She's trying to help the D-line."

Macdonald was hired as the Seattle Seahawks' head coach this offseason despite never having played football beyond high school. The number of options for women to play football beyond high school is growing, but it's rare. A lack of playing experience didn't stop Macdonald from becoming the NFL's youngest head coach at 36, however, and he doesn't believe it should be used to knock female coaches.

"It's so competitive that you're trying to find the best people you can find, and there's a lot of talented women out there that can help you win," Macdonald said. "So why would you not want these people in your building to help you out?"

Macdonald met Rosburg during his second stint with the Ravens from 2022 to 2023. He was impressed with her ability to connect with people.

"Her superpower is to generate those relationships," Macdonald said. "The players can feel how genuine and authentic she is and how much she cares about where they're coming from to be able to relate."

Despite not playing football at a high level, Rosburg can relate to the physical and mental stressors an athlete must endure. That has helped her avoid some of the stigmas attached to being a woman in the NFL.

"When I first got into this game as a player, I'd probably turned a blind eye to it, but now I'm just seeing how much value (women) can have," Weaver said. "They offer a different perspective of the game. Sometimes women can do a better job of taking some of the machismo and ego out of it, right? ... There's a tremendous amount of value in that."

When Jerry started coaching high school football in 1979, the only women he saw working in the sport were athletic trainers. Back then, it would've been hard for him to imagine a daughter of his coaching football at the highest level. Although his connection to Harbaugh certainly accelerated Rosburg's journey, he knows she wouldn't have a place on the staff unless she deserved it.

"Especially at the highest levels in the NFL, I don't think there's space for free riders. You've got to contribute," Jerry said. "And the talents of these young ladies that I've seen, they have something to bring to the table. ... The more we can do to bring more people in, we should all be fully in favor of that."

Rosburg is confident that representation will inspire more women to follow a similar path to hers. "That's the main thing: just realizing they can be a part of it in that way," she said.

Rosburg has already proven her worth with the Ravens. Could she end up taking on an even bigger role in the future?

"As her confidence grows and her knowledge of the game grows in terms of the schematics, I don't think it's unreasonable to see her growing into a position coach and maybe one day even being a coordinator," Weaver said. "You talk about someone that's capable of breaking glass ceilings — if I was going to bet on somebody, I'd have no problem putting money on her."



# Ravens' Pass Rush Style Is Unique And Paying Dividends For Sustained Success

BALTIMORE SUN | JANUARY 3, 2025 | SAM COHN

For the second straight year, the Ravens are among the best pass rushing teams in the NFL. That's no accident.

"I gotta give a lot of credit to Coach [John] Harbaugh, man," pass rush coach Chuck Smith told The Baltimore Sun. "He is the most open-minded NFL coach about pass rush, I believe, in NFL history. To let a pass rush trainer come in and Harbaugh say, 'I believe in what you're doing.' He let us do moves and teach concepts that no one else has ever done and trusts us."

Smith parlayed his own decorated nine-year NFL career into becoming one of football's preeminent pass rush trainers. He mapped out his own training program, taught several All-Pros and has consulted for several teams. The gravitas accumulated on that front earned him a fitting nickname: "Dr. Rush."

And in 2023, the Ravens brought Smith into the building for a job that was once considered taboo among NFL teams, who preferred their pass rush intel come via training camp consultants.

Consider this return on investment: Only three seasons in Ravens history have they finished with 50 or more sacks. The first was 2006, and the other two have been Smith's two years at the helm. Last year, they tallied a league-high 60 sacks. This year, they're second in the NFL with 52 (spread over 18 players) — and one more game Saturday against the lowly Cleveland Browns could inflate that total.

"This is the perfect place if a guy wants to pass rush, there's no other way to say it," Smith said. "And I'm not just saying that."

Smith leaned back against a wall inside the Owings Mills facility earlier this week. His eyes tensed for a moment behind frameless glasses trying to explain how the Ravens zagged when most of the league was still zigging. Harbaugh empowered him to teach moves and concepts that Smith said aren't done elsewhere. And the second-year coach has created what he believes can be sustained success.

It's a young group of almost entirely homegrown talent in those meeting rooms. Outside linebacker Kyle Van Noy, at 33, is the wily veteran. He's the only one with enough experience to answer why Baltimore and Smith are so different.

"A lot more freedom," Van Noy said, with a game left to add to his career-high 11 1/2 sacks. "Like in New England, I was not allowed to do what I'm doing, that's for sure. Not that it was bad, it was just different. It was sacrifice to do whatever you can to keep the quarterback in the pocket. The schematics were different."

Take, for example, Van Noy's 2018 season as a Patriot. He started all 16 games but finished with only 3 1/2 sacks in a year New England won the Super Bowl behind a masterful defensive showing under coach Bill Belichick. Smith prefers Van Noy use his skill set to put hands on the quarterback.

Outside linebacker Odafe Oweh is one sack from his first double-digit season. It's a career year whether he gets it or not. And although the 2021 first-round draft pick hasn't played for any other NFL team, his understanding of the uniqueness in Baltimore is the deep arsenal of pass rush moves Smith teaches and the intentionality with which they prepare for different quarterbacks.

It's resulted in career numbers for Van Noy, Oweh and Tavarius Robinson (3 1/2), among other contributors. Should Oweh get his 10th sack Saturday, it would be the fourth time in Ravens history — and first since 2014 with Terrell Suggs and Elvis Dumervil — that two players reached double-digit sack totals.

"Ain't nobody talking pass rush like we are," Smith said.

Much of the group doing the dirty work has ties to Smith dating before he was hired in Baltimore.

Smith helped Brent Urban prepare for the NFL scouting combine in 2014. He trained Nnamdi Madubuike in Atlanta before his breakout 13-sack 2023 season. He spent time working out Michael Pierce, had plans to get in a gym with Oweh before he got hurt, and coached Robinson at the 2023 Senior Bowl.

"We're all connected," Smith said, later adding, "here, it's a partnership, not a dictatorship."

That was a nod to defensive line coach Dennis Johnson, as well as assistant defensive line and outside linebackers coach Matt Robinson. Those three are a joint force whose teachings extend beyond the final game of the season.

NFL rules bar Smith from training with his group out of season. No shortage of trainers around the country could help prepare them for the rigors of a season with high expectations. "But hell, they hired my assistant," Smith said. "[Dez Walker] teaches the same system. So in the summer, they're doing the exact same thing."

That, coupled with the room's culture Smith touts, is why he believes this top-of-the-league success isn't a fluke. Or a two-year outlier.

"Here's the crazy part about this whole story," Smith said. "I really believe where we are, as one of the top pass rush groups in the league the last couple years, it just makes me laugh a little inside. Like, 'Dude, we're just gonna be even better.' ... It just makes me excited looking at our pass rush culture that we have here. So when we bring a guy in, we rolling."

This season has been a testament to that assertion.

Baltimore lost Jadeveon Clowney and his 9 1/2 sacks from last year to free agency. Van Noy wasn't expected to outperform his then-career-high nine sacks at 33 years old. There were questions about what Oweh or Ojabo could contribute after inconsistent beginnings to their careers. And few could have anticipated Tavius Robinson to take such a leap.

"It's even better when everyone was kind of [complaining] about [us not] having a pass rush here," Van Noy said. "That hasn't gone unnoticed. That was a big topic for the last two years. Who's gonna be the pass rush? Blah blah blah. It's been one of our strengths."

# Ravens LT Ronnie Stanley, Healthy Again, Is Elite Once More

BALTIMORE SUN | OCTOBER 25, 2024 | CHILDS WALKER

He was, in a way, the central plank to the mystery.

Would the Ravens' offensive line function in 2024? Not if Ronnie Stanley could not be A) present and B) a decent approximation of the guy who protected the blind side as well as anyone in the world in 2019 and 2020.

Stanley will be the first to tell you he was not himself a year ago after he injured his knee in the season opener and re-injured it in November. Try as he might, the former All-Pro left tackle could not comfortably flex his body for movements he had taken for granted as a young man.

He'd already lost the better part of two seasons to a terrible ankle injury, and he began to wonder if he would ever catch a break. Even under the best circumstances, an NFL veteran's health becomes a cloudier issue after he turns 30, as Stanley did in March. Would he ever feel good enough to tap fully into skills he knew he had not lost?

The Ravens needed the answer to be yes after they waved goodbye to veteran stalwarts Kevin Zeitler and Morgan Moses in the offseason. Their line, without which Lamar Jackson and Derrick Henry could not soar, would be remade, with Stanley and center Tyler Linderbaum as the only carryover pieces. No one else on the roster could touch Stanley's resume. They needed him to be that guy.

Through seven games, he has been, playing all but two of the team's offensive snaps and grading as the league's third best pass blocker at tackle, according to Pro Football Focus. In 245 pass blocking snaps, he has allowed nine pressures and no sacks. He ranks 10th among tackles in ESPN's pass block win rate.

"I think he's right back to that level he was at," Pro Football Focus' Gordon McGuinness said. "He's just not allowing guys to beat him. And his run blocking grade is not quite back to where it was in 2019, but he's on track for the second highest of his career. ... I didn't think he'd ever be back at this level, so it's been really cool to see."

Jackson watched his chief protector and locker room neighbor make that long climb back from the 2020 ankle injury that left him writhing on the field and led to multiple surgeries. He knew how much it would mean to his game to play behind a vintage Stanley.

"That was the only thing with Ronnie, just the injuries," Jackson said. "He was just trying to get back to where he was, and I feel like he's feeling pretty good now, and he's just the same Ronnie I knew ever since I entered the league. ... I get to go through my progressions, get the ball out and just have successful plays."

Stanley spoke candidly last season of feeling haunted by the knee injury that would not allow him to be himself.

"It definitely messes with you, your confidence and stuff," he said Thursday, reflecting on that time. "Your mind wants to do one thing, but your body can't do it. And when you're out there, you can't really think too much about it. You just have to react."

So it has been a tremendous relief for him to move freely again, confident that his legs will provide a solid anchor and keep him in front of world-class pass rushers such as Myles Garrett, the reigning NFL Defensive Player of the Year he will face Sunday in Cleveland.

"I just feel like I can kind of let my subconscious take over," he said. "I feel like I'm thinking less and just playing with more confidence and belief in myself."

Beyond his exceptional play, Stanley has emerged as a galvanizing senior voice for a unit that's not only young but experienced the death of its longtime coach, Joe D'Alessandris, and the abrupt transition to a new guide in George Warhop. Through a chaotic and emotionally rending three months, Stanley has appeared on the practice field every day, often staying after to give sparring lessons to younger peers such as rookie right tackle Roger Rosengarten.

Rosengarten was a freshman in high school when he first studied Stanley as a model of how to play tackle.

"My parents, I'm always going to take advice from them. The same thing goes when it comes to Ronnie," Rosengarten said. "He's such an experienced player. Anything he tells me, I take it fully and put it into my game. You have the technique stuff, but the biggest thing is he tells me that I belong right where I am. He just gives me the utmost confidence in myself."

Stanley might not expect comparisons to a teammate's mom and dad. "Never really thought about that," he said, grinning. But he does get a kick out of his role as the elder statesman for a group that has greatly exceeded expectations. He's charmed by the notion that he might imprint on Rosengarten or Daniel Faalele in ways that help them become quality NFL starters.

"They all listen," he said. "They're all hard workers. They're tough."

Beyond his importance to the Ravens' Super Bowl ambitions, this is a pivotal year for Stanley individually. He's coming to the end of the five-year, \$98.75 million deal he signed at the peak of his powers. He took a \$7.5 million pay cut going into this season and will be a

free agent when it's over. If he continues on his current trajectory, he could set himself up for a substantial third contract in a league starved for standout offensive linemen.

He reiterated Thursday that his goal is to play 15 NFL seasons, a prospect that seemed further from reach during his injury hiatuses.

Stanley has impressed everyone with his response to this crossroads moment. For his friends on the team, it's a joy to watch him play this way again after so many years defined by pain and frustration.

"He's playing great," said Patrick Mekari, the second-longest tenured Ravens lineman behind Stanley. "The small details that maybe you guys don't realize — he makes everything work. Like I've seen him block two guys in pass [protection], which sounds good on paper but it's really difficult to achieve. The balance in his stance, the timing of his hands — it's all just really good. You see him putting it all on the line."

Mekari kept coming back to the effort he's seeing from his longtime teammate after so many dispiriting injuries. No one ever questioned Stanley's innate smoothness gliding sideways and back to cut off an edge rusher.

"But a lot of people are naturally talented," Mekari said. "That doesn't make you an All-Pro. That doesn't make you the best in the league. He's had to work through a lot."

Peak Stanley spoke to the souls of those who grade and study offensive line play. He was 6-foot-6, 310 pounds, yes, but he glided through all the movements so naturally. He lost some of that elegance to the injuries, but those who watch him closely see it again, much to their surprise and delight.

"He was still playing pretty well when he was on the field the last two seasons, but it looked way more awkward, like it took more effort to do everything," McGuinness said. "I remember in 2019 thinking he's not quite on that level, but he makes pass blocking look effortless, like Jonathan Ogden did. He looks smoother again, like he was back in 2019."

# Brent Urban Wisely Chose Football Over Hockey, But It Wasn't Easy

BALTIMORE BANNER | NOVEMBER 13, 2024 | GIANA HAN

## The Ravens defensive end remains an ardent — and ever-hopeful — fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs

Sitting in the passenger seat with a Subway sandwich in hand as his dad drove through the north Toronto traffic, 16-year-old Brent Urban was tired. So was his dad.

It had been two years of driving back and forth from high school football practice to hockey practice, wearing down both Brent's body and the tread on his dad's tires. For almost every elite athlete, there comes a time when they must choose which sport to pursue. That time had come for Urban.

Despite a late start in both sports, Urban ascended quickly through the ranks. He was playing with future NHLers on his hockey club team and had offers from colleges to play football.

Hockey was his first love, but football seemed to fit both his goals and his tall, large frame better. So he left the land of maple syrup (and his beloved Maple Leafs) behind for America.

And, 17 years later, his decision has certainly paid off. Urban has reached the highest ranks of football, the NFL, and has put together a 10-year career in a sport where the average player lasts about 3.5 seasons. He's a key rotation piece on the Ravens' defensive line, expected to return for this weekend's game at Pittsburgh after missing two weeks with a concussion.

However, his love for the sport of his nation (and specifically the team of his hometown) has never waned. With the Toronto Maple Leafs in the area for a game against the Washington Capitals, Urban took time to reflect on his journey.

### Not the smoothest start

In a sport where kids learn to skate and play mini sticks at 2 years old, Urban was, in comparison, a latecomer to the sport. He didn't join an organized league until he was 7. And when he did, he hated it.

"It took so long to put on your pads and stuff, I was like, 'This is a hassle. I don't want to do this,'" Urban said. "And so I quit."

About four years passed before Urban decided to try again. But once he did, he quickly improved. After starting on the worst AA team, the second-best league, he ended up on the best AAA team for 13- and 14-year-olds.

On that team, he played with Casey Cizikas (a 14-year veteran with the New York Islanders), Ben Chiarot (a 12-year veteran now with the Detroit Red Wings), and Ryan Ellis, who played for the Nashville Predators for 10 years before an injury ended his career, among others.

Urban was actually an offensive player in hockey, though he generally played winger on the third or fourth line and was expected to be a physical, defensively stout presence.

For a big guy, Urban said he was pretty skilled. Yeah, he could hit, but he could also score. He looked up to Rick Nash, a five-time All-Star who had a big build and powerful shot that was paired with impressive puck control, good skating and acceleration.

"I always thought I was going to be a big power forward in hockey," Urban said.

"I played pond hockey, roller hockey, street hockey. Like every Canadian, you play hockey in the winter, and in the summer you played box lacrosse," he said. "That's what we all did. That's the Canadian sports trajectory. So I always thought I was going to be a hockey player."

### A better path

By eighth grade, Urban, who is now 6 feet, 7 inches tall, and 309 pounds, was already bigger than your average NHL player (forwards are about 6 feet tall, on average.)

So as he looked to the future, he saw what most taller-than-average forwards turned into: enforcers. As aggressive as Urban can play, he's not one to drop the gloves. "I didn't want to just be a fighter, you know?" he said.

However, his size made him perfect for football. And when the high school football coach told him he should play, he decided to give it a try.

The Urbans were already fans of the sport. Canadians “just pick a team, or you’re a Bills fan,” Urban said, and he and his dad were in the first group. While his dad favored the New England Patriots, Urban chose the Philadelphia Eagles because of their helmets and Donovan McNabb. His biggest rival wasn’t the Dallas Cowboys, though.

“I’d always root against the Patriots,” Urban said. “I was just so competitive. I’d be like, ‘No, I hate the Patriots because that’s my dad’s team.’”

Just like in hockey, the football coaches started Urban out on offense, putting him in at wide receiver. At the time, he was 6 feet, 4 inches tall, and 220 pounds.

“I was kind of fast, but I dropped a ton of passes, so they moved me to tight end,” Urban said with a laugh. “And then I dropped more passes, so they moved me to d-line, defensive end. And that’s where I stood.”

Thanks to all the skating he did growing up, Urban had a very strong lower body to help him anchor and explode against the large offensive linemen. He had good balance and quick feet. And, catching aside, he found that hockey required way more skill while football relied more on athleticism.

But the time commitments soon became too much. When Urban’s dad told him he was going to have to choose, Urban already had some college offers on the table from football camps he attended.

Urban was still the largest player on his football team, but that played more to his advantage on the field than on the ice. And the offers meant a chance to further his education, a stark difference from the path many hockey players take. Around 16, many leave home to play for junior leagues and sacrifice a typical high school experience, living with a billet family in a small town.

Football seemed like the right fit for his frame and for his goals.

### **Culture shock**

Once he decided which career to pursue, Urban had a challenge ahead of him. While more and more Canadian players are being recruited by college teams and making it to the NFL (such as teammate outside linebacker Tavarius Robinson), at the time the pipeline was “so bare bones.”

“The high schools up there wouldn’t even videotape their own games,” Urban said. “My dad made a little DVD of my football plays and stuff, and when I went to the camps, I’d hand them out.”

Urban chose to go to the University of Virginia, where he had a Canadian roommate as a freshman. Whereas the transition from hockey to football went smoothly, the transition from Canadian high school football to college football was more of a shock.

There was the typical transition of any college student who has to learn to manage time on their own. But Urban also went from the pressure of playing in front of a crowd of 50 to playing in front of tens of thousands. And Charlottesville, Virginia, was very different from Toronto.

“I came from a huge multicultural city, right?” Urban said. “And then you go to Charlottesville, and it’s really preppy. I had a great time there, but it was a culture shock.”

Urban managed it well enough that he was one of the few freshmen on the travel roster.

When Urban went home, he’d still play pond hockey with friends, but that eventually ended as his football career progressed. As an NFL prospect, he had to protect his body from wear and tear away from the game.

In 2014, Urban was selected in the fourth round of the NFL draft by the Baltimore Ravens. By then, Ellis and Cizikas were already in their fourth NHL seasons while Chiarot was in his second.

But Urban, who continued to be an avid fan of the game and of the Maple Leafs, knew he had made the right choice. Urban might not have wanted to be a fighter himself, but he counts himself among the “dinosaurs” who miss the days the NHL was full of big hits and plenty of fights. While there’s still hitting and fighting, the game has evolved toward a greater emphasis on speed and skill.

“In terms of modern day hockey, I don’t really see myself doing that because I would just be so much bigger than everybody,” Urban said. “There’s probably few hockey players that weighed as much as I did in eighth grade. I don’t really see much of a place for a 270-pound left wing.”

### **Honoring his roots**

It’s been 10 years since Urban strapped on skates. But he fully plans to return to the ice.

Urban spends the offseason in Austin, Texas, and he’s already looked into rinks and recreational leagues for after he retires.

"I'll probably pick some chill beer league to play in because I don't know how good I am anymore," Urban said. "I'm sure I'm OK, like I'm not going to fall over or anything, but skating's tough."

He'll also certainly return to the ice to teach his son to skate, although the 14-month-old is already big enough that Urban isn't certain he'll be the right size for hockey either.

Until then, Urban's relationship with hockey is pure fandom.

When he was younger and didn't have a kid, he would travel into D.C. for Washington Capitals games. When his friends from home visit, he said they'll often plan the trip with a hockey game. During his brief stint with the Tennessee Titans, he made it to a few Nashville Predators games to see his old teammate, Ellis, play.

And when he goes home to Toronto, he of course finds time to watch his beloved Maple Leafs. Because his love remains true and his hope eternal despite years of first-round exits.

"Because, at this point, it's like this is all I've known is failing in the playoffs," said Urban with a self-deprecating laugh. A pro athlete himself, he usually keeps calm through the first few games, but if the series drags on, the true Maple Leafs fan comes out.

"If it's Game 7, I'm yelling at the TV. I play it cool to start, but I get increasingly unwound as the series goes on," Urban said.

When he can't watch in person, he watches games sporadically through the season but keeps tabs on how they're doing.

The 2024-2025 season is young, but Urban has high expectations for his team, who plays the Capitals at 7:30 p.m. in Capital One Arena. They're 9-5-2 and second in their division. The offense has been there, and while the defense could improve, he feels like recent blue line additions "shored up" the backend in front of a goalie he likes.

It's a similar story to his own, as he plays on a Ravens team featuring an explosive offense that's been covering up the holes along the defense. The Ravens recently traded for another cornerback and will be hoping to get Urban and some other injured players back soon as they chase a division title, and then a Super Bowl.

The regular season is usually "a breeze" for the Maple Leafs. All he (and all of Toronto) cares about at this point is them making the playoffs and getting through the first round. And this year might be the year. But, then again, so was last year.

"I'm stupidly hopeful — or ignorantly hopeful — every year," Urban said. "I'm like, 'Nah, this is the year.' I buy into the hype train every year, for sure."

Of course his real focus is on his own team's recent playoff problem: an inability to win two games and advance out of the AFC to the Super Bowl.

# How The Ravens Helped Linebacker Kyle Van Noy Become His Best Self At Age 33

THE ATHLETIC | JANUARY 2, 2025 | DAN POMPEI

His eyeball felt like it would burst.

In the first game of the NFL season, Baltimore Ravens outside linebacker Kyle Van Noy pursued Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes for a potential sack when he got too low. With his body prone and his arms at his sides, Van Noy's helmet skidded in the grass, his chin strap slipped under his chin, and the top of his helmet came down over his eyes. Then Mahomes fell on Van Noy's head and Ravens defensive tackle Nnamdi Madubuike fell on both of them.

Van Noy's eye socket took the brunt of the weight. His eyeball didn't burst, but his orbital socket fractured in two places.

The result was excessive bleeding through his nose, double vision, sinus issues, sleep problems and breathing difficulty. Season-ending surgery was recommended by doctors but dismissed by the patient.

Van Noy refused to miss a game because of the fractures.

If you look closely at the 33-year-old's eyes, you will notice the area around his right eye still doesn't align perfectly with the left.

But what you mostly see in those eyes is resilience.

In the offseason, the Ravens were the only team that expressed interest in signing him. Now? Van Noy has the fourth most sacks in the NFL, and his 11 hard seasons could be a case study in how the league fails to take advantage of players' gifts.

At BYU, Van Noy was a stand-up edge rusher. In four college seasons, he had 26 sacks, 62 tackles for a loss, 11 forced fumbles and seven interceptions. In the spring of 2014, he was widely considered the best 3-4 outside linebacker in the draft.

The Detroit Lions chose him with the 40th pick, then, logic be damned, had him play strongside linebacker in a four-man front, meaning he wouldn't be rushing the passer very much. It was kind of like telling a concert pianist to play electric guitar.

One of his coaches told him they didn't know where to play him.

Core muscle surgery during his rookie season was another obstacle. In Year 2, Van Noy remained a backup — in his words, a “demoralized and depressed” backup. While driving to practice in his truck, he often was in tears.

Then came a herniated disc. Doctors pushed for spinal surgery, and injured reserve looked like a certainty, but after a week of rehab with an outside trainer, Van Noy was healthy enough to play.

But to a jaded, impatient fandom, he was already a bust. The frustration led him to consider retiring.

In his third season, Van Noy finally became a starter for the Lions. Then after seven games, he was crushed to learn they were trading him — giving up on him, really. All they were getting in return was a sixth-round pick. And they had to throw in a seventh.

His career took a turn in New England. He was always highly motivated, but after his experience in Detroit, he was motivated like Bruce Banner after gamma radiation. As a Patriot, he played in three Super Bowls, won two and established himself as a starting-caliber player.

Van Noy still wasn't being used the way he wanted, though. Patriots coach Bill Belichick saw him as a jack of many trades, lining him up at strongside linebacker, weakside linebacker, middle linebacker and defensive end.

Versatility revived Van Noy and restrained him.

“They say, ‘the more you can do,’ and they have you do everything,” Van Noy says. “But then they use it against you and devalue you that way. You know, ‘He’s not that good at everything.’”

He was good enough that Brian Flores, his former linebackers coach in New England, brought him to Miami a year after he became head coach of the Dolphins, signing him to a four-year, \$51 million contract in 2020. Flores named Van Noy a team captain.

“It was that dream you have of a young kid of not just making the NFL but getting that huge contract that you know is going to change your family for generations,” he says.

It was a setup for the biggest comedown of his career. That season, Van Noy injured his foot so badly that it still bothers him today. There were fractured ribs and a hematoma the size of a mango on his side. But he gutted it out and somehow played 14 games, though not as effectively as he had hoped.

After the season, the Dolphins cut him, meaning he wouldn't be paid most of the \$51 million.



Van Noy was stunned, angry and confused. He believes he was caught in a “civil war” between Flores and Dolphins general manager Chris Grier. There were intimations they thought he was a locker room lawyer who was trying to undermine quarterback Tua Tagovailoa. He says it wasn’t true.

“That’s the homie,” he says of Tagovailoa. “I’m super proud of the way he’s battled through injuries and started a family. It’s awesome to see.”

Van Noy says he no longer has a relationship with Flores, however.

Getting cut by the Dolphins was his lowest point. Retirement became a real possibility for a second time.

The Patriots took him back in March of 2021, but not for long. The following March, they released him, the second time he was cut in 12 months.

By then, he was 31 years old, had played eight NFL seasons and was about to change teams for the fifth time. What was most important to him was taking control of his career narrative. Van Noy wanted to be an edge rusher for the first time, and he wanted to play on the West Coast, where his family could attend his games more frequently.

Van Noy says he had to almost beg the Los Angeles Chargers to sign him to a one-year \$2.25 million deal. Coach Brandon Staley saw pass-rush potential in him, but Van Noy ended up playing various roles.

Van Noy had five sacks in the final five games of the 2023 season, and then the Chargers were done with him. It seemed as if the rest of the league might be as well. While he waited for the phone to ring — and waited and waited — he thought seriously about retirement for a third time.

If not for his wife, Marissa, he might have filed his papers and called a press conference. A Miss Utah USA who gave up her dreams of modeling and acting, Marissa would not allow him to give up his. He says in his career, she has been an angel who has guided him.

Six months passed — OTAs, minicamps, training camps, the preseason and three games of the regular season — before Van Noy had an NFL offer. By then, the Ravens were desperate, down to two healthy outside linebackers.

He had spent his spring and summer devoting himself to pass rush and working up an attitude.

Coach John Harbaugh felt the heat of his fire, and he liked it.

“He could thrive here because he loves football,” Harbaugh says. “And if you love ball, we love you here. That’s how we are.”

Ravens pass rush coach Chuck Smith appreciates the way Van Noy has approached the latter stage of his career with what Smith calls a “learning heart.” Instead of wanting to do things the way he’s done them in the past, or thinking he knows more than his coaches, Van Noy has been open to new approaches.

The result is growth, rare growth in a player who is closer to the end than the beginning. Van Noy never had more than 6 1/2 sacks in a season before having nine last year with the Ravens. He is averaging 10.2 sacks per season in two years as a Raven after averaging 3.7 in his previous nine years.

Age, we are always told, is a thief. And then someone like Van Noy exposes the lie.

“This is not New England Kyle Van Noy,” Smith says. “This is not Detroit Kyle Van Noy. This is not Miami Kyle Van Noy. This is not (Los Angeles) Kyle Van Noy. This is a pass rusher.”

Smith, who has worked with hundreds of pass rushers as a personal trainer and is known as “Dr. Rush,” has helped Van Noy expand his repertoire, working on a cross chop, adding spin moves off both feet and stealing T.J. Watt’s rip move. He’s also refined his visual keys, varied his alignments and honed his head fakes.

Van Noy makes Smith think of the Transformer Optimus Prime because of his ability to modify in response to a challenge.

“If he’s against a tackle who is a soft setter, he can power,” Smith says. “If it’s a hard setter, he can spin. If it’s a drifter, he can cross-chop. And he can long arm. He has all those tools.”

Smith says Van Noy is a master of pass-rush games. The Ravens entrust him with calling games at the line.

Several of Van Noy’s sacks have been sneaky sacks, big plays borne of subtle movements, intuition and time on task.

“He has a sense of what the play is, where the ball is, where the quarterback is going to end up,” Harbaugh says. “And then he just shows up there.”

It ultimately doesn’t matter how he gets sacks — it’s that he gets them.

“I know he gets put in a box because of his past, but Kyle is one of the best pass rushers out there,” Smith says. “Listen, they chip him like they do the best ones in the league. Look at how many people have doubled him.”

An unmistakable difference between then and now is respect. It comes from those he does battle against and those he does battle with.

Van Noy says Harbaugh has empowered him to lead.

“It’s brought out a different side of me because it hasn’t been like that in my career,” he says. “He has allowed me to be me.”

The coach asks him for his opinion on scheme, practice intensity, scheduling and timing of days off. Van Noy, the oldest player on the Ravens defense, is a member of Harbaugh’s leadership council and isn’t shy with his thoughts.

In early December, after the Ravens had lost two of three, Van Noy told Harbaugh and the other team leaders that the Ravens could benefit from a team dinner. Harbaugh told him it was a great idea and wanted to know when and where. Van Noy told him it would be at Ruth’s Chris that night — but coaches weren’t invited.

“He called the shots on that and helped bring a lot of camaraderie,” says Madubuike, who split the bill with Van Noy and a couple of others.

It was the third dinner Van Noy initiated this season. He also arranged dinners for the front seven and another for the defense when it was struggling.

Sacks are just part of what he brings.

What if Van Noy had been a Raven from the start? Would he have 100 sacks and \$100 million?

Maybe.

Maybe not.

That back injury that crushed his spirit when he was with the Lions led him to Dave Daglow of DAG Athletic Group, who introduced him to an alternative way of training that has served him well. With Daglow, Van Noy has focused on muscular balance, functional strength and perfect posture. Instead of Olympic weights and chains, he uses bands and dumbbells and mostly goes high rep. To this day, he and Daglow FaceTime regularly to address imbalances, and Van Noy says Daglow is a significant reason why he is doing what he is.

Being minimized and criticized in Detroit and traded for nearly nothing gave Van Noy an indignation that he repurposed into drive and focus.

Van Noy wasn’t thrilled about how he was used in New England. But he came away from the experience with a worldview of playing defense that he would never have had without Belichick. Playing for the Patriots helped him understand pressures, stunts and the responsibilities of those around him in a way most never do.

The cut by the Dolphins was the deepest. And it led to the most significant healing. He needed perspective, and it came from Dana Sinclair, a performance-based psychologist he had known since his time in Detroit.

“She kind of put me together after my Miami situation because I wasn’t doing very well mentally after that fiasco,” he says. “She helped me keep my stress levels down and just be in that Zen feeling, playing football like when you were a kid.”

He started questioning himself after being cut for the second time in a year, this time by the Patriots who had been so good for him. It led him to seek out Marie Diamond, a life coach and Feng Shui master he first encountered early in his career but had lost contact with. Diamond helped him let go of the past and taught him to have compassion not only for others but himself.

Every day now, he recites a simple saying she taught him. “I can do this. God is always with me. I am a winner. Today is my day.”

Being unwanted for six months after the Chargers was awful. But the feeling of having nothing left to lose, he learned, sometimes brings out our highest self.

So it’s likely none of this would have happened without all of that.

“I had to go through the rain,” he says, “to get to the sunshine.”

He says it with a laugh — a deep, hearty laugh that almost makes the room vibrate.

It’s a laugh they wouldn’t recognize in Detroit.

# Small Body, Big Heart: Ar'Darius Washington Is Measuring Up As A Starter

[BALTIMORERAVENS.COM](http://BALTIMORERAVENS.COM) | **DECEMBER 31, 2024** | RYAN MINK

Before Ar'Darius Washington's final college season at TCU, multiple draft publications projected him a future Ravens draft pick ... in the first round.

So when Washington didn't hear his name called in the first five rounds of the 2021 NFL Draft, he left his family and went to his room to be alone. He didn't want to talk to anyone, and he ultimately didn't get picked by anyone.

In addition to the usual scouts and coaches, it took phone calls from Marlon Humphrey and former Raven Patrick Queen to recruit Washington to Baltimore. Pro Football Focus declared Washington as the top undrafted free agent gem, but he was still salty and confused. How could this happen?

"Size. That's the only thing I could see," the 5-foot-8 Washington said. "I ain't gonna lie, that sent me to a dark place. I was in dark place for about four months."

A year later, Kyle Hamilton also had an extended wait, though his was in the draft's green room. When the big-bodied Notre Dame product that numerous draft analysts had ranked in their top 5 overall slid to No. 14, the Ravens pounced.

Fast forward and the Ravens are mighty thankful to have both. One supposedly too tall, the other supposedly too short, Hamilton and Washington are sizing up as a strong safety duo that has been a major factor in turning around Baltimore's pass defense.

Since Week 11, the Ravens defense ranks first in expected points added (EPA) per dropback, among several other key stats. Baltimore gave up 294 passing yards per game through the first 11 weeks. They've given up 182 per game since.

"I think part of it is having 'K-Ham' back there. He stabilizes that unit, stabilizes the defense in the back end," Defensive Coordinator Zach Orr said. "And then I just think the emergence of Ar'Darius Washington. ... I think when we finally gave him his opportunity, he went out there and made the most of it, and I think he's really become a real good NFL starting-caliber safety."

Hamilton's strong play isn't surprising. Sure, there were some questions about whether the 6-foot-4 monster could hang with wide receivers in deep coverage, but he was a first-team All-Pro last season. He's widely recognized as one of Baltimore's best players.

Washington's emergence as a starter was not in the 2024 blueprint – not with Marcus Williams patrolling the deep secondary and the addition of Eddie Jackson in free agency. In the Ravens' season opener in Kansas City, Washington played just five defensive snaps. On one, he leapt high to break up a potential touchdown catch by Chiefs first-round rookie wide receiver Xavier Worthy.

Whenever Washington has gotten the opportunity and been healthy, he's made plays. Staying healthy has been the problem.

After making the 53-man roster as an undrafted rookie and playing in three games, Washington suffered a season-ending foot injury. The following year, he was waived during roster cuts and signed back to the practice squad. He was elevated to play in three games, but didn't sign to the active roster until the playoffs.

Last season, Washington started the season as a key slot defender and played well in the first two games, logging a sack, two passes defended, and 11 tackles. But he suffered a chest injury in that second game that sent him to injured reserve until January. He again returned to play on special teams in the playoffs.

Washington said he always thought he'd be a starter someday, but when he was going through so many injuries, even he questioned whether he'd ever be healthy enough to see it come to fruition. But that didn't stop him from trying.

"I think A.D.'s probably had one of the hardest roles," cornerback Marlon Humphrey said. "He's had to make the team every single year in training camp three years in a row. If you ask anyone around here who's had the best camp the past three years, it's probably A.D."

Knock on wood, Washington has remained healthy this year. And with the Ravens secondary giving up too many big plays against the Bengals in a wild 35-34 Week 10 win against the Bengals, it was time to make a change.

Head Coach John Harbaugh was the one who let Washington know he was going to take over as a starting safety going into the Ravens' Week 11 game in Pittsburgh. Harbaugh told him on the practice field on Friday, two days before the game.

Finally, after going undrafted and dealing with frustrating injuries, he got the nod in his fourth NFL season.

"I think right from the get-go, he showed that he was a good player. He's always been one of those guys that, 'It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog,' kind of guy, and he's always had that fight," Harbaugh said.

"Really, it's been injuries that's set him back over the years. For him to be healthy now, and to get a chance to get in there and show what he can do, it's been great to see. ... He's been forged by all of those experiences."

Washington has been scrapping his entire life. He grew up the youngest of five siblings – four boys and one girl. He was always the smallest and his brothers were always fighting.

One day, he was in their back room fighting with a brother who is a year older than him. His brother grabbed his shirt and was beating him up. So another brother, who was just watching this all go down, suggested that Washington take his shirt off.

"So I took my shirt off and then I got the best of him," Washington said. "Growing up, I had to have that heart for sure and that toughness."

Washington was almost always the smallest player on the football field, and that's certainly the case in the NFL. That hasn't stopped him from dishing out some monster hits, however.

"I got something that you can't measure and that's heart," Washington said. "You can't be scared to mess up, regardless of whatever your size is, or however big or small or fast you are, it doesn't really matter. Like we out there to compete, out there to play."

In his first start against the Steelers, Washington had to make a couple open-field tackles on tight end Darnell Washington, who measures in at 6-foot-7, 264 pounds. Washington cut him down both times as part of his team-high 12 tackles.

"I was just like, 'Bruh, it's either me or him.' It was between us and the end zone," Washington said. "So I was like, you know what, I'll put my body on the line for it."

Washington made two tackles for loss against the Eagles, closed the game out with an interception against the Giants, punched a fumble out from Steelers quarterback Russell Wilson inside the 5-yard line in the rematch, then drilled Texans running back Joe Mixon just short of the end zone on fourth down last week.

"That's just who he is," Hamilton said. "He doesn't know how big he is. He's going to hit you no matter what."

Veteran outside linebacker Kyle Van Noy said Washington is his favorite player on the team.

"I see myself in him," Van Noy said. "I see that chip on his shoulder. I see a good football player. I see somebody who just loves football, has a knack for it, just makes plays. It doesn't matter where you put him – nickel, you could put him at corner, I'm sure if you put him at nose tackle he would legit find a way. He would do whatever it took."

Cornerback Brandon Stephens came into the league with Washington. Stephens was a third-round pick and hybrid defensive back, just like Washington. While Stephens got his chance early, Washington had to wait, but Stephens knew this would be the outcome.

"I think it's the way he approaches every day, the way he prepares, the hunger that he has. That was the first thing I noticed about him," Stephens said. "He's always had a chip on his shoulder. He stays hungry and wants to prove so many people wrong."

Now it's more about proving people right. The fact that he went undrafted will always irk Washington, but believes he's where he's supposed to be and now he's thriving.

"They believe in me. They trust in me," Washington said. "Go out there and show them why. The season's not over yet. I want to finish out strong and we got a long way to go."