



SEASON REVIEW CLIPS



Eisenberg: Evidence Of A Philosophical Adjustment ***After a conservative exit from the playoffs last season, the Ravens vow to attack***

By John Eisenberg
BaltimoreRavens.com
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When the Ravens were eliminated from the AFC playoffs in Pittsburgh last January, they went without their guns figuratively blazing.

They went out rushing three on third and 19 and giving up a long pass that set up the decisive touchdown.

They went out playing it safe, being conservative, and still losing.

When they looked at themselves in the mirror later, they didn't like that. A team known for being physically tough shouldn't be so cautious, defensive and afraid to lose. But sure enough, with their tepid passing game and soft defensive calls, that was the Ravens.

They vowed to change, to not let those circumstances develop again. Win or lose, they were going to be aggressive, go all out, play to win instead of not to lose.

They didn't shout it out loud – didn't say a word about it, actually. But they've offered evidence of their philosophical adjustment throughout the first month of the 2011 season.

The way they ran up the score on the Steelers in the opener, calling for a trick play on an extra point and throwing for the end zone in the final minutes – that was a piece of evidence.

The way they played so hard late in St. Louis, leaving their starters in, challenging a fumble call with a big lead, offending Rams Head Coach Steve Spagnuolo – that was a piece of evidence. (For the record, after going home that night and telling his wife he didn't want to be friends with Ravens Head Coach John Harbaugh anymore, Spagnuolo calmed down and said he was fine with it all the next day.)

The switch from Greg Mattison's careful defensive calls to Chuck Pagano's aggressive, blitz-from-anywhere scheme – that's a piece of evidence. The determined, almost stubborn effort to throw more deep balls and make the passing game more explosive – that's a piece of evidence.

For better or worse, no matter who gets in the way, the Ravens are going with a chin-out, take-no-prisoners approach. It's a no-apologies organizational dictum, starting at the top and flowing down. Their mantra for 2011 -- printed right on the cover of their media guide, by the way is - RELENTLESS.

They might ruffle some feathers, might test a few friendships along the way, but that's how they're rolling.

It came into focus Monday when the players resumed practicing after their bye-week vacation. Seeking to frame the rest of the season, Harbaugh spoke to them philosophically.

"Who are the Ravens? What are we going to be about? What do we stand for? How are we going to play? What can the people and the fans in Baltimore and across the country expect from us and be proud of? That's important. It (was) a good time to kind of talk about that," Harbaugh said later Monday.

And?

"We want to attack people in every way we can – offense, defense, special teams, down the field, at the point of attack, in all three phases," Harbaugh said. "That's what we're about. That's the way we're going to try to play every week."

There's friction between coaches and players on any team, and the Ravens are no exception; they had to sacrifice a week of OTA sessions a year ago because someone in the locker room turned them in for exceeding offseason practice limits.

But when a roomful of players hears their coach tell them to go all out all the time, stomp people and maybe bust a few chins, they're going to leave that room smiling and thinking their coach understands them.

Former Ravens coach Brian Billick had his struggles as the offense guru he was purported to be, but he was superb at calibrating the locker room, getting the players in just the right mood to play. Harbaugh obviously has also done a good job of that, as his 35-17 regular-season record attests, but by turning his players loose and letting them uncork their inner aggressions, he may have found a sweet spot as the leader of this team.

"Oh, yeah, I think they love it," Harbaugh said Monday. "I think that's who they are. That's who they want to be."



Pagano takes aggressive approach to defense

By Aaron Wilson
Carroll County Times
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OWINGS MILLS - Chuck Pagano once challenged one of his biggest linebackers at East Carolina to an impromptu wrestling match, offering to excuse the entire position group from running sprints if he lost.

In roughly five seconds, the future Baltimore Ravens defensive coordinator had wrapped up a 6-foot-4, 230-pound NFL prospect into a small package he couldn't escape. Somewhat embarrassed at being rudely taken down to the ground, former Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Jerry Dillon was in full equipment at the time except for his helmet.

When Pagano was a 155-pound safety at Wyoming, he built a reputation as an intimidating hitter by launching his undersized frame into much larger players.

Now, Pagano is bringing that aggressiveness to the Ravens' vaunted defense after being tabbed this offseason to succeed Greg Mattison.

Where Mattison was regarded as more conservative than the hair-on-fire approach of Rex Ryan, Pagano is regarded as somewhere closer to Ryan in terms of temperament and aggressiveness.

"I think coach has his own swag to him," Ravens Pro Bowl outside linebacker Terrell Suggs said. "I think this is our first Italian defensive coordinator. So, it's going to be fun. We like the aggressiveness that the coach portrays at times, and we like the smartness that he portrays at times. So, I think he's got his own swag and his own two shoes and it's going to be great for the city of Baltimore."

Promoted from secondary coach, Pagano takes over a defense that ranked 10th in total defense last season, fifth in rushing defense and 21st in pass defense.

Known for hurling his headset or hat when things go wrong, Pagano has the fiery attitude that players respect.

"Chuck's one of those coaches who gets after you, but you always have the ultimate respect for him," Johnson said. "The sidelines always get heated. When somebody is fiery and aggressive and has a similar personality as we do, we love it. With his personality, his knowledge of schemes, we're definitely going to be aggressive."

Pagano has no intentions of coaching from the booth. He'll be on the sidelines with his guys, mixing it up.

And he has every ambition of taking the Ravens' defense to an even higher level of intensity.

"I just told them that when people put on our tape it ought to look like we've got 13, 14, 15 guys out there," Pagano said. "We've got a smart football team, a team that doesn't beat itself, plays with great fundamentals and technique, plays with passion, most tackling team in the NFL, most physical, can just dominate people. When we walk out of that tunnel or out of that locker room, we expect to shut people out and just play great defense."

Pagano's primary challenge is upgrading a pass rush that dipped to a franchise-worst 27 sacks last season.

Too often, the Ravens would play coverage schemes, rush three people or four and not strike fear in quarterbacks' hearts.

Another area the Ravens need to improve is holding a fourth quarter lead. Despite going 12-4 in the regular season, they were outscored 119-80 in the fourth quarter.

It was a far cry from the organized chaos preached by Ryan during the Ravens' defensive heyday.

And Pagano reminds some of Ryan's biggest zealots of the former Ravens defensive coordinator and bombastic New York Jets coach.

"I really like his mentality," Johnson said. "I would say he's more toward Rex's style, a little more emotional probably. Coach Mattison always kept a level head. You know Rex would get pissed off and bring the house. And I think he would be somewhere in the middle. His coaching knowledge and just the way you relate to him, it's awesome."

Rather than pursuing a former NFL head coach like Dave Wannstedt or Eric Mangini or promoting linebackers coach and former New England Patriots defensive coordinator Dean Pees or defensive coordinator Clarence Brooks. Harbaugh opted to go with Pagano as a rookie NFL defensive coordinator.



The roots of that decision lie in Pagano's hard-nosed approach to football, which makes him a kindred spirit to Harbaugh.

"Any coach will imprint his personality on a group, and Chuck has a great personality," Harbaugh said. "He has confidence and he has just always been that way. He really has a lot of fun out there, yet he is also very detailed in what he does.

"I expect our defense to play that way. They are going to play confident, but they are going to be detailed. They are going to play really hard, and they are going to be reckless in the best sense of the word. I'm excited about what our defense is building."

A former University of North Carolina defensive coordinator, Pagano has coached in Baltimore for three seasons. During that span, the pass defense ranks eighth overall and Baltimore has intercepted 67 passes to rank second in the league with opposing quarterbacks generating only a 69.9 passer rating.

"They've been playing great defense here long before any of us got here, and they'll be playing great defense long after I'm gone," Pagano said. "They've always been an attacking, swarming, tough, physical, hard-nosed group of men that has great passion. And so my philosophy is their philosophy. Let's go out and wreak havoc and play Ravens defense, just the way they've played for many, many years around here."

Last season, the Ravens intercepted 19 passes and finished third in scoring defense as they allowed just 16.9 points per contest.

Respected highly by key players such as middle linebacker Ray Lewis and safety Ed Reed, whom he coached and recruited to the University of Miami, Pagano is expected to cut the Ravens loose to be themselves.

"I know the guys, they know me, they know my personality," Pagano said. "I know their personality, so it was an easy transition."

Legend Lewis wants another ring for career wrap

By Mike Freeman
CBSsports.com
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OWINGS MILLS, MD. -- Ray Lewis is asked about his legacy, and it's not an easy question to answer considering his legacy is thick and palpable and historic. Then he answers by pulling out two big notebooks.

Lewis doesn't like the schedule-keeping gizmos. He goes old school with pen and datebook. Both are full, but it is the second one that's most interesting. In it is Lewis' workout schedule, and it's this insane level of physical preparation that, to me, has allowed Lewis to pass Dick Butkus as the best middle linebacker of all time and challenge the legacy (there's that word again) of Lawrence Taylor as the most impactful linebacker period.

Almost every day of the book is filled with something ... many somethings. Wednesday: two hours of workouts including 10 150s in sand. Thursday ... more hours, including squats. The incline benches, the 20 miles on the bike, and more 150s. Even for an NFL player, Lewis' workouts are intense, reminiscent of what Jerry Rice used to do. Lewis has at least 20 or 30 of these books chronicling his workouts dating back years. They are representative of his dedication as well as his attempt to beat back time as a 36-year-old player in his 16th season.

"When you're still chasing something," Lewis explains, answering the legacy query, "it's hard to look back. I don't look back. At least not yet. I'm chasing the greatest of all time. Period."

When I ask the Ravens star how long can he keep up his frenetic pace the response was highly intriguing.

"My son will be a junior this year. I only play this game for another ring. If we can win it this year, and I'm being brutally honest with you, if we win it this year, I'm gone to then spend as much time as I can with him," Lewis said. "I'm gone to be with my son. And I feel like now we have enough pieces in place to make a good run at the Super Bowl."

So if the Ravens win a title this season -- and they have a definite shot to do so -- Lewis may not come back. Is that set in stone? No, but Lewis made it very clear that while he isn't consistently pondering retirement, a championship would likely lead to the end of one of the top five greatest defensive careers the sport has seen. Lewis is only getting started in his conversation. The motor is beginning to warm, and when Lewis gets going it would take something atomic to stop him.

"I don't know when it will all be over for me," he says. "People want to use my age against me. They say I'm too old. People fear getting old. I don't fear that because now I have wisdom and a tough body to go with that wisdom."



"I don't ever want to be 24-year-old Ray Lewis again. I made too many bad choices. Now I have the maturity and I take care of my body. I haven't eaten fast food in 13 years."

Lewis next threw down a league-wide challenge.

"If people think I'm slow let me say this," he said. "Sideline to sideline there still isn't a 'backer in this business that can beat me. Sideline to sideline. Not one. I challenge you to find one."

"There are fast guys in this league but it's also not just about the speed. Young guys make a lot of money at the combine from running the 40 [-yard dash]. But then you put on the film and they don't play with heart."

Lewis inspires great emotion. Some love him, others hate him. But it is undeniable that we have watched a player who is only surpassed in effectiveness by names like Deion Sanders and maybe even Taylor -- and Lewis' legacy is giving Taylor's track record a serious run. When Lewis is asked to specifically address his legacy, he pauses and shows me his cell phone. On it is a fresh text from a young kid named Darius who lives in Baltimore and needs a heart transplant. Part of the text to Lewis read: "You've done so much for me."

Lewis argues that watching Darius face such a horrible situation with courage has done more for Lewis. Lewis has befriended Darius as Lewis has many young inner-city children around the country.

"If I had a legacy," Lewis says, "maybe that would be it."

Suggs is new Ravens sack king

With three sacks, Terrell Suggs passed Peter Boulware for the all-time sack lead (71.5)

By Ryan Mink
BaltimoreRavens.com
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Terrell Suggs said he never had a goal of becoming the Ravens' all-time sack leader.

But when he entered the 2011 season just 1 ½ sacks away from Peter Boulware's career record of 70, Suggs figured what better way to break it than against the rival Pittsburgh Steelers?

Suggs had tormented Pittsburgh over the years. He had five sacks in three games against them last year.

This time around, the Steelers tried everything imaginable to block him. It still didn't matter.

Suggs recorded three sacks against the Steelers in Sunday's 35-7 win at M&T Bank Stadium and broke Boulware's record, which was set in 2005. Suggs now sits atop the list with 71.5 career sacks.

"It's huge," said Suggs, who was beaming with pride that it came against Pittsburgh and with his family in the stands. "It was almost fate."

Suggs' first sack came on Pittsburgh's second drive. The Steelers were facing a 1st-and-10 when the outside linebacker stunted off the left edge and burst up the middle. He nailed Ben Roethlisberger, forcing a fumble that the Ravens later turned into a touchdown.

Suggs recorded another sack and forced fumble to break Boulware's record. It came in the fourth quarter and set up Baltimore's final points in the rout.

The 2010 Pro Bowler has now sacked Roethlisberger 15.5 times (including the playoffs), the most any NFL defender has dropped the sturdy Steelers quarterback.

"There's only a few players that can bring him down and I'm one of them," Suggs said. "God can have his soul, but his ass belongs to me."

What's more impressive than the fact that Suggs is the Ravens' new sack king is the overall player he has become. It's not just about sacks.

"Terrell Suggs is a premier player," Head Coach John Harbaugh said. "He's one of the best players in the National Football League. He's one of the premier defensive players that everybody game plans around."



Linebacker Ray Lewis has been with Suggs from the beginning, when the Ravens drafted the Arizona State product with the tenth overall pick in 2003. Suggs came out of college as the NCAA's single-season sacks record holder. He notched a jaw-dropping 24 sacks in 2002.

He did more of the same as a rookie, entering games in passing situations to be a rush specialist. He earned Defensive Rookie of the Year honors with 12 sacks and six forced fumbles.

But since then, Suggs has developed into a hybrid that can still rush the passer with the best of them, but can also drop into coverage and is extremely stout against the run. And in a locker room full of leaders, he's stepped up to become one of those in the forefront.

"When you watched him, how raw of a talent he was when he first came in, you knew how special he was going to be," Lewis said.

"Every year, I started challenging him personally to mature in different areas, to not just be a sack master but a complete football player. Now you see everything; he's all things."

After Sunday's victory, overcome with emotion, Suggs gave props to safety Ed Reed and Lewis, calling them the greatest safety in the game and the greatest football player to ever play the game.

And himself?

"The next king," Suggs said.

The 2011 Baltimore Ravens: In the spotlight

Dizzying roster makeover has Ravens younger, faster and perhaps better than ever

By Joe Platania
PressBox Online
September 15, 2011

Like a colossus, Ray Lewis has stood astride Ravens history since its very beginnings.

Better than anyone, the perennial Pro Bowl inside linebacker and future Hall of Famer understands what it has always taken to become a Raven, as well as remain one.

"I mean, I've got a lot of stories to tell," Lewis said early during this year's training camp. "I always give whatever side it is, whether there's a good side or a bad side, whether it's on the field or off.

"I think that's what my 16-year experience brings, just a lot of everything, from the ups to the downs, to the highs and the lows, whatever it may be."

These days, that last statement may be the most relevant of all.

For it is this, the Ravens' 16th season of existence -- one that kicked off with a 35-7 victory against the Pittsburgh Steelers -- that truly underscores how changing times and tides can truly alter the face of a football team.

Including players that made this year's squad, Lewis has seen a staggering 428 other active-roster players put on a Ravens uniform since he did so for the first time during the team's first season, 1996.

To have dealt with so many teammates, to have imparted so much knowledge and energy so often to so many, he has become someone who has not only indelibly stamped himself as the most recognizable person in Ravens history, but one of the most team-oriented as well.

Since being part of a championship-winning squad in 2000, Lewis has seldom dwelled, at least outwardly, on his two Defensive Player of the Year honors or his Super Bowl Most Valuable Player award.

Instead, he has primarily focused on how "great it would be to win a Super Bowl with this group," meaning the stellar list of teammates that have kept the Ravens on a run of seven playoff appearances during an 11-year span, including the last three.

Those players that became team mainstays after Super Bowl XXXV, a robust nucleus that has, at one time or another, included the team's top two pass-catching targets (Todd Heap, Derrick Mason), the team's second-most frequent tackler after Lewis (Kelly Gregg), the team's second-best touchdown scorer among running backs (Willis McGahee) and a slew of dynamic, charismatic defensive



playmakers (Bart Scott, Samari Rolle, Will Demps, Adalius Thomas, Trevor Pryce and Ed Hartwell, among others), all provided Lewis, the coaching staff, the fans and the city with a treasure trove of great moments and mostly successful seasons.

But besides being hard-working, successful players who contributed to contending teams, all those players have two other things in common: they didn't win a Super Bowl -- Thomas and Gregg were practice-squadders in 2000 -- and they're not Ravens anymore.

Lewis' "group" is gone, but fortunately for the Ravens' organization, those that have replaced them are mostly younger, faster and just as hungry as Lewis and his cohorts were when they were minnows and the world was their oyster.

But if the vibrant group of the last decade couldn't reel in another Super Bowl, how will the new batch of Ravens respond to the scrutiny that comes from playing for a successful major-sports franchise in a sports-loving city?

Like Ravens of the past, will they rise to the occasion and dwarf the spotlight ... or will they shrink from it and drag the team down with them?

How much has really changed?

At first glance, it doesn't appear that the Ravens are heading into a transition year.

For one thing, majority owner Steve Bisciotti simply doesn't permit that kind of talk or thought. Several years ago, at the team's season-ending press conference, he infamously said he didn't believe in windows that open and close.

It's an admirable attitude to have, but somewhat unrealistic in the NFL's salary-cap era. Teams all over the league have had to endure plenty of turnover in order to either fight their way to the top or stay there, and they have only broken through when a semblance of stability has surfaced.

The Green Bay Packers have averaged five new starters per year during the last four seasons -- "new starters" being defined as those that have played a majority of the games at season's end -- but they still have been a constant playoff presence and won last February's Super Bowl.

The Atlanta Falcons have gone 33-15 the last three years, with seven new starters per season, but they are more optimistic than ever about their Super Bowl chances because only four spots changed hands in 2011. Chicago had averaged 8.5 new starters per year since it won the 2006 NFC title, but the Bears might have only six this year.

For their part, the Ravens haven't really settled into a stable groove, averaging eight new starters per season since 2007. But even with that kind of turnover, Baltimore has not only continued to be a constant postseason presence, but is also the only team that has won a postseason game during each of the last three seasons.

This year, Baltimore entered the regular season with 18 new players on its 53-man roster (as of Sept. 5), a surprisingly low number in the current climate. In fact, their average age dropped the Ravens from having the fifth-oldest team in the league last year to the 13th-oldest in 2011.

"We have a veteran group of guys who take the right approach and work hard every day and preparing for (the start of the season)," guard Marshal Yanda said. "We are not worried about it and excited for the opportunity. We'll work hard every day to get as prepared as we can."

Not only that, but the franchise always expends a great deal of belief in its homegrown talent. Of the Ravens' 39 regular and supplemental draft picks since 2007, 37 of them have remained with the team in some form -- active roster, practice squad or injured reserve -- after their rookie-year training camp. This year, all eight draft picks made the 53-man squad.

Adapt or Die

Infusing new blood into the leagues fiercest rivalry, the Ravens demolished the Steelers and changed the balance of power in the AFC. Evolution? In the NFL, you'd better believe.

By Damon Hack
Sports Illustrated
September 19, 2011

Last week in Pittsburgh the Steelers prepped for their season opener with the help of a black-and-purple talisman named Ray. The small knitted piece—with ray woven in the center, crossed out by an x—was mailed to the Steelers by a fan in 2008 for luck in their blood feud with the Ravens. While Pittsburgh beat Baltimore three times that season and won its record sixth Super Bowl title, Ray



went up on a wall in the Steelers' practice facility, next to the lockers of the offensive linemen. "It's from an old lady who said she put a hex on [linebacker] Ray Lewis," right tackle Willie Colon explained. "We've never taken it down."

On Sunday at M&T Bank Stadium the Ravens ended that spell, unraveling the Steelers one thread at a time. Baltimore forced a franchise-record seven turnovers, marched unbothered on a proud but aging defense and unleashed a beating on Ben Roethlisberger so bad that the quarterback struggled to keep his helmet on straight. With four seconds left in a 35--7 rout, Big Ben dropped back to pass one more time. Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs broke through a leaky line and flattened Roethlisberger for his third sack. As the players spilled onto the field and headed toward the tunnels, Suggs lingered beneath the cloudy skies to savor the moment. Over the summer he'd predicted a performance like this, believing he has reached a point in his nine-year career where he can win games with preparation as much as talent.

Now he was standing victorious, having outfoxed the Steelers' offensive line and run roughshod over Roethlisberger. "His soul may belong to God," Suggs crowed, "but his ass belongs to me."

In a rivalry marked by hard hits, trash talk and fantastic finishes, Baltimore's thumping provided more than a pivot point. It also gave a teaching moment to the NFL: adapt or die.

"It's a new year, 2011," said the 36-year-old Lewis, who intercepted a Roethlisberger pass and forced a fumble. "New pieces, new faces."

The theme of change was prevalent on the NFL's opening weekend, when new coaches, new players and new philosophies were put to the test after the league's 4½-month lockout. Teams expected to struggle—the Bengals, Cardinals, Jaguars and Redskins—savored victories with new leaders under center. A couple of powerhouses, the Steelers and the Falcons, came out on the short end of surprising blowouts. With a condensed free-agent signing period and limited reps, everybody was on a fast track, all the while trying to avoid tripping and falling.

No team was more impressive than the Ravens. In the first three years under coach John Harbaugh, Baltimore was a combined 32--16, but two of those campaigns ended with a playoff loss to the Steelers. So in the shortened off-season Ravens general manager Ozzie Newsome chose to infuse the roster with new blood. He jettisoned veterans such as tight end Todd Heap and wideout Derrick Mason and brought in a raft of players, among them wide receiver Lee Evans, running back Ricky Williams, fullback Vonta Leach, left tackle Bryant McKinnie and safety Bernard Pollard.

With the 27th selection in the April draft, Newsome gambled on Jimmy Smith, a cornerback from Colorado whom some teams shied away from because of character issues. Although Smith injured his ankle on the kickoff coverage team in the first quarter and never lined up at defensive back, he's a key part of the long-term plan in Baltimore. "We drafted Jimmy because when we've been a great defense, when we set the defensive record in 2000 [and won the Super Bowl], we had two great corners in Chris McAlister and Duane Starks," Newsome says. "Jimmy's 6'2", but [he has a long reach]. When he gets his arms up, the ball has to go over that to be completed. Along with that height, he's smooth in transition and he can tackle."

Newsome's moves got the attention of Steelers coach Mike Tomlin, who admitted to being "a little bit more uneasy" about facing Baltimore after winning six of the previous eight times. "At this juncture they probably know more about us than we know about them," Tomlin said. "Ozzie Newsome and Company have been active this off-season in improving their team."

The Steelers, on the other hand, took a more conservative approach, massaging a roster that lost to the Packers in Super Bowl XLV.

But against the quickness of Ravens running back Ray Rice, the power of Williams and the speed of second-year tight ends Ed Dickson and Dennis Pitta (who had a combined seven catches for 104 yards and a touchdown), the Steelers' defense looked old. As in ancient. Pittsburgh gave up 170 yards rushing at 5.5 yards a carry, an unconscionable stat for a black-and-gold defense, while allowing Joe Flacco to pass for 224 yards and three touchdowns.

"We understand that every time you play the Baltimore Ravens, you have to bring it or you will be embarrassed on the scoreboard and embarrassed physically," Steelers safety Ryan Clark said last week. "Our fans don't like the fact that they're one of the few teams that hits us back."

Newsome has been butting heads with the Steelers since 1978, first as a tight end with the Browns and now as an executive. "You can measure yourself and your season with your ability to beat the Steelers," Newsome says. "It hasn't changed."

The new Ravens had only heard stories about the rivalry, but they couldn't wait to get their own taste of it. Pollard, who previously played for the Chiefs and the Texans, used to seek out Ravens-Steelers highlights after his own games.

"You always knew something was going to go down," Pollard said last Thursday. "That went into my decision to come [to Baltimore] because you see guys get down and dirty. At the end of the day we are all dogs without a leash. That's what you have out there."



The Baltimore coaching staff was happy to oblige its new charges, throwing them headlong into a game plan that was executed with precision. On the Ravens' first play from scrimmage, offensive coordinator Cam Cameron called for a Rice run off the left side.

McKinnie, who was released by the Vikings after reporting to camp well overweight, at 387, made an initial block, then launched himself into linebacker James Farrior on the second level. Rice dashed for the first 36 of his 107 yards. The tone was set.

Said Cameron of McKinnie, "It doesn't hurt to give a guy a chance to tee off on somebody the first play of the game."

While the new members of the Ravens gave Baltimore a different energy, the veterans carried the burden of heartbreaking losses to the Steelers. "I knew they had some bitterness in them," Smith said of his older teammates. At halftime, with the Ravens leading by the same 21--7 margin they enjoyed in last January's divisional playoff game, several players talked about being in this position before.

This time, they promised, they would make it right. That wasn't what Lewis wanted to hear, so he took the floor and let loose.

"I corrected everybody," he said. "Everyone was basically saying, 'We've been here before,' and I was like, 'We haven't been here before—2010 and all those other years are behind us.'"

While Lewis, safety Ed Reed (two interceptions, four passes defensed) and nosetackle Haloti Ngata (two fumble recoveries, one forced fumble) handled the details of new defensive coordinator Chuck Pagano's more aggressive, get-to-the-quarterback scheme, Baltimore's offense was predominantly in the hands of two players for whom last year's playoff meltdown was an especially dismal memory: Flacco, who had thrown an interception and lost a fumble, and the normally sure-handed Rice, who had also fumbled. In fact, some viewed Flacco, the 18th pick in the 2008 draft, as the only question mark on an otherwise Super Bowl--ready team.

"Joe knows the heat that comes with the territory, but he's played pretty darn good in those [Steelers] games," Cameron says. "Everyone picks a quarterback apart until he beats the team [that] maybe he's lost to a few times. I always knew he was made of the right stuff."

Flacco, nicknamed Joe Cool by his teammates, knows that one dominating victory over an old nemesis won't quiet everybody. "There's always going to be critics," he says. "Turn around, 10 weeks down the road, and something might happen and, O.K., it's back again."

Said Rice, "We know it's Week 1. It's not the playoffs. But that playoff taste [from last season], that's over."

At the very least the Ravens have bloodied their hated foe. The Steelers, after a Super Bowl defeat and an off-season of embarrassing headlines, face questions about their own mettle. Safety Troy Polamalu, hobbled by a left Achilles tendon injury last season, made little impact beyond a horse-collar penalty. Linebacker James Harrison, with two back surgeries in the off-season, left the game with a bruised right knee. Farrior spent more time on the sideline than usual, cradling his helmet and watching his replacement, Larry Foote.

Yet while the defense is aging and the offensive line appears vulnerable, Roethlisberger didn't seem overly concerned. "I just think this was a bump in the road," he said.

As the Steelers limped out of M&T Bank Stadium, the Ravens exchanged hugs and handshakes. Rice showed off a bloody two-inch gash behind his right ear. He couldn't even remember the play that cut him.

"Steelers-Ravens is like the Detroit Pistons against the Chicago Bulls," Reed said. "You go into the paint knowing you're going to get fouled."

Harbaugh agreed: "Ray [Lewis] said it earlier in the week—it was going to be about being physical and about executing. The whole thing about ghosts, demons, monkeys on your back, that's not real to us."

No, for these Ravens, there is more than a Ray of hope.

Ngata signing 'sets personality' of defense

By John Eisenberg
CSNbalto.com
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A day after Ravens defensive tackle Haloti Ngata signed a five-year, \$61 million contract making him the highest-paid non-quarterback in the NFL, his teammates had some fun with him at practice Wednesday.

"No one asked me for a loan. They just asked me to give them money," the soft-spoken Ngata said. "There was no (discussion of a)



loan involved.”

Ravens head coach John Harbaugh said he heard a couple of players wishing Ngata, 27, a happy birthday, even though he was born on January 21.

“He got a present,” Harbaugh said.

But all lightheartedness aside, a sense of satisfaction palpably pervaded the team’s training facility Wednesday in the wake of the Ngata signing.

Even though there was never much doubt that the Ravens would eventually lock up Ngata, who is regarded by many observers as the NFL’s best defensive player, the fact that he is now officially in the fold through 2015 is hugely meaningful.

In the short run, it frees up an estimated \$5 million in salary cap room that the Ravens can use to fill any personnel holes that crop up. It also frees them to apply the franchise tag to running back Ray Rice, a pending free agent, if they can’t agree to a longterm contract with Rice after this season.

But Ngata’s value to the organization goes well beyond any short-term concerns.

The knowledge that he will be around through 2015 “sets the personality of our defense,” Harbaugh said. “You can talk a lot about what positions have the most value ... but it is just so much more than that. The impact he has on our defense, the personality, the tone he sets. We can be a dominant defense because he is that force in the middle.”

The Ravens’ longstanding emphasis on defense comes from GM Ozzie Newsome, who decided long ago that stopping the other team was the first commandment of winning football. Ray Lewis, 36, and Ed Reed, 33, have led the unit for a decade, but with those two seemingly near the end of their careers, the Ravens needed a new generation of stars to step in and continue the tradition.

Their 2009 signing of linebacker Terrell Suggs to a six-year deal and now this signing of Ngata seemingly have accomplished that goal.

“You see guys like Ray Lewis, Ed Reed, Terrell Suggs, and to be in that group is really humbling, really, to be considered one of those guys,” Ngata said. “I hope I can do a great job and lead this defense and this team and (do) whatever I need to do to get some wins.”

Suggs, 29, has made four Pro Bowl appearances, and Ngata is already well on his way to a third, having led a stout run defense and forced three turnovers in the Ravens’ first two games.

They’re a classic “fire and ice” combination, with the outspoken Suggs having just set the franchise’s career record for sacks, and the soft-spoken Ngata anchoring a run defense that has never finished lower than fifth in the league with him in the middle.

“You always say you want to be strong up the middle,” Harbaugh said. “We’re strong up the middle.”

Ray Lewis, who plays right behind Ngata, just shook his head when asked to assess Ngata.

“First off, he’s one of the guys who really deserves (a big contract), just the humblest guy you’ll ever meet,” Lewis said. “He has gotten better and better every year. I don’t even think he’s bumped into his greatest side of playing yet.”

Ravens’ Rookies Contributing Early

Beyond Torrey Smith, LaQuan Williams is returning kicks and Pernell McPhee’s getting sacks

By Ryan Mink
BaltimoreRavens.com
September 27, 2011

The prevailing thought entering this season was that rookies would have a tough time.

The lockout crushed valuable classroom hours and zapped their chance to get more physically prepared in an NFL weight room.

That hasn’t been the case in Baltimore thus far, however.

Even with top draft pick cornerback Jimmy Smith sidelined by a high ankle sprain, the Ravens are getting some early dividends from their Class of 2011.



"[It's] probably necessity as much as anything," Harbaugh said. "A lot of rookies have been thrown into the mix and I think some of them have responded and done real well – and they've obviously worked real hard to do that – and others haven't."

That certainly played a part in the case of wide receiver Torrey Smith. With starting wide receiver Lee Evans (ankle) out, Smith exploded for 152 receiving yards and three touchdowns on Sunday.

Fifth-round rookie Pernell McPhee has seen quite a few snaps at defensive end and recorded his first NFL sack against the Rams. He has four tackles and one pass deflection as well.

Undrafted rookie wide receiver LaQuan Williams stepped into the starting kickoff returner role in St. Louis while David Reed nursed a shoulder injury and took back two kicks for 60 yards, including a 37-yarder to start the second half.

He also had one catch for seven yards and was targeted on a deep pass along the right sideline in the fourth quarter. Williams' quick contribution may be the most surprising.

The Maryland product was the only undrafted rookie free agent to make the active roster and had the least amount of preparation.

Unlike drafted rookies who knew where they were playing and received playbooks from teammates during the lockout, Williams didn't sign with the Ravens until July 28.

"All the hard work has paid off and it feels good to get the ball in my hands," Williams said.

"I got a lot of help from the veterans on this team, guys like [Anquan Boldin], Lee [Evans], Ed Reed, Ray Rice and Ray Lewis helping us push through and teaching us little things here and there."

Although they haven't yet played big roles on the field, the Ravens' other rookies are in key backup spots and are starting to see some time.

Fourth-round wide receiver Tandon Doss was activated for his first game in St. Louis and targeted by one deep pass, which went incomplete. Seventh-round running back Anthony Allen has been active for all three games and saw his first offensive action in St. Louis, running three times for eight yards.

Third-round pick Jah Reid is Michael Oher's backup at right tackle and saw some late snaps in St. Louis. He got called for a false start on the final series. Baltimore has enough confidence in sixth-round quarterback Tyrod Taylor that the front office didn't sign a veteran backup.

Ravens defense reminiscent of record-setting 2000 edition

By Aaron Wilson
Carroll County Times
October 4, 2011

OWINGS MILLS - The Baltimore Ravens' defensive gold standard remains unchanged and unchallenged, established by a Super Bowl championship squad headlined by a young Ray Lewis and multiple other mayhem-minded blue-chippers.

Regardless of whether the Ravens' current defense ever approaches the lofty heights of the 2000 defense that set an NFL record for fewest points allowed, the fact that they're even being mentioned in comparison conversations is an encouraging sign.

We have an unbelievable respect for those guys," outside linebacker Jarret Johnson said. "When we talk about the Ravens' defense and the history we have, it all started with those guys. They set the bar, and they set it as high as you can set it. We're trying to beat that.

"It's tough to do. They had a lot of really good veteran players. They had some extremely physical guys and had a great scheme to go along with it. You want to be your own self, but if we play anywhere near those guys we're going to be a good defense."

It was only two weeks ago that the Ravens' defense was drawing heavy criticism after being picked apart by Tennessee Titans quarterback Matt Hasselbeck in a loss.

Now, the defense is being heralded around the NFL after setting a franchise record by scoring three touchdowns during a 34-17 victory Sunday over the Jets where they terrorized quarterback Mark Sanchez.



The Ravens (3-1) scored touchdowns on fumble returns by linebacker Jameel McClain and Johnson and an interception return by cornerback Lardarius Webb as he dashed 73 yards for a touchdown.

The Ravens stonewalled the Jets, holding them to 150 yards of total offense and a mere seven first downs with two gained after halftime. They rushed for only 38 yards.

Afterward, Jets coach Rex Ryan, the brash former Baltimore defensive coordinator and defensive line coach for the Ravens' Super Bowl team, when he guided Tony Siragusa, Sam Adams, Michael McCrary and Rob Burnett, spoke highly of this defense.

Ryan didn't hesitate to broach the topic of the 2000 defense that allowed only 165 points and shut out four opponents, or the 2006 team that finished first in the NFL in total defense as that team went 13-3.

"I've been around football a long time and I've never seen anything like that before," Ryan said. "The performance by their defense was spectacular. They were coming after us. That's that Raven defense. It reminded me of the 2000 and 2006 defenses. We got it handed to us."

The Jets aren't alone in that category.

The Ravens set a franchise record with seven turnovers in a stomping of the Pittsburgh Steelers to launch the season. And they shut down the St. Louis Rams' offense, forcing them to abandon their no-huddle attack.

A quarter through the season, the Ravens rank third in the NFL in yards allowed with 284.5 yards of total offense surrendered per contest, second in scoring defense, allowing just 14.3 points per contest and rank first with 14 takeaways.

They're third in rushing defense, giving up 72.5 yards per game on the ground and tied for seventh in pass defense with a 212 average given up per game.

"We can be special, but it all depends on where we go from here," said Pro Bowl outside linebacker Terrell Suggs, who leads the Ravens with four sacks. "We can't take any steps back because that's not how championship teams are built. Not in this league. You've got to make the momentum snowball."

Whether the Ravens legitimately belong in the annals of defensive history with the 2000 squad that featured a secondary with Rod Woodson, Chris McAlister and Duane Starks and linebackers Lewis, Peter Boulware and Jamie Sharper remains to be seen.

Nonetheless, this defense is building a strong identity of its own.

Just ask Sanchez, who was hit 10 times and sacked twice as he completed only 11 of 35 passes for 119 yards, no touchdowns and one interception for a horrible 30.5 passer rating.

Under new defensive coordinator Chuck Pagano, this defense definitely has gotten back to its aggressive roots with fearless blitz packages.

Pagano is following in the footsteps of former Ravens defensive coordinators Marvin Lewis, Mike Nolan and Ryan, who all went on to become NFL head coaches.

And they've done it while shorthanded in the secondary with rookie first-round cornerback Jimmy Smith out since the first game with a high left ankle sprain and cornerback Chris Carr hobbled with a strained left hamstring.

"The best defensive performance is the next one," Lewis said. "We are looking to get some rest, come back completely healthy. We are really looking forward to that."

Ravens coach John Harbaugh is reluctant to compare this defense to previous ones other than pinning the leadership brand on Lewis, a two-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year.

"You've got to be careful about putting labels on any of that stuff," Harbaugh said. "If you're going to put any label on it, put Ray's label on it. That to me is the thread that probably runs through this defense. There have been a lot of people who have put their fingerprints on it and a lot of people who have had a lot of input over the years."

"Those guys played just the way you want to see them play. It was fast, it was aggressive, it was physical, it was with abandon. Yet, it was with great discipline and attention to detail. To me, those are the things that make for great defense."

The Jets averaged a minuscule 2.7 yards per offensive play and converted only four of 15 third downs.

The way the defense suffocated the Jets hearkened back to the Ravens' stingy tradition.



"It's about carrying on tradition, you know," McClain said. "You don't step into a position like this halfway. You know everything that this defense has done, and you know what this organization is about. It's an honor to be here coming from where we've come from, our humble backgrounds. Where can it go in the future? Obviously, going up to the top."

Retooled Ravens celebrate 'a whole new year'

By David Ginsburg
The Associated Press
October 7, 2011

BALTIMORE - Thirty minutes into the first game of the season, Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis stood before his teammates and delivered an inspirational and insightful speech that set the tone for the entire season.

Baltimore held a 21-7 lead over the defending AFC champion Pittsburgh Steelers, the identical score at halftime of their playoff game in Pittsburgh nine months earlier. In that one, the Ravens came apart in a 31-24 defeat.

Lewis placed himself in the middle of the locker room and emphatically spiked the comparison.

"Everybody was saying, 'We've been here before,'" Lewis said. "And I was like, 'We haven't been here before, because 2010 is 2010, and 2011 is a whole new year.' If you understand it that way, then you understand that this is a new team."

And so it is. The retooled Ravens went on to hammer the Steelers 35-7, and they enter this Sunday's bye with a 3-1 record, alone atop the AFC North and charging toward a fourth straight playoff appearance.

Baltimore general manager Ozzie Newsome retooled the team during a whirlwind offseason shortened by the NFL lockout.

Almost every move he made has thus far appeared to be the right one, beginning with a salary cap purge of wide receiver Derrick Mason, tight end Todd Heap, running back Willis McGahee, defensive tackle Kelly Gregg and fullback Le'Ron McClain.

At this point in the season, the Ravens don't miss any of them. Not even a little bit.

Ricky Williams has proven to be a capable backup to running back Ray Rice; Lee Evans and second-round draft pick Torrey Smith have made up for the loss of Mason; Vonta Leach is an upgrade from McClain; Terrence Cody has proven to be just as immovable on the line as Gregg; and the tight end tandem of Ed Dickson and Dennis Pitta has made it easy for Ravens fans to scrap the "HEAP!" cheer that resonated throughout M&T Stadium for the past decade.

Newsome also added safety Bernard Pollard and a pair of offensive linemen who made an immediate difference.

The signing of free agent tackle Bryant McKinnie enabled Michael Oher to move back to the right side _ where he is more effective _ and free agent guard Andre Gurode has been invaluable during Ben Grubbs' absence with turf toe.

Oh, and the defense under first-year coordinator Chuck Pagano has been spectacular.

As Lewis said, this is indeed a new team. And it's not outlandish to believe the Ravens could become even more formidable with the sooner-than-later return of Evans (ankle injury) and cornerbacks Chris Carr (hamstring) and Jimmy Smith (ankle).

"The scary part is, I think we can only get better," Rice said. "What you're seeing is a token of hard work. Guys are not afraid to work."

The Ravens aren't good enough to just show up and win. That was proven in Week 2, when they followed up their emotional victory over the Steelers with a 23-13 defeat at Tennessee. Then came a 37-7 rout in St. Louis and a surprisingly easy 34-17 win over the New York Jets.

Against the Jets, Baltimore scored three touchdowns on defense and allowed only seven first downs to hit the first quarter of the season tied with five teams for the best record in the AFC.

"We can't ask for anything else," Lewis said.

Moments after the Jets game, there was an aura of cautious confidence in the locker room.

"We feel good," center Matt Burk said.



"Certainly we wish we were 4-0, but we're 3-1. We take pride in what we've done to this point, but when we come back from the bye it's a whole new deal. There's still a long, long way to go in this thing. They didn't pass out the Lombardi Trophy after this game. Good teams get better as the season goes. We'll see where this thing goes and where this journey takes us."

The goal is to get to Indianapolis, site of the Super Bowl, and the easiest way to get there is to play at home leading up to the game.

The Ravens were eliminated at Pittsburgh in 2008 and 2010, and in 2009 their postseason run ended in Indianapolis.

Baltimore has won 12 of its past 13 at home, including two this season in which it outscored the two participants in the 2010 AFC title game by a combined 45 points.

"We're only going to get better, but getting better is a choice. It's based on how hard we decide to work," coach John Harbaugh said.

"I'm excited, I'm proud of these guys, yet, hey, we have a long way to go."

Through offensive changes, injuries, Ravens can rely on Rice

By Dan Kolko
MASNSports.com
October 9, 2011

For much of the first four weeks of the season, the Ravens have been working with an offense which features a recently constructed offensive line and a passing attack composed of two fairly inexperienced second-year tight ends, a host of rookie wide receivers and just one veteran wideout.

Doesn't exactly sound like an ideal situation, does it?

Through it all, one player has carried the offensive attack, and he's done it with flair, juking defenders out of their cleats and racking up highlight reel plays seemingly every single Sunday.

Running back Ray Rice currently leads the Ravens in not just rushing yards (297), but he's also tied for the team lead in receptions (16) and ranks first on the team in receiving yards (242). Rice has scored four of the Ravens' nine offensive touchdowns, and is averaging over 15 yards per reception - an insane number for a running back.

Now in his fourth NFL season, Rice has quietly emerged as one of the top backs in the league, and he's been a godsend for the Ravens through the early part of the season, stabilizing a unit which has experienced injuries and rotated in a batch of players new to the team's offensive system.

"That's a guy that is a staple for us," head coach John Harbaugh said. "He's an anchor for us, and he's been doing it again this year while these other guys continue to develop."

The bulk of Rice's impact is felt in the running game, where he's averaging 4.5 yards per carry and 74 yards per game, all with defenses focusing specifically on slowing him down. His speed and agility allow him to turn a two-yard gain into a 22-yard gain, and his powerful frame makes him tough to bring down with arm tackles.

On top of that, a large part of what makes the Rutgers product such a dynamic playmaker is that his skills translate to the passing game, as well. Rice has become a vital part of the Ravens' aerial attack, as he's developed into a trusted check-down option for quarterback Joe Flacco when deeper routes are covered, and he has the athleticism to line up out wide or in the slot, as well.

A prime example of Rice's receiving ability was seen last Sunday against the Jets, when he lined up in the backfield, but went in motion to the left. Flacco hit Rice on a crossing route with a perfectly thrown pass, and the running back did the rest, shaking free of safety Eric Smith, dancing away from would-be tacklers and rumbling 53 yards down the sideline.

"I'll tell you, I marveled at that catch he made across the middle," Harbaugh said. "He's a legitimate, premier playmaker in the National Football League; he really has been since his rookie year."

If there's any knock on Rice, it might be that he doesn't get the ball enough. Last season, Rice averaged 23 touches a game, and that was with Willis McGahee and Le'Ron McClain sharing the carries, as well.



The Ravens talked this offseason about returning to their physical running game, and they went out and signed fullback Vonta Leach and re-upped guard Marshal Yanda to help them grind out the tough yards on the ground. Still, with the Ravens relying more on a passing attack through the first four games, Rice is down to 20 touches (and 16 carries) per game this year.

Regardless of how he gets the ball in his hands, good things seem to happen when Rice is in the open field, spinning away from defenders and churning out yardage. That's something which isn't lost on linebacker Jarret Johnson, who competes against Rice every day in practice and has a chance to watch the running back work up close.

"He's an elite back," Johnson said. "He's as good as there is in the league. Obviously, his quickness, his lateral movement, is what scares defenses the most. He gets any amount of green grass, and I mean a yard, and he can make you miss. But, he brings it all to the package. He's great out of the backfield. He's great in pass protection; you saw how physical he was picking up a couple of those blitzes (against the Jets).

"You really can't say enough about Ray Rice. The more he touches the football, the better we are as a football team."

Ravens defense returns to its roots under Pagano

By Jarrett Bell
USA Today
October 18, 2011

BALTIMORE – In the meeting room with his players, brainstorming through X's and O's to create the havoc that is their heat-of-the-battle pleasure, new Baltimore Ravens defensive coordinator Chuck Pagano has no shortage of volunteers.

"When I ask, 'Who wants to come on this play?' Everybody raises their hand," says Pagano, promoted this year from defensive backs coach. "It's not like math class in elementary school, when no one is sure of the answer.

"They all want to rush. If we ever backed off a bit, believe me, I'd hear about it."

Pagano, who replaced Greg Mattison, came into his role promising to return the Ravens defense to its roots of aggression, and the results have been just that.

Baltimore — which put the clamps on the Houston Texans on Sunday and on Monday night will face the Jacksonville Jaguars and rookie quarterback Blaine Gabbert— has allowed an NFL-low 14.2 points in building a 4-1 record.

That's hardly new. They've been there and done that.

With a cast of stars led by Ray Lewis, Ed Reed and Haloti Ngata, the defense ranks third for yards allowed. In a Ravens context, there's nothing unusual about that, either.

Yet the striking difference, propelled by the increased blitzes that Pagano has dialed up, has come with a pass-rush that has generated 14 sacks. The Ravens, whose 27 sacks in 2010 tied for third-fewest in the league, are on pace for a season with nearly 50 sacks this season.

In a league proceeding on a record course for passing prowess, pressure with extra rushers is the ultimate antidote. Heading into last weekend, the Ravens blitzed on 79 of 161 passing plays, a 49.1% frequency rate that was topped by only three teams — the New Orleans Saints (54.9%), Cleveland Browns (53.2%) and Texans (51.9%).

During the first series on Sunday, the Ravens set a tone by blitzing on every passing down. The first sack came on a double blitz by Reed and Lewis from the defense's left side. When two blockers contained Reed on the edge, Lewis knifed through the middle to dump Matt Schaub.

"We didn't blitz as much last year," said Reed, the all-pro safety. "If you study the tendencies, we're probably a little more aggressive. The game's not the same, so you tend to call the plays differently. Chuck has an attitude about it, and we have that attitude, too. And the defense has a mentality because our offense isn't like it used to be in the past."

The offense is surely more explosive, demonstrated Sunday with Joe Flacco's 305-yard outing spiked by two 50-plus yards completions that complemented Ray Rice's 101 rushing yards. Yet defense has added layers, too.

Pagano's blitzes are more exotic and less predictable than they were under Mattison, more closely resembling the schemes employed under Rex Ryan, now the New York Jets coach. That means corner blitzes, slot blitzes, overload blitzes, delayed blitzes and so on.



"Chuck's got a lot of nerve," says Lewis, the perennial all-pro linebacker in his 16th season. "Chuck trusts us to hold up our end. Chuck just doesn't believe in anybody sitting back there having their time with us."

The blitzes are effective, Pagano says, because savvy veterans can adjust on the fly to blocking patterns. The trust has also been built through the three years Pagano coached the secondary.

"He was part of it for three years," says Ravens general manager Ozzie Newsome. "The players gained respect for him, but they also like his teaching style — where you can be demanding, but do it in a respectful way."

Pagano, 51, is on his third NFL stop. On the college level, he once coordinated the defense at North Carolina under Butch Davis and coached DBs at Miami, when Reed, like now, was his star safety.

Wrapped in high-energy and passion, He wears his reputation as a risk-taker like a badge of honor.

"My motto's always been. 'They can fire you, but they can't eat you,'" Pagano says. "If we go down, we're going down saying we put it all out there. Not that we want to be stupid. We have to take calculated risks. But we will let the fur fly."

This kind of talk resonates with the players who are quick to volunteer for blitzes.

"We don't care about failing," Lewis says. "If you fail, fail going 100%. percent. And if you don't make it, guess what? Your partner has your back."

Pagano, the fifth defensive coordinator in the franchise's history, realizes his job is easier because of players like Lewis. Three of the team's previous coordinators, Marvin Lewis, Mike Nolan and Ryan, left to become head coaches.

"The one thing you don't have to talk to this group about is studying," Pagano says. "Or working hard in practice. Or playing hard. Or running to the football. That's just how they roll. That leaves you a lot of time to coach."

And time to draw up a few new blitzes.

Flacco matures as Ravens look toward securing home playoff game

The Ravens, who haven't hosted a playoff game since 2006, have edge on Steelers but must handle Bengals

By Jeff Zrebiec
The Baltimore Sun
November 8, 2011

The 23-20 comeback victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers Sunday night represented the defining moment of quarterback Joe Flacco's young career, and could mean much more to the Ravens as they enter the second half of their season.

When a poised Flacco capped a 13-play, 92-yard drive by hitting rookie wide receiver Torrey Smith for a 26-yard touchdown pass with eight seconds to play, the Ravens thwarted another gut-wrenching defeat at the hands of Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, earned their first regular-season sweep of their rivals since 2006 and thrust themselves into ideal position for the playoff run.

They are tied with the surprising Cincinnati Bengals, not only for first place in the AFC North but for the best record in the conference heading into Sunday's game against the struggling Seattle Seahawks. They also now hold the tie-break over Pittsburgh, meaning that if the Ravens beat the teams that they are supposed to beat the rest of the way, they could be looking at a first-round bye and at least one playoff game at M&T Bank Stadium.

"It's a big accomplishment," Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs said after Monday's victory. "In my eyes — to be totally honest with you — [the Steelers are] the defending AFC champs. So they're still the team to beat, but if we play Raven football throughout, we'll see them again in January, and they've got to come to our house. We swept them, but don't be fooled. We're going to have to see this team in January. Like I said, we just positioned ourselves for them to have to come to M&T so we can do [it]."

The Ravens haven't had a home playoff game since 2006 and two of their past three seasons have ended with playoff losses to the Steelers in Pittsburgh. For the Ravens to visit Heinz Field again this season, the Steelers would have to make up two games in the standings. Only three of the Ravens' last eight games are against teams currently sporting winning records.

"I told them, 'We'll probably see you guys again,' " said middle linebacker Ray Lewis. "But if we see them again, hopefully it's on our terms."



Ravens coach John Harbaugh was predictably more focused on the present and the not-so distant future at his news conference today. However, he is undoubtedly aware that the division hierarchy could be decided in the next four weeks as the Steelers face the Bengals Sunday and then again Dec. 4, while the Ravens will play Cincinnati for the first time Nov. 20.

"The mathematical implications are definitely there, but it doesn't mean much if you go out and don't win your next game and your next game and your next game," Harbaugh said today. "At the end, it's how many wins you have compared to how many somebody else has and then the tiebreakers come in at that point. You just have to keep stacking wins. That's why you talk about one week at a time. In the National Football League, every week your season is on the line. That's why we try to point to this Sunday and make that the most important thing we do."

Still, Harbaugh admitted that the team spent part of Monday trying to come down from the emotional high that came from beating its biggest rival in the waning seconds. After the game, Harbaugh quoted Theodore Roosevelt and scripture. Running back Ray Rice said that over the last six quarters, Flacco is playing better than any quarterback in the NFL, and the stoic Flacco had trouble containing his excitement.

"This game was huge. Anybody that follows the Ravens knows that this is a huge game," said wide receiver Anquan Boldin, who finished with seven catches for 88 yards, four of them coming in the game's decisive drive, including a 10-yard catch on 4th-and-1.

"Last time we were in this stadium, we left with a bitter taste in our mouth. In the offseason, that drove us. We definitely had to stick it to them and show them that we're the better team."

Asked earlier what the comeback victory meant for his much-maligned quarterback, Boldin said, "Maybe people will stop putting him down now. We know what kind of quarterback we have. There was no panic with our offense and I think you saw that. A lot of that starts with our quarterback."

Flacco hit Boldin for completions of 21, nine, 10 and 11 yards. He also hit rookie wide receiver LaQuan Williams for 13 yards and tight end Ed Dickson for two before finding Smith, who beat Steelers cornerback William Gay, in the corner of the end zone. Smith had dropped four passes in the game, including one earlier in the drive that would have went for the go-ahead score, but he had no problems handling this one.

"Joe was the same in the huddle as he was every single time," said Smith. "He was calm, confident, a little more fired up, [like] 'Come on, let's go win this game.' He's the same person he always is — relaxed. He was definitely confident that we could get it done." Said linebacker Jarret Johnson: "The way he managed the offense, the way he managed the clock, the throws he made, you can't say enough about it. It was just a huge drive. It was absolutely one of his best games."

Against the league's top-ranked passing defense, Flacco went 28-for-47 for 300 yards and a touchdown and set a franchise record by converting 14-of-21 third downs. He out-dueled the Ravens' long-time nemesis in Roethlisberger, who dug the Steelers out of a 16-6 fourth-quarter deficit and gave them the lead with a 25-yard touchdown pass to Mike Wallace with 4:59 to play.

However, the Steelers left enough time for Flacco to engineer the ninth game-winning drive in the fourth quarter or later in his career.

"I don't know what it means. It means that we're 6-2, that we beat Pittsburgh two times, so we put ourselves in good position for the division," Flacco said. "But we've got a lot of good teams that we still have to beat."

The Ravens were also aware that the last time they beat the Steelers — a 35-7 victory in Week One — they followed it up by playing poorly in a 26-13 loss against the Tennessee Titans. The Seahawks have lost three consecutive games and have been outscored 63-28 in the process.

"We're at the halfway point, and we feel like we've put ourselves in a good position," Johnson said. "We're 6-2, but we've got a tough one coming up this week, a West Coast trip, and if we don't go out and play well next week, it's just going to put us back in a hole. We need to capitalize this week and make this win really mean something."

Leach will make impact in Ravens' running game

By Mike Preston
The Baltimore Sun
August 1, 2011

When the Ravens agreed to a three-year contract with fullback Vonta Leach on Sunday, it was an indication of the team's offensive plans.



It was a statement.

The Ravens want to return to old-school football, where they grind a team with their defense and pound it into submission with a strong running game. Few players like collisions the way Leach does.

He's the Ravens' new crash test dummy.

"Fullbacks are like dinosaurs," running backs coach Wilbert Montgomery said. "So when you get a chance to get a legitimate one, you've got to grab them. They are just not out there. This year, we must have looked at hundreds of them. They are no longer coming out of college football because of the Wildcat and spread offenses.

"We got what we consider a Raven; he is a pounder," Montgomery said of Leach. "As far as I'm concerned, he's like a lineman blocking for Ray Rice."

Signing Leach shows the Ravens have come full circle in their offensive approach. In the past two seasons, they got away from coach John Harbaugh's run-oriented roots and became infatuated with the strong arm of quarterback Joe Flacco.

The Ravens, though, never seemed comfortable with that style. They didn't know when to keep up the fast pace or slow it down. And when it came to securing a lead in the fourth quarter with a strong running game or getting the big yard in short-yardage situations, the Ravens had no punch.

Now, they have a home-run hitter in the 6-foot, 250-pound Leach.

"I'm very excited, and [I] watched what he did for Arian Foster," said Rice, the Ravens' star running back. "He is an amazing back, and he lays the wood on people. I can't wait to follow him. He is all about business and all about hard work."

And unlike former Ravens fullback Le'Ron McClain, Leach, 29, won't complain about his rushing attempts. McClain made two Pro Bowl appearances during his four years in Baltimore but wanted the ball after last season, when he had only 28 carries for 85 yards.

The Ravens, though, had their own issues to settle. They thought McClain was a great hybrid fullback-running back, but those fullback collisions took a toll on him. He could stalemate with a lot of defensive players, but after tough, physical games, he often had neck, shoulder or leg injuries.

Leach can move players. He is the stereotypical thumper. If he can't meet a linebacker standing in the hole, he goes after one on a search-and-destroy mission.

"Coming off a Pro Bowl season and solid football play the previous three years, we're excited having a guy of this caliber," Montgomery said. "No. 1, he sees himself as a fullback. He doesn't have the run skills of Le'Ron, but we will still give him the ball and opportunities. He has had a few catches, but we're not going to ask him to catch a lot of passes. But we will ask him to pancake people."

The Ravens have had thumpers before in Sam Gash, Ovie Mughelli, Alan Ricard and Lorenzo Neal. Neal came to Baltimore during Harbaugh's and offensive coordinator Cam Cameron's first season.

Back then, Neal ran onto the field, imitating the Juggernaut character in the X-Men. Three years ago, the Ravens powered up by using an unbalanced line and inserting an offensive lineman at tight end.

This is a good year for the Ravens to go back to old-school football. They have a lot of young receivers and tight ends and an offensive line that had trouble protecting Flacco last season.

The Ravens want to improve on last year's running game, which fell from the top five in 2008 and 2009 to 14th. They know they need to be able to take advantage of first-half leads against the Pittsburgh Steelers and New England Patriots with a strong second-half running game.

Leach puts them closer to fulfilling that goal. He is a blue-collar player who survived in the NFL as an undrafted rookie before bouncing around among several teams and eventually becoming the best fullback in the game during the past five seasons in Houston.

Leach cleared the way for Foster's league-leading 1,616 yards rushing last season. He was pursued by the Dallas Cowboys, Denver Broncos and New York Giants before coming to the Ravens.

"Hitting is part of what I do," Leach said. "It's the mentality of a fullback. You're going to go in there [and] hit somebody every single time, every single play. It's going to be like a car crash."

That kind of talk excites Rice.



"Everyone knows his reputation. I said I can probably trip and get 5 yards running behind him," Rice said, laughing.

Pollard a 'perfect' fit for Ravens defense

By John Eisenberg
CSNBaltimore.com
November 10, 2011

Seattle Seahawks quarterback Tarvaris Jackson gave an interesting answer this week when asked what he saw from the Ravens' secondary on film.

"The first thing you think about is Ed Reed," said Jackson, who will lead the Seahawks against the Ravens Sunday at CenturyLink Field.

That he mentioned Reed first was no surprise.

"The next guy you see is Bernard Pollard," Jackson continued. "He's a tough guy, very physical, comes off the edge a lot. We'll need to keep him in our sights and make sure we're not letting him get a free shot."

Pollard has started just five games for the Ravens at safety since joining the team as a free agent before this season. But his impact is increasing in a hurry.

He led the team with seven tackles Sunday night in Pittsburgh, and has totaled 22 tackles over the past four games. He registered his first sack against the Arizona Cardinals on Oct. 30.

His hard-hitting style was a "perfect" fit for defensive coordinator Chuck Pagano's attempt to make his unit more aggressive and punishing, Pagano said Thursday.

Pollard, who played three years in Kansas City and two in Houston before coming to Baltimore, acknowledged that life with his new team is off to a great start.

"Walking in the door, I knew I fit in here," he said.

He was signed to replace Dawan Landry, who played alongside Reed for five years but jumped to the Jacksonville Jaguars before this season. The team already had an able replacement, Tom Zbikowski, but saw Pollard as a potential upgrade.

Zbikowski started the first three games before suffering a concussion that sidelined him, opening the door for Pollard. Zbikowski is healthy again and filling a role off the bench, but it appears there's no going back on Pollard as the starter. He is playing too well.

"The guy is wreaking havoc," Pagano said. "He's one of the toughest guys we've got, anyone in the locker room will tell you that, just a big, physical presence down in the box. He's a threat every time we put him down there. The offense has to account for him as a blitzer coming off the edge or inside. He's doing a great job for us."

Pollard smiled when asked what it was like to play for a highly-ranked defense with players such as Reed, Terrell Suggs, Ray Lewis and Haloti Ngata.

"It's just phenomenal," he said. "Everyone is hungry to go out there and play hard for 60 minutes. There's a great tradition. It doesn't get any better than this if you're a defensive football player. Who wouldn't want to be a part of it?"

Pollard has been flagged twice for roughness in 2011, leading Steelers coach Mike Tomlin to say he had "a nasty playing disposition" and "appeared to be a barn boss" on the field. It was meant as a compliment.

"He's a nice addition for them," Tomlin said.

Pollard was known for playing the run well in Houston, but the Texans let him go after their secondary finished last in the league in pass defense in 2010, possibly damaging his reputation as a cover guy.

"He had that reputation, as a box safety," Pagano said, "But he matches up well with tight ends and has done a good job against the pass."

It didn't take him long to win over his more heralded teammates.



"We had a great safety in Dawan Landry, but now we have Bernard. It's kind of like he filled the void and brought a little bit more to it," Suggs said. "Dawan was smart, but Bernard Pollard, he is smart as well as physical, and he complements our defense a lot."

Harbaugh brothers ready for a different kind of family Thanksgiving

By Mark Maske
The Washington Post
November 22, 2011

There are no plans for the Harbaugh brothers to sit down together for a Thanksgiving meal Thursday. But their holiday will be all about family and football, two things they always have mixed seamlessly, and they seem perfectly content with that.

The NFL's first matchup of brothers as opposing head coaches comes Thursday night in Baltimore, with John Harbaugh's Ravens hosting Jim Harbaugh's San Francisco 49ers. It is a meeting of equally rugged first-place teams that would be compelling no matter who was calling the shots from the sideline.

But it is inescapable, even for two football lifers with coaching tunnel vision, that the night's biggest story line, by far, will be brother against brother.

"To say that's not there, that you're not thinking about it, I think probably wouldn't be real," John Harbaugh said. "I think it's an amazing thing. It's an historic thing. It's very special."

The Harbaughs' story has been well chronicled since Jim left Stanford in January to jump to the NFL. The brothers shared a room as kids and still call themselves best friends who haven't had a squabble for more than 20 years. They grew up around college football practice fields, tagging along with their father, Jack, a longtime coach who worked as an assistant to Bo Schembechler at Michigan and later won a then-Division I-AA national championship as Western Kentucky's head coach.

Jim was a standout college player as Schembechler's quarterback for the Wolverines from 1984 to 1986, and had a 15-year NFL playing career. John, older by 15 months, was a defensive back at Miami University in Ohio but didn't have NFL talent and began coaching for his father at Western Michigan at the age of 21. Jim followed them into coaching as well, and now the Harbaughs will be in the spotlight Thursday as pro football's first family of X's and O's.

"I couldn't be prouder of my family — prouder of my brother, prouder of my sister, prouder of my parents," Jim Harbaugh said in a conference call with reporters.

The brothers had countless sports-related competitions as kids, with John Harbaugh recalling that they fashioned sleeveless T-shirts into makeshift Big Ten uniforms. They also used a tennis ball and a coat-hanger rim to play each other in basketball. But they last opposed one another in a formal athletic setting as teenagers on a baseball diamond in Ann Arbor, Mich.

"I've never rooted against him, really, ever," John Harbaugh said. "We played against each other one time in baseball in high school, an American Legion team. My dad was actually coaching Jim's team. And we won, 1-0. That's the last time I remember. We were always on the same teams all the time. So it's going to be a little different that way."

Jim Harbaugh remembered that it was "a big game" for the team he and others formed after failing to make the cut for John's Baskin-Robbins team.

"We almost pulled off the [upset]," he said. "That would have been right up there with 'Rocky' and the 'Miracle on Ice.'"

Jack Harbaugh and his wife, Jackie, celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary Friday. They were in Baltimore for the Ravens' triumph Sunday over the Cincinnati Bengals. They plan to be at the stadium Thursday before the game but intend to leave before kickoff and watch on television.

"We'll be there, but we won't be there for the game," Jack Harbaugh said by telephone last week. "This is their opportunity, their moment. If we were in the stands, it would distract from the game and the teams."

Jack Harbaugh said he thinks his sons have remained as close as ever, even with both in the NFL. "I don't think their relationship has changed much at all," he said. "I don't know about the week of this game, but I know they communicate regularly. I don't see any difference."

The 49ers are scheduled to travel Wednesday to Baltimore and return home immediately after the game. The brothers' only Thanksgiving get-together, they say, will be on the field at M&T Bank Stadium.



"It's about football, really," John Harbaugh said in a conference call early this week. "We wouldn't have Thanksgiving together, anyway, if we were playing a normal game. But I'm sure both of our focus is going to be on the game and on our team. There's no time for anything else."

The Ravens, with a record of 7-3, are tied atop the AFC North with the Pittsburgh Steelers. The 49ers are 9-1, comfortably ahead in the NFC West and challenging the unbeaten Green Bay Packers for conference supremacy, transformed by Jim Harbaugh from a team that went 6-10 last season. The team had a saying used by the Harbaugh family — "Who's got it better than us? Nobody."—printed on T-shirts for its players. John Harbaugh said this week he wished he'd thought of that first.

John said the ticket-buying burden for the many family members coming to town for the game had fallen to him.

"I think all of the Harbaughs, the extended Harbaughs, will have a great time, one way or the other," John said. "I think there will be one Harbaugh side that will be really happy and there will be another Harbaugh side that will be really, really disappointed. And then Mom and Dad will be torn. That's kind of how I think it will go."

Ravens' Suggs establishing himself as one of best players in NFL

By Mike Preston
The Baltimore Sun
December 1, 2011

The only thing quiet about Terrell Suggs is the way his name is being mentioned as a Player of the Year candidate along with Tom Brady, Drew Brees and Aaron Rodgers.

He is in the company with some great quarterbacks. When you're a defensive player and you're in this class, oh, your game is at the highest level.

Through 11 games, Suggs has 49 tackles, including nine sacks, three forced fumbles and two interceptions. His play has been so dominant that few people in Baltimore talk about Ray Lewis' toe injury anymore, and the opposition has to game-plan for him.

The bigger the stage, the better Suggs plays. When the Ravens play the Pittsburgh Steelers, Suggs is usually the best player on the field. On Thanksgiving night in a nationally televised game, the Ravens racked up nine sacks against the San Francisco 49ers, and the biggest star was Suggs, who collected three.

"Prime-time TV," Suggs said of his performance. "All the football players wait their whole career to play on Thanksgiving. I never had a Thanksgiving game. It was my first one, so I knew a lot of my family members and a lot of the people who hadn't seen me play in a while were going to be watching. Knowing that, I kind of got after it and cut it on."

Suggs might be an outside linebacker, but he has a quarterback's charisma. He is a man who plays the game with boyish enthusiasm and knows how to turn it on when the cameras are rolling. On game day, Suggs is shown on the video board at M&T Bank Stadium several times a game.

Arnold Schwarzenegger never flexed that much in his prime.

Who is Suggs' favorite superhero?

"I definitely would say it was the Incredible Hulk," Suggs said. "I like how when he gets angry, he turns into the Hulk and he can just destroy things."

"I definitely practice in the mirror," Suggs, smiling, said about his flexing. "I like when the camera is on me. I like to entertain. I do like the attention, so I have to give the crowd a little something."

There will be those who criticize Suggs because at times he appears to be selfish and arrogant. I'd prefer to know who writes his scripts. Love or hate him, he comes up with some beautiful one-liners.

How about when he said of Ben Roethlisberger, "His soul belongs to God, but his ass belongs to me"?

He had another gem before the second Pittsburgh game this season, when he said: "We're taking 53 men to the apocalypse, and we ain't bringing flowers."



That was only a few days before he announced that he was from "Ball So Hard University" as the Ravens' defense was introduced on NBC.

"They just come right off the top," Suggs said of his one-liners. "I'm going to be totally honest with you. We are a little bit loony. Before we walk into this building, we might have all been normal, but to be a Raven, you have to be special. ... I just say whatever comes to my mind, and nine times out of 10, I'm winning and I hit home runs with one."

And for those who don't like him, guess what? He doesn't care.

"There is one thing I'm going to be, and that's me," Suggs said. "I know that everybody is not going to be a Terrell Suggs fan, and that's fine. For the people that are, I'm going to be myself and they are going to love me and they are going to enjoy it."

His teammates love Suggs. He's a throwback to the day of former Minnesota Vikings defensive lineman John Randle. He never shuts up and constantly sings in practice. He, Haloti Ngata and Jarret Johnson are the biggest pranksters on the team.

"I stole a guy's car [allegedly Paul Kruger's] and went and parked it at the park," Suggs said. "Then I gave him a treasure map of where to find it in downtown Baltimore, and it was really right around the corner."

The Ravens know the lighter side, but they've seen a different side this season. Suggs had taken on more of a leadership role and hasn't hesitated about challenging the offensive coaches about their game plans and not handing the ball more to running back Ray Rice.

While stepping up, Suggs hasn't stepped on the toes (pun intended) of Lewis.

"I think it just kind of happened; it wasn't forced upon me," said Suggs, in his ninth season. "I guess you do mature. I didn't think I ever would, but it's more of a 'let's get the job done' this year. I'm still the same guy. I'm still the jokester, but I'm more serious and I pay a little more attention to detail. "

And now, everybody seems to be paying more attention to Suggs. His name is being dropped in national columns, which is an accomplishment in itself with a team that has recognizable stars in Lewis and safety Ed Reed.

Opposing teams are starting to slide their protection toward him or double-teaming him, which should free up other players. A few years ago, Suggs had only one move: pure speed off the corner.

Now, he has an assortment and is setting up moves, which shows his versatility. A few defensive players might have a sack or two more than him, but Suggs is getting constant pressure.

"They've got to take care of him. I think in the last game, on Thursday night, the very first pressure we called, he lined up with two other guys to the right and they turned the protection [there], and we had a blitz coming from the other way," defensive coordinator Chuck Pagano said. "He'd be the first one to tell you that a couple games ago, he was sitting there and every time we came off, we'd design a bunch of things as a staff to try to get him loose just because of the protection issues.

"Everybody's making sure they take care of him. They're doubling, chipping, putting a tight end over there. But our guys do a great job of trying to come up with some different things. We had him lined up on the center one time, and we blitzed him up the A-gap. So we're trying to do our best to manage him to where we get him some singles — at least some singles to where they can't double him."

Ravens win in December with standard formula

By David Ginsburg
The Associated Press
December 6, 2011

OWINGS MILLS, Md. - The Baltimore Ravens appear to be at their best offensively when quarterback Joe Flacco spends most of the game handing off the football instead of dropping back to throw. That's how the Ravens beat Cleveland on Sunday, and that just might be their best course of action right up to and through the playoffs.

Baltimore (9-3) set a franchise record with 55 rushing attempts against the Browns in a 24-10 victory. Ray Rice led the way with a career-best 204 yards rushing on 29 carries, and Ricky Williams chipped in with 76 yards on 16 attempts.



The Ravens won their only Super Bowl in 2001 with an offense dominated by running back Jamal Lewis and a defense centered around middle linebacker Ray Lewis. Jamal Lewis is retired and Ray Lewis has missed three straight games with a toe injury, but the formula for success hasn't changed.

"We believe in running the football, absolutely," coach John Harbaugh said Monday. "We think you have to run the ball and stop the run to be the kind of physical football team we want to be."

Flacco threw only 23 passes against the Browns, but Harbaugh attributed the run-pass imbalance in part to the muddy field in Cleveland.

"We felt like we could run the ball, possibly. We wanted to be able to do that," the coach said. "On the same token, it was rainy and it was windy and the field was real sloppy. The conditions for throwing the ball weren't really ideal. ... We try to be built for all weather conditions, but I think the way the game played out, the type of game it was, the best approach was to run the ball and keep running the ball because we were having some success doing it."

In losses to Jacksonville and Seattle, the Ravens abandoned the run and attempted to win through the air. Baltimore has won its share of games on the strength of Flacco's throwing arm, but this team seems to be at its best when it uses the run to set up the pass.

Against the Browns, the offensive line was only too happy to surge forward instead of drop back into pass protection.

"The guys up front did a great job," fullback Vonta Leach said. "Ray did a good job of hitting those holes. Obviously with the weather the way it was and the field the way it was, you got to run the ball. We established the run and we kept with it."

Center Matt Birk said, "That's what we need to do. It was that kind of game. As an offense, we were able to run the ball."

The Ravens have thrown 412 passes this season and have 284 rushes. That is, in part, because the NFL has become a passing league and Baltimore has a host of capable receivers, including Anquan Boldin and Torrey Smith. So Harbaugh isn't about to commit entirely to the run as the Ravens seek to stay on course to capture the AFC North title — and perhaps the top seed in the conference.

"The teams that are scoring the most points are the teams that are throwing the ball the most," Harbaugh said. "But our objective here is not to score the most points, per se. It's to score more points than our opponent on any given Sunday. That's why we're really not willing to sit here and say that we are a run-first outfit."

But to win in December, when the weather gets cold and the pressure to win intensifies, the Ravens have found that smashmouth football is far more effective than finesse.

"We've always had good teams. We play good defense. We've been able to run the ball," Harbaugh said. "Some years we've been better running the ball. We'd like to believe that we're built for December. Everything we do is built for December. We're trying to be our best in December and January."

The Ravens have four games left, the next three against losing teams. The winless Indianapolis Colts (0-12) come to Baltimore on Sunday, and although it seems as if the Ravens could afford to let Lewis rest his ailing right toe another week, Harbaugh doesn't see it that way.

"We're going to try to win the game against the Colts," Harbaugh said. "We want to go in there full strength. Obviously a healthy Ray Lewis, playing at the calibre he's capable of playing at, helps us beat the Colts. Is he going to be ready to do that? We don't know. He says he's going to be ready to do it. He's got some orthotics that may give him a chance."

Baltimore has won three straight without Lewis, who has watched from the sideline in each instance.

"We have, probably, been somewhat cautious," Harbaugh acknowledged. "We want to make sure that he doesn't re-injure it. So, we'll just have to see how it goes again this week."

Tough guy Yanda one of the game's best

By Aaron Wilson
Carroll County Times
December 8, 2011

OWINGS MILLS -- Hauling buckets of grain, performing back-breaking chores, pitching out calf stalls at the family dairy farm later devoted to raising pigs, Marshal Yanda built his legendary toughness.



Growing up on the farm outside of rural Anamosa, Iowa, the Baltimore Ravens' gritty offensive guard would rise at dawn to tend to the animals.

And the farm work became a competition with his older sister, Katie, before and after school.

"We always worked hard, and that pretty much set the foundation of my work ethic," Yanda said. "That's how I go about my day, working hard for the things that you want."

Yanda grew up four-wheeling, bouncing on a trampoline, go-kart racing and playing basketball.

He later emerged as a scholarship football player and captain of the Iowa Hawkeyes football team following a detour at a junior college after he didn't apply himself academically in high school.

Today, Yanda has established himself as one of the top offensive guards in the game. He returned to his natural right guard spot this year after signing a five-year, \$32 million contract that included a \$10 million signing bonus.

Engulfing defensive linemen with a powerful hand punch and leg drive, the 6-foot-3, 315-pounder has provided strong blocking for the sixth-highest scoring offense in the league.

Every snap is a heavyweight fight with Yanda, who transforms football into a brawl with his go-for-the-throat mentality as he plays to the echo of the whistle.

"He's one of the toughest guys I know," right offensive tackle Michael Oher said. "I know if I had to be stuck in an alley and had to pick one person to be with, I would pick Marshal to watch my back. I love playing besides him.

"If I have a big game, it's because of him. If I'm having a good season, it's because of Marshal. If he don't make the Pro Bowl, I'm going to be pissed."

Capable of playing either offensive guard or tackle, Yanda tore three ligaments in his right knee against the Indianapolis Colts three years ago. He regained his leg strength through a grueling rehabilitation.

Three seasons later, the former third-round draft pick brings a sturdy presence to the line of scrimmage.

"You always want to try to be physical," Yanda said. "They instill that in offensive linemen. You've always got to be physical and try to really dominate guys."

Yanda led a lot of the interference for Pro Bowl running back Ray Rice during the Ravens' 24-10 victory over the Cleveland Browns on Sunday.

Rice gained a career-high 204 yards and scored a touchdown, and Baltimore set a franchise record with 55 rushing attempts. The Ravens rushed for 290 yards, the third-most in franchise history.

In particular, Yanda's ability to pull and kick out defensive ends and linebackers was a pivotal factor in Rice having gaping holes to roam through.

"If you want to talk about every single little technique, I can't think of one that he's not good at," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "He executes every technique very well. He's really strong, really strong, great feet, a good bender.

"But that's not what makes him the player he is. I think it's just his personality, who he is as a person. Nobody works harder than Marshal. Nobody cares more."

The lore about Yanda reaches beyond stonewalling Pittsburgh Steelers All-Pro outside linebacker LaMarr Woodley or blocking defensive ends that tower above him.

On cash bet during his rookie year, Yanda supposedly took three Taser shots to the chest.

The story gets better every year since it was actually a stun gun that former cornerback Samari Rolle once brought to work.

"It wasn't like a cop's Taser, and it wasn't that high voltage since Samari had the batteries on low," Yanda said. "It wasn't bad at all. They built it up where I got tased. Hey, it was a bet."

High-intensity and relentless, Yanda is a mauling blocker despite a lack of ideal size.

The avid outdoorsman plays with a pronounced nasty streak.



"It all starts with being physical," Yanda said. "You have to think aiming point, assignment and landmarks when you're blocking."

Other than his bank account, money hasn't changed Yanda's lifestyle.

He remains a modest individual whose biggest splurge was purchasing a larger house near the Ravens' training complex with a backyard for his wife, Shannon, and their young son, Graham.

"It's not necessarily about the money, it's more about pride in the game and doing my job for the team," Yanda said. "The money is great, but when I'm out on the field, I'm thinking about making blocks so my team can win and doing my part to the best of my ability. I'm really happy to be here."

Rice Becomes NFL Yards Leader

Even while setting career marks, Ray Rice feels fresh heading into the final stretch

By Garrett Downing
BaltimoreRavens.com
December 11, 2011

Good things happen when Ray Rice has the ball in his hands.

In his encore to the best rushing performance of his career, Rice set a handful of personal bests and again etched his name in the record books as the Ravens beat the Indianapolis Colts 24-10.

"That's what this time of year is going to have to be about," Ravens Head Coach John Harbaugh said. "If you can run the ball and stop the run, you should always have a chance this time of the year."

Rice topped 100 yards rushing in back-to-back games for the first time in his career, and picked up 149 total yards from scrimmage.

The big day made Rice the NFL's leader with 1,622 yards from scrimmage (1,029 rushing, 593 receiving), moving him ahead of Chicago running back Matt Forte, who was inactive for the Bears game today. Rice could keep the lead since Forte's early prognosis after injuring his MCL on Dec. 4 had a two- to six-week time frame for recovery.

Rice carried the ball 26 times for 103 yards and a touchdown, which put him over 1,000 rushing yards on the season for the third straight year. Rice became the first Ravens running back since the franchise's all-time rushing leader Jamal Lewis to top 1,000 yards in three straight seasons.

"It means a lot to me," Rice said. "Obviously anytime I do something, I give my credit to the offensive line, but to do three straight, it does say something, and consistency matters."

Just like he has done all year, Rice also played a large part in the passing game. He caught six passes for 46 yards and those six catches moved Rice into third place all-time in Ravens receptions, behind only tight end Todd Heap and wide receiver Derrick Mason.

"I don't want to be a guy who was a 'one-hit wonder,' and all that stuff," Rice said. "I try to just stay the course."

Rice was the motor for the offense, which collected 358 total yards and punted just three times. Baltimore passed 31 times and ran 37, and controlled the ball for 36 minutes and 8 seconds.

The run complemented the pass, and the Ravens had both working.

"I thought it was a good blend," Harbaugh said.

Rice's one touchdown came early in the second quarter, which capped off a 10-play drive. The 6-yard carry gave Baltimore a 17-0 lead, effectively putting the game out of reach after the Ravens first three possessions.

"We had to [score fast]," Rice said. "We've been victims of not bringing our best and we've been beat, so it was one of those situations where we wanted to come out and score to help our defense out."

Rice has been the defense's best friend lately, as he is in the midst of one of the best stretches of his career, and the offense appears to be clicking.

"We're just playing good team football," Rice said.



Earlier in the season, his production was down, as he had limited touches in losses to Jacksonville and Seattle. After both games, team leaders like Terrell Suggs and Ray Lewis were vocal about the importance of getting Rice more involved in games.

In the four games since the loss to Seattle, Rice has averaged 117.5 rushing yards and had at least 20 carries in each game. The Ravens are 4-0 during that stretch.

"I guess I could say I'm pretty fresh going into it right now, considering the workload I had in the first half of the season," Rice said. "I'm not saying I saved my best for the end of the season, but I'm doing a great job of keeping myself fresh."

"I know there's a lot more football left."

Torrey Smith Breaks Ravens Rookie Record

By Ryan Mink
BaltimoreRavens.com
December 22, 2011

Of any rookie class in NFL history, this one should have it the toughest.

Because of the lockout and forfeited camps, the rookies came in especially green. Wide receiver Torrey Smith said he felt like somebody coming off the streets.

Yet Smith is having perhaps the best rookie season of any Raven in franchise history.

Last Sunday night, Smith broke running back Jamal Lewis' Ravens rookie record with his seventh touchdown of the season, a streaking 36-yard touchdown across the middle.

"Put behind the eight-ball, it's been pretty amazing what he's done," Ravens Wide Receivers Coach Jim Hostler said.

"I tell him all the time, he's far surpassed my expectations. He's way down the road where I thought he was going to be."

Smith's seven touchdowns are tied for the most among NFL rookies with Cincinnati's A.J. Green. His 770 receiving yards are the second-most in the NFL behind Green.

But how does it stack up in the Ravens annals?

Lewis started 13 games and ran 309 times for 1,364 yards and six touchdowns. He caught 27 passes for 296 yards and was a major reason why the Ravens reached the Super Bowl.

Smith has also altered Baltimore's offense – giving it a long-lacking vertical threat. Whether it's enough to help take the Ravens to the Super Bowl remains to be seen.

Lewis smiled and said "it's great" that Smith broke his record. He's been watching him this season.

"Torrey has come out and progressed and done very well," Lewis said. "He's respected around the league with his speed. ... He's a big, big addition to this offense."

There's no denying that Smith has had a remarkable rookie season. Hostler said a big reason is that Smith has overcome obstacles.

First it was the previously mentioned lockout, which put the rookies in overtime trying to learn the system. But Smith bought in from the start, Hostler said.

"You don't have to spend time to keep convincing him to do it our way," he said.

Second, Baltimore had just cut veteran receiver Derrick Mason and had yet to trade for veteran Lee Evans, which put Smith's progression on fast forward. He was immediately placed on the first team opposite Anquan Boldin.

"Force-feeding me helped a lot," said Smith, who will now step into an even larger role with Boldin out.

What it also did was apply more stress, which Hostler said led to a few of Smith's early "breakdowns." It was all part of Hostler's process.



"We grind the rookies down probably a lot more than other teams do," Hostler said. "They don't have a chance to ease into it. That was a little bit of a shock to him."

Third, Smith had some problems with drops in training camp practices that ultimately pushed him to fight harder. His mistakes were displayed for everybody to see when he had a pair of drops against the Washington Redskins in the preseason.

He had a total of four receptions in the preseason, fewer than fourth-round pick Tandon Doss and the same as undrafted rookie LaQuan Williams. The second-round Maryland product admitted he was pressing.

Through those times, Hostler saw the maturity that factored into the front office's decision to draft Smith.

The struggles led Smith to roll up his sleeves and work harder. Throughout the season, he's taken extra balls from the JUGS machine after practice, even on players' days off on Tuesday, to improve his hands. He's also come a long way in his route-running, ensuring that he's not just a speed burner.

"A lot of guys can't accept or handle failure. He's extremely good at it and can grow from it and get better from it," Hostler said.

"Through those down times, you're always looking for that little indication that he's not going to be able to pull out of it, that he's not going to accept coaching well enough to pull out of it. It's all a credit to Torrey that he was."

Hostler said he was absolutely happy – as strange as it sounds – that Smith had some early drops. Looking back on it now, Smith is too.

"I've been through things already that vets haven't experienced," he said with a chuckle. "I've been as high as you can be and as low as you can be. I think it helps you be level-headed."

Smith was aware that he broke Lewis' record. But when asked how much it meant to him, he showed some more of that modesty and maturity.

"Not much really," he said. "I've been able to have a little bit of success, but the biggest thing for me is winning."

Ravens Go 8-0 At Home for First Time

Head Coach John Harbaugh dedicated the game ball to the fans of Baltimore

By Garrett Downing
BaltimoreRavens.com
December 25, 2011

Ravens Head Coach John Harbaugh walked into his postgame press conference carrying a game ball from his team's 20-14 victory over the Cleveland Browns.

In his opening statement, Harbaugh dedicated the ball to the fans of Baltimore, who played a key part in helping the Ravens complete an undefeated at regular season home record for the first time in franchise history.

"8-0 at home for the first time in the history of the franchise is a tremendous accomplishment," Harbaugh said. "Credit goes to the players, first. It goes to the coaches, but it also goes to our fans. I think over the course of time since the Ravens came to Baltimore, and from my experience here in the last four years, there's not a better stadium in the league than M&T Bank Stadium."

As a tribute to the fans, the ball will be put on display at the Ravens' practice facility in Owings Mills.

"We'll find a spot at The Castle for this and display it very prominently," Harbaugh said.

The win improves the Ravens current streak to a franchise-best 10 straight wins at home, and keeps the Ravens in line to bring the postseason to Baltimore.

Since Harbaugh took over as head coach in 2008, the Ravens have compiled a 27-5 record, second best in the NFL behind New England. Baltimore has consistently been one of the best teams in the NFL in front of their home crowd, but until Sunday the Ravens had never finished the regular season with an 8-0 mark at home.

"I've never been perfect at home in 16 years of football," veteran linebacker Ray Lewis said. "And that's amazing, because as good of teams as we've had here, we've always found a way to lose one or two, here or there."



"But I think this year we really made our focus on taking care of home, and our team came in, and we did a great job taking care of home."

The impact of the home crowd was felt at certain points of the game, specifically on the final drive of the first half. The Browns got the ball down near the Ravens end zone, but ran a play to running back Peyton Hillis with 11 seconds left from the three yard line. Hillis was stuffed on the play, and the Browns ran out of time to attempt a field goal before the end of the half.

After the game, Browns quarterback Seneca Wallace said the crowd was a factor in the confusion.

"It was very loud in that end," Wallace said. "It was bad communication."

The Ravens have been a different team when playing on the road, as they're just 3-4 away from M&T Bank Stadium.

They now have a chance to ensure that Saturday's victory wasn't the final game of the season at M&T Bank Stadium. A win over Cincinnati next week ensures that at least the Divisional Round will be played in Baltimore, where the Ravens have proven they are incredibly tough to beat.

"We are our best team when we're in M&T [Bank Stadium] and our fans are rocking," outside linebacker Terrell Suggs said. "So, we definitely need a home playoff game by any means necessary."

Ravens have playoff mentality

By Aaron Wilson
Carroll County Times
December 25, 2011

BALTIMORE — As far as the Baltimore Ravens are concerned, the playoffs essentially launch in earnest next week.

That's when they square off on the road with the Cincinnati Bengals, an obstacle standing in their way of clinching the AFC North division title, a first-round bye and emerging as at least the second playoff seed in the AFC.

And the Bengals (9-6) are attempting to earn the sixth and final wild-card berth in the AFC by beating the Ravens.

"It's going to be a war, man," Ravens veteran outside linebacker Jarret Johnson said. "They're fighting for their life. We're fighting for the division. So, it's going to be a playoff game."

Provided the Ravens (11-4) complete their first sweep of the AFC North division in franchise history with a win over the Bengals, they'll be assured of playing at least one more game at M&T Bank Stadium.

That's where they finished 8-0 after a fairly lackluster 20-14 victory over the Cleveland Browns on Christmas Eve.

Considering the Ravens are 3-4 on the road this season, winning this game is imperative.

"It's big, man.," outside linebacker Terrell Suggs said when asked about the importance of playing at home. "We want a chance at winning, and you've got a better chance to do it when you're at home. And our fans, I consider myself to be a player of the people, and we are our best team when we're in M&T and our fans are rocking. So, we definitely need a home playoff game by any means necessary."

There's even a chance the Ravens could secure the top seed in the AFC and home-field advantage throughout the playoffs if the New England Patriots lose to the Buffalo Bills next week and Baltimore manages to beat the Bengals for a second time.

If the Ravens lose to the Bengals and the Pittsburgh Steelers defeat the Browns again, the Steelers would win the division.

In order to avoid that scenario, the Ravens will need to play better after two rough weeks in a row.

Although they've now won five of their past six games, the Ravens didn't look good in the second half against the Browns as they allowed 14 unanswered points. That included an 84-yard punt return for a touchdown surrendered to return specialist Josh Cribbs and a Seneca Wallace touchdown pass to tight end Evan Moore.



One week after being embarrassed by the San Diego Chargers during a 34-14 loss where the secondary was shredded by Philip Rivers and the run defense gave up three touchdown runs, the Ravens were repeatedly gashed by Browns running back Peyton Hillis for 112 rushing yards on 24 carries.

"I think the perfect time to hit on all cylinders is to get in the playoffs," middle linebacker Ray Lewis said. "The thing that we did now is put ourselves in a great position for the fourth year in a row, being back in the playoffs. Now, it's up to us to go out and finish what we're trying to finish, and that's when you start clicking.

"It's one thing to play these great games during the year and whatever but for us now, it's about playing those great games in the playoffs. That's the next step for us."

Despite the Ravens' record, their last two impressive wins came against the Bengals and the San Francisco 49ers last month.

And the Ravens were plagued by dropped passes and a special-teams breakdown for their third return allowed for a touchdown this season. That hasn't happened since 2002.

"Sometimes we say it's not perfect and it's not pretty, and it was not," coach John Harbaugh said. "But in this league and this environment against this football team, the Cleveland Brown, they made it tough on a lot of people this year, our guys found a way to win the game at the end and that's what counts. ... I was a little disappointed with some of the drops. It wouldn't have been a game if we'd have converted on third down."

Joe Flacco was intercepted once against the Browns by cornerback Sheldon Brown and twice against the Chargers.

However, he doesn't think the Ravens played badly against the Browns.

"San Diego, we just kind of got hit," Flacco said. "They got us. It happens sometimes. In this game, I don't think we didn't play well. I just think we had a couple of plays where we could have done the simple thing better and we would have been perfect. I see where you're coming from just because of the way the game looked, but I don't think we didn't play well."

The Browns are a 4-11 outfit, though.

The Bengals are far more formidable.

Rookie quarterback Andy Dalton has passed for 3,166 yards and 20 touchdowns, and talented rookie wide receiver A.J. Green has caught 63 passes for 1,031 yards and seven touchdowns.

"We have to get better," strong safety Bernard Pollard said. "We have not reached our best point yet. We reach our best point when we hold that trophy up. We have to get back in this thing, and get ready to play football next week."

Enthused about the Ravens' record at home that includes victories in 18 of their past 19 games in Baltimore, Pollard acknowledged the difficulties the team has experienced away from the friendly confines of M&T Bank Stadium.

That includes road losses to the Tennessee Titans, Jacksonville Jaguars, Seattle Seahawks and the Chargers.

"That's exciting, but we have to fix the other part, though," Pollard said of the undefeated home record. "Next week we're going on the road, into a hostile environment, and they're going to give us their best shot. We're going to get better. We're going to get sound. We're going to iron this out and get ready to play football."

Seven Ravens selected to next month's Pro Bowl *Rice, Leach, Yanda, Suggs, Lewis, Ngata and Reed named*

By Jeff Zrebiec
The Baltimore Sun
December 27, 2011

The Ravens, who enter Sunday's regular-season finale against the Cincinnati Bengals as the No. 2 seed in the AFC, could be well-represented next month in the Pro Bowl with seven players being selected Tuesday for the game, including six as starters.

But count linebacker Terrell Suggs among the Ravens who have no desire to be in Honolulu on Jan. 29.



“To be clear, I have no intentions of playing in the Pro Bowl,” said Suggs. “I plan on being in practice with my teammates that week, getting ready for the Super Bowl.”

Suggs did say that he was “excited and honored” but he made it clear that cold Indianapolis — and not sunny Hawaii — is the desired destination for the Ravens, who nonetheless garnered the second-most Pro Bowl selections in team history. Only the New England Patriots and San Francisco 49ers had more with eight apiece. The Green Bay Packers also had seven selections.

Suggs, middle linebacker Ray Lewis, defensive tackle Haloti Ngata, safety Ed Reed, running back Ray Rice and fullback Vonta Leach were named Pro Bowl starters. Right guard Marshal Yanda was selected as a reserve for the first time in his five-year career.

“I am ecstatic, that is really the only thing I can say,” said Yanda, who re-signed with the Ravens this offseason, getting a five-year and \$32 million contract. “This is such a great honor, something that I never really expected. When I made it to the NFL, I was so happy to be on a team and playing in the league, and now, to be a part of a Pro Bowl team is something very special. You don’t get there alone. You have to be on a good team and playing well as a unit. I am thankful for my teammates and coaches who helped get me to where I am.”

Yanda — who has not been called for a penalty all season — and Leach have helped clear the way for Rice, who leads the NFL with 1,869 yards from scrimmage and is fifth with 1,173 rushing yards. Both Leach and Rice will go to the Pro Bowl for the second time in their careers.

“This is a team award, and I hope that everyone on our team can take pride in the fact that they helped seven of their teammates attain this honor,” said Rice who has 13 touchdowns, tied for the fifth most in the NFL. “But I will celebrate after the season. We have unfinished business to take care of over the next few weeks.”

Leach made the team last year as the lead blocker for Houston Texans star running back Arian Foster, but he took extra pride in earning the recognition with the Ravens, and specifically with Rice.

“This means a lot to me, especially with it being my first year on a new team. With changing teams, the lockout and trying to learn a new playbook, I am so proud and happy to be going my backfield mate,” he said. “This is a great thing and something to celebrate, but that will have to wait until after the season. Right now, we are getting ready for Cincinnati and a strong playoff run.”

Pro Bowl recognition has almost become almost routine for the Ravens’ celebrated defensive standouts. Lewis has been selected for the game 13 times in his 16-year career, Reed has been named eight times in his 10-year career, Suggs has gone five times in nine years and Ngata three times in six seasons.

Lewis and Reed have been named to every AFC Pro Bowl team since 2005, and their inclusion this year comes despite the fact that both have had relatively quiet seasons, at least in terms of big plays. Lewis has a team-high 88 tackles to go along with two sacks, one interception, six passes defended and two forced fumbles despite missing four games with a toe injury. Reed has 48 tackles, three interceptions, one sack, eight passes defended and one forced fumble.

“It’s definitely an honor and a blessing,” Reed said. “To come back after an injury last year and to be voted by my peers and fans is special. I am very appreciative of the honor, but right now, there are bigger goals in mind. With the Bengals coming up this week and a push to the playoffs, we have a lot of work ahead of us, but this is definitely something I am proud of and am thankful for.”

Suggs leads the AFC with a career-high 13 sacks. He also has 64 total tackles, two interceptions and six forced fumbles.

The Pro Bowl teams are based on the votes of fans, players and coaches, with each counting for a third of the total. There were 43 players chosen per team.

Left guard Ben Grubbs was named a first alternate for the Pro Bowl, meaning that he would get an invitation to the game if any guard on the AFC team can’t attend.

Special teams ace and linebacker Brendon Ayanbadejo was selected as a second alternate. Quarterback Joe Flacco and safety Bernard Pollard are third alternates, and right tackle Michael Oher is a fourth alternate.

“When I found out, I felt the same way I did the first time I made it,” Ngata said. “I know that this wouldn’t be possible without my teammates. Hopefully, though, I won’t be able to play in the Pro Bowl because I want to be playing in Indy.”



Lewis: These Opportunities are Rare

The Ravens linebacker is focused on going to the 'next level' this season.

By Garrett Downing
BaltimoreRavens.com
December 29, 2011

Ray Lewis has seen just about everything in his time with the Ravens.

He's been a Super Bowl MVP for the organization's one championship, and he's also suffered through some four-and five-win seasons in the earlier years of the franchise. Lewis has long been the face of the organization and he's headed to the Hall of Fame whenever he decides to call it a career. But before he gets to that point, his focus is bringing another championship to Baltimore.

And he recognizes this season as a great opportunity to do just that.

"Opportunities come few, they come very few," Lewis said. "But I think right now, we have the team that understands that."

The Ravens have made the playoffs for four straight seasons, the longest current streak in the NFL, and have been one of the league's most successful franchises in recent years. Returning to the Super Bowl, however, hasn't been done since they hoisted the Lombardi Trophy in 2000.

Lewis hopes to change that this season.

"Being in [the playoffs] the last four years, I don't think it's about postseason for me anymore," Lewis said. "It's mostly about finishing that. It's mostly about going to the next level."

For years, Lewis has been the leader of the locker room and this season he has harped on the point that while they have been perennial playoff contenders, chances like the Ravens have this season to win a title are rare.

"I was just talking to Ray [Rice] and was telling him we've gone from year one with him, and now we're in year four already with him," Lewis said. "And you see how quickly it can go by. But the opportunities go by even faster."

Lewis also knows how quick a team's fortunes can change.

A year after the Ravens went 13-3 in 2006, they won five games, and the veteran linebacker hasn't forgotten the struggles through some of the tough seasons.

"I remember everything, man," Lewis joked.

When the organization arrived in Baltimore, the Ravens won 16 games in the first three seasons. During those early years, Lewis said he remembered looking around at some of the top teams in the league, and hoping that the Ravens would someday be in that class.

"Now we have that," Lewis said. "Now we have what all of the years I'd use to look at all these other teams [and think], 'Man, one day, hopefully we're there.' Now we're one of those teams to where we're in the playoffs every year and we are always contending for the titles and things."

Now that the Ravens are in the group, Lewis is emphasizing it's nothing to take for granted and they have to pounce on the opportunity.

"I think this team has matured enough," Lewis said. "Now we have a lot of key pieces that have matured to the point that they see that it is right now that we need to go do what we need to do."



Playoff football returns to Baltimore as Ravens win AFC North

There hasn't been a January NFL game in the city since 2007

By Jeff Zrebiec
The Baltimore Sun
January 1, 2012

CINCINNATI — For the first time since 2007, Baltimore will host an NFL playoff game.

A tense 24-16 victory over the Cincinnati Bengals, highlighted by touchdown runs of 70 and 51 yards by Ray Rice, gave the Ravens the AFC North title — the third division championship in team history — and resulted in them clinching the conference's second seed, a first-round bye and a second-round home playoff game.

Across the city, fans decked in their usual purple flocked to bars. They hung on every play, their emotions as tangled as those of the coaches and players.

"We all felt it right here, right in the pit of our stomachs. Our football team really wanted to win this game," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "We really needed to win this game. I think it's the best division in football. It's not even close. For our team to sweep the division and to go undefeated at home, I'm just so proud of these guys for that. This is one championship. We still have two more that we're shooting for, the conference championship obviously and a world championship."

For now, the Ravens, who finished the regular season at 12-4 and won all six games in their division for the first time in team history, will have to settle for a much-needed week off, and then a second-round matchup at M&T Bank Stadium, where they went 8-0 this season. It's their first division title since the 2006 season, which was also the last time the Ravens had a home playoff game.

Will Doering of Baltimore knows playoff football will change the city and has yearned for its return. In the third quarter of the game, it looked like he could finally get his wish — and the 27-year-old said he couldn't wait to see the city support its team.

"It's going to be a completely different atmosphere," said Doering, who was watching the game at Stalking Horse in Federal Hill.

Near Doering stood Shaun Downey, who called Baltimore "a happier place to be when there's a home football game." He even notices it at the high school where he teaches.

"The students are happier, the teachers are happier, the parents are happier," said Downey, 32, who lives in Middle River.

Downey also works as a bouncer at the bar and said a home playoff game would be a boon to local businesses.

"It's another weekend of people coming into town, plus the regulars," he said.

The outcome of Sunday's game was in doubt until the final seconds, as Bengals rookie quarterback Andy Dalton drove his team down to the Ravens' 33-yard line with 11 seconds to go but couldn't find a receiver on two final throws.

The Ravens, who had trouble all year winning on the road, sprinted off the sidelines to celebrate.

The Bengals, who thought they needed a victory to make the playoffs, wound up getting in anyway, thanks to losses by the New York Jets, Oakland Raiders and Denver Broncos. They'll start the playoffs 4:30 next Saturday at the AFC South champion Houston Texans.

The Ravens, meanwhile, will enjoy the first round at home as several of their banged up players will get an important week of rest.

"It was obviously pretty exciting," said Ravens fourth-year quarterback Joe Flacco, who has already played in seven playoff games in his career, none of them at home. "We haven't won a division since I've been here. Just to do it the way we did, to go undefeated in a division that has three playoff teams was pretty big."

Back in Federal Hill, the sounds of shouts and cheers from the packed bars spilled outside.

At Mother's, Caren Pozanek of Reisterstown watched the game with her husband and son.

"Hopefully we can win this and have home-field advantage, because we're not so good on the road," she said during the game, "but we're doing pretty well today."

"Our city supports our team more than anyone," said her husband, Keith, 48. "That's why we're so great at home."

The Pozaneks are "a big Ravens family," Caren Pozanek said, adding that her 18-year-old daughter is a die-hard Ray Rice fan.



On a cold and windy day at Paul Brown Stadium, Flacco happily played a supporting role, throwing one 9-yard touchdown pass to Dennis Pitta to give the Ravens a two-touchdown lead just before halftime, but otherwise handing the ball off to Rice.

Rice finished with 191 rushing yards and two touchdowns on 24 carries, setting a single-season team record with 15 touchdowns. His 70-yard touchdown run, sprung by a great play by right guard Marshal Yanda, who wasn't even expected to play in the game because of injuries, came on the Ravens' fourth play from scrimmage.

Rice's 51-yard run, which came three plays after linebacker Terrell Suggs stripped Bengals tight end Jermaine Gresham of the football with the Bengals attempting to go in for a go-ahead score, gave the Ravens a 24-13 lead with 5:41 to go.

There were some anxious moments that followed, but the Ravens reveled in securing exactly what they had talked about since the start of the season: the division championship, a first-round bye and at least one home playoff game.

"This is very humbling, just because of the things that you go through during the course of the season — the highs, the lows, the ups and the downs," said Rice. "To be able to go on the road to secure a home playoff game, the feeling in that locker room was like no other. I can only imagine what the city of Baltimore is doing right now. It's amazing."

Rice Carries Ravens With Monster Day

The Pro Bowl running back ran for 191 yards and two touchdowns on 24 carries

By Ryan Mink
BaltimoreRavens.com
January 1, 2012

The Ravens have ridden running back Ray Rice down the stretch this year. And he put them on his back when it mattered most. In windy conditions in Cincinnati, Rice had a monster day to push the Ravens to the AFC North crown. He ran for 191 yards and two touchdowns on 24 carries. Rice said this week that he had been to every AFC playoff game except for one – a home game. That was his driving force.

"It's the first one for me, Joe [Flacco], Coach [John] Harbaugh," Rice said. "We all came in together, and it's just great to get that feeling now."

Rice, who was named to his second Pro Bowl this past week, broke several personal and team records on Sunday.

He notched 15 touchdowns this year, setting a new team record. His 1,339 rushing yards this season are a new personal single-season high. He posted 2,068 total yards this season, a new career-high. It's his second year in a row with more than 2,000 total yards.

Rice joins longtime St. Louis Rams running back Marshall Faulk as the only players in league history to register at least 1,200 rushing yards and 700 receiving yards in multiple seasons.

But records weren't what Rice was running for on Sunday. With wind gusts of up to 30 miles per hour in Cincinnati, it was a better day to run than pass.

And Rice didn't waste any time in making his impact felt.

On just the fourth play from scrimmage, Rice burst up field for a 70-yard touchdown that gave the Ravens a lead they never surrendered. It was the longest regular-season run of his career, topping a 67-yarder against Cleveland. Rice cut behind right guard Marshal Yanda, who started despite rib and thigh bruises that made him doubtful to play. Blocks by fellow Pro Bowler Vonta Leach and right tackle Michael Oher sprung Rice.

"It was a total team effort," Rice said. "Running backs, we get the glory. But man, I know it's going to get expensive with what I have to get for my offensive line.

"But don't worry about it. It ain't about the money. I have to get those guys something nice. They set it up for me nice this year."

Rice continued to bang away at the Bengals defensive line, then laid down the hammer in the fourth quarter with his 51-yard touchdown. The Ravens had just a four-point lead at the time. Rice made it 24-13 with five minutes, 52 seconds remaining. Rice largely carried the Ravens offense down the stretch of the regular season.

It started with 104 yards against the Bengals in their first matchup on Nov. 20. He piled up 204 yards in a win over Cleveland two weeks later, then ripped off 103 against Indianapolis the next. Rice had a career-long, 42-yard touchdown catch against Cleveland last week.



As they head into a bye week, the Ravens can thank their running back and let him get some rest.

But Rice spent his postgame press conference thanking them. He was particularly inspired by the fact that Yanda was even playing.

"For Marshal Yanda to even be playing was huge," Rice said.

"The run game is different when he's not in there. So for him to say, 'You know what, I'm going to tough this one out because I know what's at stake,' shows what kind of guys we have on our team."

Rice finished his second touchdown run of the day with a leap into the end zone as he stumbled down the stretch. But he has done anything but falter at the end of this year. With the Ravens needing every single win to hold onto the division lead over the Pittsburgh Steelers, Rice helped carried the offense in the colder months of the season.

"December, January football in the AFC North, you have to be able to run the ball and you have to complete passes," Head Coach John Harbaugh said.

"Sometimes in the running game, you have to keep pounding it in there. ... We broke one there [with the 51-yarder]. I think Ray finishing both those runs was pretty impressive."

Ravens relish AFC North title, playoff bye and home postseason game

By Dave Ginsburg
Associated Press
January 2, 2012

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — For the Baltimore Ravens, the benefits that come with their first AFC North title since 2006 begin with a much-needed bye that should enable several injured players to heal before the team begins a markedly different playoff drive.

By defeating the Cincinnati Bengals 24-16 on Sunday, the Ravens (12-4) earned the No. 2 seed in the AFC and a two-week rest.

"It's a great win in a lot of ways," coach John Harbaugh said Monday before rattling off the names of 10 ailing players, all of whom should be ready to play in Baltimore's next game — at home on Sunday, Jan. 15.

The injury list starts with wide receiver Anquan Boldin, who missed the final two regular season games with a knee injury. Safety Bernard Pollard sprained a wrist and received a bruised elbow on Sunday; linebacker Jameel McClain sprained an MCL; defensive tackle Haloti Ngata cut his elbow and guard Mashal Yanda played with sore ribs.

Others who will benefit from the week of rest: Defensive tackle Terrence Cody (strained left hip), linebacker Dannell Ellerbe (concussion), defensive backs Tom Zbikowski (concussion) and Jimmy Smith (concussion) and kicker Billy Cundiff (left calf).

"The No.1 thing we need to do is to get healthy," Harbaugh said.

Harbaugh called the victory over Cincinnati "kind of a one-for-two" — meaning Baltimore won't have to win this weekend to advance to the second round.

That's the path the Ravens had to take in each of the previous three years as the wild-card entrant, and that didn't work out too well.

Although Baltimore won at least one playoff game each time, it advanced to the AFC title game only once and is still seeking its first Super Bowl appearance since the 2000 season.

There are no guarantees it's going to happen this year, but there's no question the path to the Super Bowl is easier as division titlists. In addition to getting a bye this weekend, Baltimore opens the postseason at home, where it's 8-0 this season.

"We have an opportunity to take advantage of the week that we haven't had in the past to try and improve ourselves," Harbaugh said. "I think that's the plus of having a bye. That's where you have a little bit of a leg up, plus you get a home game."

The Ravens worked the entire season to get where they are now. Beating Pittsburgh twice, going unbeaten within the division for the first time, knocking off Houston at home, all of those accomplishments enabled Baltimore to attain its highest postseason seeding in five years.



"To end the regular season this way is very humbling because of the things you go through the course of a season — the highs, the lows, the ups and downs," running back Ray Rice said. "To be able win the division on the road to secure a home playoff game, the feeling in that locker room was like no other."

Now, instead of getting ready for a quick turnaround and facing the prospect of playing three straight games in the road, the Ravens can relax to a degree before resuming play at a stadium where they haven't lost in well over a year.

"It's a bonus," Harbaugh said. "It's earned."

"I'm looking forward to the rest and sitting at home and watching the first week of playoffs with my babies," linebacker Terrell Suggs said. "You know, that's the biggest thing. To be division North champs, that's your goal."

That's the priority in the regular season. Much is left for the Ravens to accomplish, however, and being a No. 2 seed provides nothing beyond a week off and a home game.

"It's one down and two to go in terms of championships," Harbaugh said. "They'll be no taking anything for granted, that's for sure."

The schedule for the players this week: Practice on Wednesday and Thursday, then take off the next three days before returning Monday. During the weekend, the Ravens will learn who they next face. It's either going to be Houston, Pittsburgh or Denver.

"Some of these teams we already started (scouting) last week," Harbaugh said. "We'll continue on that. Then we'll start in earnest, as soon as we know, in developing the actual game plan on Sunday."

Flacco Alone Atop Wins Category

Joe Flacco has won more games (44) in his first four years than any QB in NFL history

By Ryan Mink
BaltimoreRavens.com
January 4, 2012

Critics can think what they want.

But there's one thing nobody can take away from Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco.

He wins.

Flacco won his 44th career regular-season game Sunday against the Bengals. It's the most victories in NFL history for a quarterback in his first four years.

Instead of acknowledging the magnitude of his record, Flacco focused on getting more Ws this season.

"It's pretty special for us to be able to come out here the last four years the way that we have week-in and week-out to win games," he said. "Hopefully, I can add three more playoff wins on top of what we have the last few years. If we play well, we have the team to do it."

Flacco's statistics did drop somewhat this year.

He completed five percent fewer passes, threw for 12 fewer yards and five fewer touchdowns this season when compared to last year.

He tossed two more interceptions and his quarterback rating dropped from 93.6 to 80.9.

But Flacco took on more responsibility within the offense. He attempted a career-high 542 passes, 43 more than his previous high and 53 more than last year.

He also helped mold a young wide receiver corps that featured two second-year tight ends and three rookie wide receivers.

And while the stats haven't always looked good, Flacco won 12 games this year and captained the AFC's fourth-highest scoring offense.

In Cincinnati, Flacco gave the perfect display of how stats don't always tell the story.



It was cold and there were 25 mph winds. But with his big hands and strong arm, Flacco completed 15 of 19 passes for 130 yards and a touchdown. It was actually, statistically speaking, his most accurate day of the regular season.

While performances like that don't look like much on paper, they resonate with Head Coach John Harbaugh. Playing in such harsh AFC North conditions late in the year is part of the reason why the Ravens drafted Flacco.

"His performance in this last game, though maybe some wouldn't consider it flashy, was extremely effective," Harbaugh said.

Harbaugh also gave props to Flacco for his durability. He completed his fourth-straight regular season without missing a start – 64 straight.

"Joe is tough," Harbaugh said. "He is really a guy that game-in and game-out, play-in and play-out, hops back up, never complains about getting hit, never looks at the official [and says], 'Where's my call?' [He] just gets back in the huddle and plays the next play.

"That's kind of Baltimore, isn't it? A little bit? I would think that this town, I know they do, appreciates that about him. That's one of his greatest strengths."

Well, that and winning.

Ravens star Ray Lewis prepared for playoff push win no thoughts of retirement

Dave Ginsburg
Associated Press
January 5, 2012

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — There were times this season when 36-year-old Ray Lewis showed his age on the football field.

The Baltimore Ravens standout middle linebacker acknowledges this. Upon assessing his overall body of work, however, Lewis feels no need to defend himself.

"You are going to always make a bad play, you are always going to make a good play. It's never about that," Lewis said. "It's about the consistency, or how consistent you can approach every week, week-in and week-out."

If that is indeed the criteria for judging one's performance, then 2011 was another very good year for Ray Anthony Lewis. Playing in his 16th NFL season, he led the league's third-ranked defense with 98 tackles and was selected to play in the Pro Bowl for a 13th time despite missing four games with a right toe injury.

This week, Lewis and Baltimore (12-4) have a bye week before launching their fourth playoff run in four seasons. This just might be the final push for Lewis in his quest to get a second Super Bowl ring, but he has no intention of making this all about him.

"I have a true obligation, first of all, to myself to play the game with nothing else on my mind," he said. "The second thing I have is an obligation to are my teammates — just to give it everything I've got."

There has been no talk about retirement, and Ravens coach John Harbaugh has no reason to believe Lewis is remotely close to walking away from the game.

"Put it this way: I think Ray Lewis has a lot of football left in him," Harbaugh said after Thursday's practice. "He's going to know when it's time. But it's not time. It's time to go win a football game a week from Sunday, and that's all any of us are looking at right now."

Harbaugh considers himself fortunate to have a player with the experience and savvy of Lewis in the middle of the Baltimore defense.

"First of all, the most important thing is he's a great player," the coach said. "We also have the most experienced defensive player in the game, the best leader in the game, and probably the smartest player as far as understanding what our opponents do."

Since the Ravens made him the 26th overall pick in the 1996 draft, Lewis has set an example for others in preparing to play on Sunday.

He has arguably spent as much time watching film as lifting weights, and his knowledge of the opposition's tendencies has enabled him to make up for the fact that his body isn't quite what it was when he arrived as a 21-year-old out of the University of Miami.

"I tell people all the time, I would never want to go back to being a young Ray Lewis," he said. The young Ray Lewis, he was good, he was good, but he was out of control a lot of times. The way I am now is a much wiser person. Every man chases wisdom, if you are



truly a man chasing something. Where I am now in my career, I appreciate the game. I appreciate the mistakes. I appreciate the ups and the downs because there is always a learning curve that I have already been through many times.”

It's hard to fathom, but Lewis has been a member of the Baltimore Ravens as long as they've been the Baltimore Ravens. After the team made the move from Cleveland, Lewis was selected behind Jonathan Ogden during the team's first draft. Ogden retired after the 2007 season, one of hundreds of Ravens to come and go during Lewis' lengthy tenure.

“It's actually a credit to me and my hard work,” he said, not in a boasting manner but in a matter-of-fact tone. “To still be around doing what I am doing ... Sixteen years I've been in this business. Do you know how many men I have seen come walk in and out of this door? And think about all the people that had that one dream to be here and never made it.”

Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs, now in his ninth season, can't envision the Baltimore defense without Lewis taking charge in the huddle and, more often than not, making the pivotal play.

“It's a different persona when 52 is not in the middle, when 52 is not making the calls, when 52 is not lining us up,” Suggs said. “He's definitely the leader. There's nobody who's put more blood, sweat and tears into building this Raven organization than Ray Lewis. He's the general, and will always be the general. I love the man like a big brother, and always will. He is the backbone, the heart and soul, of our team.”

Lewis was MVP of Baltimore's only Super Bowl win, a 34-7 thrashing of the New York Giants following the 2000 season. He's still waiting for a second chance to get back into the sport's biggest game.

“You see these young kids that come in this business, and they don't really understand how hard it is to win a Super Bowl. They don't understand how everything has to be in place,” Lewis said. “When you finally start to get them to understand that, by that time they are in their fourth, fifth, sixth, ninth, 10th year.

“We have the team to do it now. We don't have too many more excuses. Let's go do it right now. Then whatever else comes after that for all of your careers, you go enjoy it, but go win a championship. There are a lot of men that came in this business, and that's the one thing they have left this business without, and that's the ring. I have touched it before. To go back with this group of men could be a special thing.”

Harbaugh a Consistent Winner

John Harbaugh is the first coach to ever take his team to divisionals in his first 4 years.

By Ryan Mink
BaltimoreRavens.com
January 7, 2012

On the plane ride home from Cincinnati, Head Coach John Harbaugh actually took a second to think about how special this season has been.

The Ravens are going to the playoffs for the fourth straight time. No other team in the NFL can say that right now.

Thanks to a first-round bye, Baltimore will also be going to the divisional round for the fourth consecutive season. No head coach since 1970 (when the wild-card format was established) has ever done that.

Harbaugh's not one to look back and reflect when there's still work to be done, but he had to admit, the feeling after doing it once again was “pretty cool.”

“Those are the moments that you really just never are going to forget,” Harbaugh said of the postgame locker room in Cincinnati and plane ride home.

“Those are the ones that you just say, ‘Wow. This thing that we accomplished together ...’ There are no words for it. I think you just remember it. You can't put a price tag on it.”

Harbaugh was hired in 2008 to the surprise of some pundits and fans because he had never before been a head coach and was most recently a special teams coordinator for the Philadelphia Eagles. He took over a young team with a rookie quarterback that was coming off a 5-11 season.

Since then, the Ravens have known nothing other than winning.



Baltimore flipped its record in 2008, setting an NFL record for biggest turnarounds by a head coach taking over a sub-.500 team. The Ravens reached the AFC championship.

Harbaugh is the only head coach in NFL history to take over a team with a losing record the previous season and then go on to win a playoff game in each of his first four seasons. Nobody had done it in three straight seasons either.

The only other head coaches in NFL history to reach the playoffs in their first four years are Bill Cowher (Pittsburgh Steelers), John Robinson (Los Angeles Rams) and Chuck Knox Jr. (Los Angeles Rams). Cowher made it six straight times to start his Pittsburgh career (1992-1997).

During Harbaugh's four years, the Ravens have compiled 48 overall wins (regular season and postseason). That's tied for the second-most in the NFL with the New Orleans Saints and New England Patriots. It only trails the Steelers (50).

So how has Harbaugh done it?

Center Matt Birk, outside linebacker Jarret Johnson and inside linebacker Jameel McClain answered that question, and each had a different reason.

"He's a passionate guy," Birk said. "You need to have that passion to play this game and coach this game. He lets that show and it rubs off on his players and his team."

"He's a very disciplined coach," McClain said. "He has a structured plan in the direction he knows he wants to go in, but he's willing to bend for the team or to adjust it to make it everybody's goal at the same time. He has his plan, but everybody has a piece of the plan."

"We've always had a good defense. Since he's been here, we've been the most balanced that this organization has ever been," Johnson said. "We're constantly working on improving every aspect of the game. Because of that balance and because there's never a fall-off in the way we prepare, we're in it every year."

After resting, Ravens turn focus to upstart Texans ***Veteran players urging younger teammates to treasure playoff chances***

By Jeff Zrebiec
The Baltimore Sun
January 9, 2012

Ravens defensive end Cory Redding had managed to stay calm and avoid an emotional attachment to the Denver Broncos-Pittsburgh Steelers Wild Card game Sunday. But when Broncos' wide receiver Demaryius Thomas caught Tim Tebow's pass on the first play of overtime and ran 80 yards for a touchdown, Redding admitted that he jumped off his couch.

A day later, the veteran said that the play and the Steelers' defeat should serve as a lesson to the Ravens as they embark on what they hope will be an extended playoff run.

"Cincinnati is out, Pittsburgh is out, Atlanta lost this weekend. It lets us know that we just have to go out there and let everything hang out," said Redding who didn't go to the playoffs for the first seven years of his career, but now has gone in back-to-back seasons with the Ravens. "You can't go out there and play cautious. Just get it, man. Go get it."

The Ravens returned to work today and began preparations for Sunday's second-round playoff game at M&T Bank Stadium against the Houston Texans, who dispatched of the Cincinnati Bengals, 31-10, on Saturday. The coaching staff, including offensive coordinator Cam Cameron who was at Reliant Stadium Saturday to scout the Texans, put in the game plan for Sunday's game shortly after their opponent became clear. On their way to the AFC North title and a first-round bye, the Ravens beat the Texans, 29-14, in Week Six.

Much has changed since for the Texans, who started quarterback Matt Schaub in that game but not star wide receiver Andre Johnson. Johnson is back after fighting through hamstring issues for much of the season, though Schaub — and his primary backup Matt Leinart — are out with season-ending injuries. Rookie fifth-round draft pick T.J. Yates is in, though the Ravens feel that the Texans are just as dangerous.

"It's not that much different. Teams evolve," said Ravens coach John Harbaugh. "But they're the same team in terms of what they like to do. They're good at what they do. That's why they've gotten as far as they have [and] they are as successful as they are. Of course, there will be wrinkles here and there, but it's going to be our players running our system against their players running their system. And whichever team plays the best on Sunday is going to be win the game. So there's an element of game-planning to it, but more than anything, it's [that] any two teams probably know each other fairly well at this point."



Against the Bengals, Yates completed 11-of-20 passes for 159 yards, including a 40-yard touchdown to Johnson. All-Pro running back Arian Foster carried the Texans' offense with 153 yards rushing and two touchdowns.

When the Ravens and Texans played on Oct 16, Foster was held to just 49 yards on 15 carries, his third lowest rushing total of the season. Limiting him will be the team's No.1 goal again this weekend.

"That's the objective: first and foremost is to stop the run," Redding said. "You can't let him get going. And number two, get guys, get eyes on No. 80 (Johnson), and guys on the back end really control not letting the ball over our heads. And No. 3, get after Yates, period. You have to stop the run, control the pass and get after the passer. That's the formula for winning every single week and that's been our formula from week one and up to week one, and it hasn't changed."

Redding spent the bye week resting and rehabbing a sore ankle, which kept him out of one game down the stretch and limited him in others. He said he feels "awesome," and he's hardly the only Raven to come back off the bye week feeling refreshed.

Harbaugh said that he expects all the injured Ravens, including wide receiver Anquan Boldin (knee) and linebackers Jameel McClain (knee) and Brendon Ayanbadejo (quad), to play on Sunday, meaning that the team will be at full strength for the first time in weeks.

"We did what we had to do to get that first-week bye," Redding said. "We came out of the backstretch 3-1, and that was our main focus. Guys are fighting on the field with big gashes down their legs and bruised ribs, messed up knees and toes and ankles and hands, and yet we still fought our way. Everybody got in that game, that Cincinnati game, and just played because we knew we were fighting for a week off. That was the biggest thing. We got that accomplished. We got control in the AFC North accomplished, and now it's time to rest, recover and get ready for the second season and winning Game One. That was the mindset for the guys. It was a big accomplishment."

Redding, middle linebacker Ray Lewis and center Matt Birk are among a number of Ravens' veterans who have counseled the team's younger players about how rare these opportunities are and how important it is to seize them.

Redding has never won a major championship, even falling short of a high school title when his North Shore (Texas) team that included Ravens' guard/center Andre Gurode lost in the state semifinals. While with the Minnesota Vikings, Birk went to the NFC championship game in two of his first three seasons, but he hasn't played for a conference title since.

"As you get a little bit older and you go through a lot more, you certainly don't take it for granted," said Birk. "Everybody's goal is the same when you start the season. I think one of the great things about football is the delayed gratification. You really work an entire year to reach that goal, to get to the Super Bowl. Obviously, making the playoffs is the first step."

For the Ravens, the next step is to take care of a talented Texans team in front of a sold-out crowd which will undoubtedly be ready for the city's first home playoff game since January 2007.

"The 'Bank' is going to be rocking. Everybody out there is going to be screaming loud. It's going to be crazy," Redding said. "[Yates] is going to have a hard time trying to make his checks. He is going to have hard times really trying to let the guys know when a blitz is coming because it is going to be noisy, and we want that. The defense really feeds on that energy, but for a young quarterback coming into a hostile environment and really having troubles with communicating, it's going to play into our hands. We are just going to sit back and let the crowd do their thing and do our job."

Ravens take business-like approach to latest playoff foray ***Ravens veterans have urged rookies to stay loose- and focused***

By Edward Lee
The Baltimore Sun
January 11, 2012

That they don't have the best postseason reputation is not lost on the Ravens.

The franchise is 9-6 in the playoffs, and four of those victories occurred during the team's magical run to win Super Bowl XXXV to cap the 2000 season. The Ravens are the only club in the NFL to have qualified for the postseason in each of the past four years, but don't have a Super Bowl or AFC championship title and just one AFC North crown to show for their labor.

"You don't want to be the team that just has an 18-game season every year," outside linebacker Jarret Johnson said recently. "You don't want to be the team that is just satisfied with making the playoffs and then goes home early. We appreciate the fact of what we were able to accomplish. We understand that you don't get this opportunity many times. You look at a guy like [former Miami Dolphins



quarterback] Dan Marino, Hall of Famer. He went to the [Super Bowl] one time. Every year, you can't take for granted the fact that you are in the playoffs. You have to take advantage of that because you don't know if you are ever going to make it again."

To that end, the team seems to be taking steps to ward off distractions and focus on the task at hand, which begins with Sunday's AFC divisional contest against the Houston Texans at M&T Bank Stadium.

The four corn hole boards in the Ravens locker room have become the equivalent of a child's toy after Christmas — unused after frequent play and more of an inconvenient nuisance lately.

Outside linebacker Terrell Suggs, perhaps the most brazen of jokesters in a locker room full of colorful personalities, gently chided nose tackle Terrence Cody and rookie cornerback Jimmy Smith last week for failing to turn down some music while reporters were crowded around kicker Billy Cundiff, whose locker neighbors Cody's.

And during the flight back from Cincinnati after the team's 24-16 victory over the Bengals in the Jan. 1 regular-season finale, players were asking about the upcoming practice schedule, not how many days off they would get after securing a first-round bye.

The Ravens practiced Wednesday and Thursday last week before getting a long weekend away from their training facility in Owings Mills, but it was quite a departure from 2006 when former coach Brian Billick gave the players five days off before they returned to practice.

"I like that we all stayed around," Suggs said. "We're not taking the noose off. They say never take the noose off a mule because it's not going back on there. I like that we still all stayed in football and kind of stayed grounded in football. We get a chance to refocus and actually see what it is we're playing for, and that's awesome. But five years ago, I was a young man. What was I — 25, 24 [years old]? I definitely shot out to the West Coast. Took a five-hour flight, probably went to Vegas. I don't remember. Whereas now, I'm more mature, I'm kind of a vet, sort of. We know what's at stake, we know what we're playing for, and we're just taking it all in."

Coach John Harbaugh said the practice schedule took shape as players and coaches discussed their objectives.

"We talked about how this is not a midseason bye," he said. "There are goals in a midseason bye and goals in a postseason bye and things that need to be accomplished. Our guys understood that. We've got great leadership, and our leaders were out on front on that."

The sense of seriousness that has pervaded the Ravens can also be traced to the shrinking window of opportunity for some of the team's veterans. Inside linebackers Ray Lewis and Brendon Ayanbadejo, free safety Ed Reed, center Matt Birk, left tackle Bryant McKinnie, wide receiver Anquan Boldin and kicker Billy Cundiff are 30 years and older.

But defensive end Cory Redding, who is 31, said the hunger to win a Super Bowl is not limited to the aging players.

"Regardless if you have 16 years in the league or you're in your first year in the league, it's a sense of urgency because you never know when you're going to have the opportunity to be in this position again," he said. "That's the biggest thing that we emphasize to everybody in the locker room, whether they are 16 years in the league or rookies. Seize every moment. Control the opportunity you are in. Never take this for granted because we have some guys that have been in the league six years, been to the playoffs six straight times. We have guys like myself who have been in the league nine years and only tasted the playoffs twice. So you never know when you are going to get this opportunity again."

Still, the players said they are enjoying their position in the postseason. A win against Houston, and the Ravens will advance to their second AFC championship game in Harbaugh's four-year tenure as the franchise's head coach. And if the Denver Broncos pull off another upset by upending the New England Patriots Saturday night, that title contest could take place in Baltimore.

Suggs said the team is still having fun.

"Of course, we're still loose," he said. "Who better than me to keep the team loose? We're still loose, but like I said, we all know the task at hand, we all know the consequences of playing bad, and we all know what we've got to do. We all know the objective."

Quarterback Joe Flacco said the team will gain even further satisfaction by making a run deep into the playoffs.

"I think we're a pretty loose group, but at the same time, we don't really mess around," he said. "We're not loose and come out here and mess around and not get our work done. We're loose in our lives, but when we come out here and practice and we take the field, we're a pretty serious group. Yeah, we like to have fun, but you have fun by going out there and playing well and win football games."



Ravens veterans adopt now-or-never approach in bid to earn 1st Super Bowl ring

By David Ginsburg
The Associated Press
January 13, 2012

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — Matt Birk made his debut in the NFL as part of a Minnesota Vikings team that went 15-1. Minnesota reached the playoffs in each of the next two seasons, too.

Although the Vikings never made it to the Super Bowl during that span, Birk figured it was only a matter of time before he would be fitted for a Super Bowl ring. Now the starting center for the Baltimore Ravens, Birk is 35 years old and in 15th NFL season. He's still waiting for a chance to be part of pro football's biggest spectacle.

"Two out of my first three years in the league I went to the NFC championship game," Birk said. "At that time, I probably didn't know what it meant or just how precious it was. And I haven't been back since."

Birk is one of 35 players on Baltimore's 53-man roster to have participated in an NFL playoff game. Only one, middle linebacker Ray Lewis, owns a Super Bowl ring.

For many of the Ravens veterans, this postseason run could represent their last chance to win a championship. Although Baltimore has reached the playoffs in each of the last four seasons, this team might be the best of them all. After going 12-4 and winning the AFC North, the Ravens enter Sunday's home game against Houston (11-6) as the No. 2 seed in the conference. With a victory, Baltimore will move within one victory of booking a trip to Indianapolis for the Super Bowl.

"This is probably my best shot at it," Birk said. "My first year we were 15-1. That team and this team are the two best I've ever been on. The last three years we've been kind of building to this point. I think we've gotten better each year. Somebody my age, I realize this is probably my last and best shot at it."

Ravens safety Ed Reed joined the Ravens in 2002. He's received eight Pro Bowl nominations — including one this season — and has played in nine postseason games. But he's still waiting to experience the thrill of playing in the Super Bowl.

He isn't getting younger, either. Reed has several gray hairs and no longer finds the trip to Hawaii for the league's all-star game to be worth the bother.

"I couldn't tell you the last time I've been to the Pro Bowl," he said, "so that tells you how I feel about that."

Lewis has the ring. He wants another. Mostly, though, he wants his teammates to understand just how special it is to own one.

"That's what it's all about. You see these young kids that come in this business, and they don't really understand how hard it is to win a Super Bowl," Lewis said. "They don't understand how everything has to be in place, how your health is a big issue."

"We have the team to do it now. We don't have too many more excuses. Let's go do it right now. Then whatever else comes after that for all of your careers, you go enjoy it, but go win a championship. There are a lot of men that came in this business, and that's the one thing they have left this business without, and that's the ring. I have touched it before. To go back with this group of men could be a special thing."

Defensive end Cory Redding spent six seasons with Detroit and another with Seattle before joining the Ravens as a free agent in March 2010. He got his first taste of the playoffs last season, and now the 31-year-old is eager to take the next step.

"To have the opportunity to play in the playoffs two years in a row, having the chance to continue to fight for what you have always been dreaming of when you were a little kid — hoisting up that (Lombardi) Trophy — it's a privilege and an honor," he said. "Right now, myself and everybody included in that locker room, I'm telling everyone to soak everything in and don't take this thing for granted. Because we don't know when the next time we're going to be here."

Linebacker Jarret Johnson is in his ninth season. He was part of the Ravens team that advanced to the AFC title game in 2008, only to be turned back by the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"You don't want to be the team that just has an 18-game season every year," Johnson said. "You don't want to be the team that's just satisfied with making the playoffs and then goes home early. We understand that you don't get this opportunity many times. You look at a guy like Dan Marino, Hall of Famer, he went one time. Every year, you can't take for granted the fact that you are in the playoffs. You have to take advantage of that because you don't know if you are ever going to make it again."



Ravens hold on to beat Texans, advance to AFC championship game ***Baltimore forces four turnovers in 20-13 victory over Houston, will play New England next Sunday***

By Jeff Zrebiec
The Baltimore Sun
January 15, 2012

They have played together for so long that certain things become expected. So even after a regular season in which Ed Reed had just one interception in his final 15 games, Ray Lewis felt it coming, simply because he's seen it so many times before.

As the Houston Texans drove into Ravens' territory in the final two minutes looking for a game-tying touchdown, Lewis got the attention of his long-time teammate and made one request.

"I told Ed before the play -- he'll tell you that I was joking -- I said, 'After you catch this interception, don't you pitch it,'" Lewis said. "The confidence that we have in each other is more overwhelming than you can ever imagine."

Reed's interception, coupled with his pass breakup moments later on one final T.J. Yates desperation heave to the end zone, secured the Ravens' 20-13 victory in an AFC Divisional playoff game at M&T Bank Stadium, and the team's third appearance in the AFC championship game in franchise history.

The Ravens will travel to Gillette Stadium next week for a showdown with the New England Patriots that will decide the AFC representative in the Super Bowl.

"This is all we have been dreaming for," said Ravens running back Ray Rice. "We didn't look past anybody this year, and we didn't look past the Texans today. New England is definitely going to be a challenge but we are up for it."

As anyone who has watched the Ravens all year might expect, it wasn't pretty or easy. After taking a 17-3 lead late in the first quarter, the Ravens scored just three points -- a 44-yard field goal by Billy Cundiff with 2:56 to play that gave the home team a seven-point lead -- over the final 46 minutes of the game.

Quarterback Joe Flacco did little to quiet his skeptics, throwing two first-quarter touchdowns but completing just 14-of-27 passes while being hurried all game. Rice gained 60 yards on 21 carries while the Ravens' defense allowed Arian Foster to rush for 95 yards in the first half and 132 for the game, and didn't sack Yates once.

But the Ravens also committed no penalties and didn't turn the ball over once and when their first home playoff game since 2007 was over, they were celebrating one more opportunity to achieve a goal that has eluded them since their Super Bowl win in 2000.

"You win the game no matter what," said Ravens coach John Harbaugh, who advanced to the AFC title game for the second time in four years, and now owns a 5-3 playoff record. "That's what it really boils down to in a situation like this. This football team won the game no matter what. It wasn't perfect by any stretch, but they found a win to win the football game. And Houston is just at tremendous football team."

Unable to move the ball for the better part of the final three quarters, the Ravens turned to a formula that they have relied on for so many years: a punishing defense that forced four turnovers and pitched a shutout in the second half.

And front and center -- like they have been so many times before -- were Lewis and Reed, who have been criticized at times this season and have recently faced questions about whether they are entering the final days of their storied NFL careers.

Lewis made seven tackles, including a huge play on Foster for a seven-yard loss about midway through the fourth quarter with the Ravens clinging to a four-point lead. Reed, who has gotten some criticism this season for poor tackling and failure to make big plays -- issues that might be explained by an ailing shoulder -- had two pass breakups and six tackles. He was helped off the field following his final deflection, unable to put much weight on his left ankle. But X-rays were negative and Reed left little doubt that he'll play next weekend against the Patriots.

"We feel like we're the big brother of the team, but our offense will get going. We know that," said Reed when asked about the defense carrying the load. "We knew they would make plays when they needed to. It's not going to always be a blowout or a shoot-out game. It's going to be hard fought. It takes a team effort. It's just not offense out there on the field or defense on the field or special teams. It took a team effort. We capitalized on some plays and they did, too. We just made more."

While Reed, Lewis and wide receiver Anquan Boldin -- he caught four passes for 73 yards and a touchdown in his return from knee surgery -- played starring roles, the Ravens got their share of unsung performances as well. Tight end Kris Wilson's first catch all year went for a touchdown, his first since the 2009 post-season.



Left guard Ben Grubbs fell on two fumbles that kept drives alive, and Lardarius Webb picked off two Yates passes, including one late in the first quarter that preceded Flacco's 10-yard touchdown pass to Boldin that gave the Ravens a 17-3 lead with a minute, eight seconds left in the first quarter.

Aside from Danieal Manning's game-opening 60-yard kickoff return that set up a Texans' field goal on the afternoon's first possession, the much-maligned special teams coverage units bottled up punt returner Jacoby Jones and set up the Ravens' first touchdown. Jones bobbled Sam Koch's 64-yard punt and it was recovered by Jimmy Smith at the Texans' 3. Three plays later, Flacco hit an uncovered Wilson on 3rd-and-goal from the one.

"I definitely wouldn't have predicted it," said Flacco of his touchdown pass to Wilson, who is normally the blocking tight end.

The Texans' defense, which ranked second in the NFL during the regular season, stiffened considerably after the first quarter. After the touchdown pass to Boldin, the Ravens went three-and-out on three of their next four drives and saw their once 14-point lead cut to four after Foster's 1-yard touchdown run with just under five minutes remaining before halftime. Foster carried the ball seven times for 54 yards on the drive and caught one ball for 12 yards.

Houston wouldn't score again, while the Ravens were thwarted in their best touchdown opportunity of the second half. Leading 17-13, they had fourth-and-goal from the 1-yard line with 2:45 left in the third quarter. Harbaugh kept Cundiff on the sideline, but Rice was stuffed by linebacker Tim Dobbins.

"It wasn't tough at all," said Harbaugh of the decision. "It was easy."

The Ravens' defense certainly prevented Harbaugh from any second-guessing. They forced a three-and-out on the next Texans' possession. Houston's final four drives then ended with a punt, an interception by Webb, interception by Reed, and incomplete pass, thanks to Reed.

"I think it was a Ravens type of victory," said linebacker Terrell Suggs who was kept mostly quiet by Texans left tackle Duane Brown. "I always say this, 'There's a right way to do things, there's a wrong way to do things and then there's the Ravens way to do things.' It wasn't really pretty but, hey, we're not really a pretty team. We got the 'W' and on to the AFC Championship."

And that is all that mattered to these Ravens, who now are one win away from playing in the Super Bowl.

"The only reason you play this game is for the opportunity to go to the Super Bowl," said Lewis. "We have that opportunity right now. Whatever anybody wants to say about us, we are in position. There are two teams left in the AFC, just us and the Patriots. Next week, that's going to take care of itself."

In NFL playoffs, Baltimore Ravens' Ed Reed, Ray Lewis keep Father Time at bay

By John Feinstein
The Washington Post
January 15, 2012

BALTIMORE — There is a patch of gray in Ed Reed's hair, a reminder whenever he looks in the mirror that he's 33 and not 23, that, as he puts it, "Father Time is marching on." Ray Lewis keeps his hair so short it is impossible to detect any change in hair color, but there is no doubting the receding hairline, regardless of how expensive his suit may be.

The pair has been the heart and soul of the Baltimore Ravens defense for so long it feels as if they were playing in Baltimore with Johnny Unitas and John Mackey in Memorial Stadium. Lewis is in his 16th season and Reed is in his 10th. Each knows he isn't the player he was in the past. Each knows that the stars of this Ravens defense are Haloti Ngata and Terrell Suggs.

But, as they proved again Sunday in the Ravens' tense, grinding 20-13 AFC semifinal victory over the Houston Texans, they both have some game left.

"They've both taken some criticism this season and I'm glad to see them both come out when it really mattered and play so well," Ravens Coach John Harbaugh said in the victorious locker room. "In a very real sense this was vindication for them."

Vindication for Reed came in the form of a nearly game-clinching interception on the Ravens 4-yard line with 1 minute 51 seconds to play after he failed to corral wayward passes that appeared to be there for the taking. Lewis had eight tackles and several turn-back-the-clock moments, most notably when he found himself in the open field with Houston's superb young running back, Arian Foster, midway through the fourth quarter.



The Texans were down only 17-13 at that stage, at midfield with a first down. Most in a record M&T Stadium crowd of 71,547 were growing nervous as the cold January sun began to fade rapidly. Houston quarterback T.J. Yates found Foster in the left flat with only Lewis standing between him and a long gain.

"Watching him all day long was amazing," Lewis said later. "He has so many cuts and moves there are times when you almost catch yourself just watching him."

Lewis didn't watch this time. He never gave Foster a chance to cut or dart or slash, wrapping him up and bringing him down for a loss of seven yards. Two plays later, facing third and 12, Yates tried to find Kevin Walter deep down the middle and cornerback Lardarius Webb made his second interception of the day.

If there is a difference between Lewis and Reed — besides the fact Lewis is 36 and Reed is 33 — it is that Reed will at least acknowledge he's getting older. Lewis darts and dodges like Foster when the subject comes up.

Reed is still fiercely proud of who he is and clearly has been stung by some of the criticism he's heard this season. He talked about those who have been on him for not tackling well and about his few interceptions — three all season, two in the opener — and insisted, even while bringing it up, that he didn't listen to his critics.

"I had a better tackling game today than the last two or three," he said. "This is the playoffs. You do whatever you have to do to win. I know people have talked about me not getting as many picks, but some of that has been because they don't throw it my way that much."

He stopped and smiled. "Just before I made the interception I shook [Webb's] hand and asked him for his hands. Afterward he said he wanted them back. I'm getting older. I understand that. I know Father Time is out there and someday someone else is going to be playing safety here in Baltimore."

Lewis knows the clock is ticking for him, too, but he chooses not to get caught up in worrying about when the end will come. "I never have those moments," he said when asked if he thinks about it. He laughed. "I got kids. They challenge me in everything — sprints, in the weight room."

"Hey, when it's over, it's over. I think people appreciate when great warriors fight to the end. They don't think about the guys who play two or three years. I'm proud to have played 16 years. I credit a lot of people: My mom, God, but I also credit my work ethic. I can't stop working."

"Whenever is whenever, whenever that is."

Lewis and Reed have earned the right to feel that way. The Ravens are in the AFC championship game Sunday and believe they can win at Gillette Stadium regardless of how gaudy Tom Brady's numbers were against Denver on Saturday night.

Since Harbaugh came to Baltimore, the Ravens have never failed to reach the conference semifinals. They will be in their second championship game since Harbaugh and quarterback Joe Flacco arrived together in 2008. One of the reasons for their success is that Harbaugh and his coaches have been able to transition a great defense from one dominated by Lewis and Reed to one led by Ngata and Suggs on the field while Lewis and Reed remain vocal leaders off the field.

There was little that was pretty about the Ravens victory on Sunday — they are rarely a pretty team. The last time they made something look easy was in Super Bowl XXXV back in 2001, when they beat the Giants, 34-7.

They haven't been back since. Now, they're on the doorstep again. Lewis and Reed can clearly hear the footsteps of Father Time. But, as they both showed on Sunday, he hasn't caught up to them just yet.



Suggs is Defensive Player of the Year

By Mike Wilkening
ProFootball Weekly
January 16, 2012

If you love football, the gray box listing previous Defensive Players of the Year on the right side of this page is a time machine. Start at the bottom with Dick Butkus, our inaugural winner in 1970, and work your way up. Close your eyes and think of Butkus getting ready to crush some poor tailback at Wrigley Field. Go on, daydream for a few minutes.

Now, take your right index finger and place it on the name of the 2000 PFW/PFWA DPOY recipient, legendary Ravens LB Ray Lewis. Start tracing upward. You'll see Lewis won it again in '03. The next year, teammate S Ed Reed, one of the greatest center fielders ever to wear an NFL uniform, won the award.

Now, scan to the top of that gray box, where our 2011 honoree, Ravens OLB Terrell Suggs, joins these ranks.

Suggs, 29, earned top defensive honors after notching a career-high 14 sacks for the ferocious Baltimore defense, which allowed the NFL's third-fewest yards per game — and still counts Lewis and Reed as starters. The Ravens have finished in the top 10 in yards surrendered per game in 12 of the last 13 seasons.

This begs the question: Why has this defense kept in such dominant form for so long? Suggs pointed to the group's leadership and mentality.

"We've always, since I've been here, been the most physical, rough defense that's just going to play lights-out," said Suggs, who is in his ninth NFL season.

In eight of those seasons, Baltimore finished in the top six in yards allowed. But in the last two years, Suggs has shone brightest. In 2010, he recorded 11 sacks in the regular season and then added five in two postseason games. This season, he tormented divisional rival Pittsburgh in the regular-season opener, taking down QB Ben Roethlisberger three times, and he never looked back. Suggs earned AFC Defensive Player of the Week honors three times in 2011 and garnered AFC Defensive Player of the Month honors for December/January.

Suggs credits the hiring of OLB coach Ted Monachino, his position coach at Arizona State, as one reason for his improvement the last two seasons.

"We've got a bond that's stronger than blood, if you ask me," said Suggs. "When he became my coach in college, we did some phenomenal things. When he became my coach again here, we did some phenomenal things."

Suggs also began to demand more of himself.

"I used to rest on my laurels, so to say," he said. "You know, I've got Ray Lewis and Ed Reed — we're going to be fine."

"I think the last two seasons, I've kind of put it on myself a little bit more. I can go win a game for us, you know, not just kind of just waiting in the shadows for my two big brothers, so to say."

One example of Suggs' rising to the occasion came Thanksgiving night against San Francisco, when he sacked 49ers QB Alex Smith three times in the second half.

On Suggs' second takedown of Smith, he pushed 49ers RT Anthony Davis backward and then closed quickly on the Niners' quarterback, forcing a punt. On his final sack of Smith, Suggs looped inside, beating two blockers.

Suggs showed special pass-rush ability from the moment he entered the league at age 20. He notched a dozen sacks in 2003, his first NFL season.

At the beginning, Suggs said, his speed was his greatest asset. Then, he focused on power.

"Now, it's speed, power, finesse, striking of the hands," he said. "It's kind of all of that, putting it (into) one." His is a skill set that puts the opposition to the test.

"He's very athletic," Texans OLT Duane Brown told reporters last week. "If you try to focus on his athleticism so much, you forget about his power, and he can use that on you."



Pass rushing alone doesn't define Suggs, who recorded six tackles and defended a pass in the divisional round win vs. Houston on Sunday. He had 70 tackles and two interceptions in the regular season.

"I play on the team with the best player ever to play," Suggs said, referring to Lewis. "He's got everything. He's got picks. He's got sacks.

"... He's got everything on his résumé. When I'm done, I would like a résumé similar to that, with everything on there." Suggs' résumé isn't exactly a blank piece of paper. He's the franchise's all-time sack leader. He's made five Pro Bowls.

He is grateful for the individual recognition. Now, he wants something he doesn't have: a Super Bowl ring.

Was 2011 his best season? Suggs offered a qualifier that said everything about his mind-set.

"Statistically, yes," he said, "but I think my best season will be the one where I'm the last team playing and there's confetti falling on my face.

"Until that happens, I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

Billy Cundiff misses game-tying field goal as Ravens fall to Patriots in AFC championship game ***Baltimore kicker's 32-yard attempt goes wide left with 11 seconds left, giving New England a 23-20 win***

By Jeff Zrebiec
The Baltimore Sun
January 23, 2012

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Terrell Suggs stood on the sideline, and the man who is never at a loss for words could only mouth the words "Oh, my God."

Ray Rice and Torrey Smith said nothing, choosing instead to stare straight ahead and wonder in silence how a long football season full of legitimate Super Bowl aspirations could possibly end like this.

Fourteen yards from the end zone and a Super Bowl berth, and seemingly in position for no worse than a game-tying field goal that would force overtime, the Ravens watched two potential touchdown passes get broken up, and then Billy Cundiff pushed a 32-yard field goal wide left with 15 seconds remaining.

The season-ending 23-20 loss to the New England Patriots at raucous Gillette Stadium appeared to sting worse than any of the Ravens' previous playoff failures. The Ravens, who dressed in near silence after the game, had the lead early in the fourth quarter and had three late opportunities to regain it.

However, they squandered each one and instead put the AFC championship on the right foot of Cundiff, then watched in disbelief when he couldn't prolong the game.

"It [stinks]," Suggs said. "It was a special year from start to finish. Even with 22 seconds left, we thought we had it. But hey, congrats to them, can't take anything from them. Rest assured, we are going back to work. We're going to take the necessary time off, but when we train, we know what our destiny is."

For the seventh time in franchise history and the first since 2008, the Patriots' destiny is the championship game — this time, Super Bowl XLVI in Indianapolis, where they'll meet the New York Giants, who defeated the San Francisco 49ers, 20-17 in overtime, in the NFC championship game Sunday night.

The Ravens, meanwhile, start an offseason filled with lament after coming so close to getting back to the Super Bowl. Nobody felt any worse than Cundiff, who got a good snap and hold and just missed the kick.

"It's a kick I've kicked a thousand times in my career," Cundiff said. "I just went out there and didn't convert. That's the way things go. There's really no excuse for it."

To their credit, the Ravens rallied around Cundiff and acknowledged that it should have never come down to a game-tying field-goal attempt. Two plays earlier, Joe Flacco, who had one of the better performances of his career given the circumstances, made a perfect throw to wide receiver Lee Evans. He appeared to catch the ball in the right corner of the end zone, but as he was coming down with it, Patriots rookie cornerback Sterling Moore slapped it away.

Thinking it was a touchdown, Flacco threw his hands up and started running toward Evans, and the Ravens' sideline erupted.



"There's really not a whole lot to say about it. It was an opportunity for us to go to the Super Bowl, and I let it go," said Evans, who had his best game as a Raven, catching three balls for 39 yards after entering the game with just five catches all season. "Honestly, the most disappointing part of all this is that I feel personally that I let everybody down. This is the greatest team that I've been on, and I feel like I let everybody down. Yeah, it's on my shoulders. It's as tough as it gets."

That sentiment was echoed by safety Bernard Pollard who signed with the Ravens before the season, feeling that they represented his best shot at getting to the Super Bowl.

"Eighteen seconds, man. I don't care who you are. You can't drive the field 18 seconds against us. But shoulda, coulda, woulda and we didn't," Pollard said. "It was the biggest game of my career, so it's the biggest loss of my career. It hurts, it [stinks]. We got to bounce back somehow, somehow. To do what we did, that's hard. For us, we got to find a way to get back there."

Ravens coach John Harbaugh, who has guided the Ravens to the playoffs in all four of his seasons but is now 0-2 in AFC championship games, pleaded for the referee to review the play by Evans to determine whether he had held it long enough for the touchdown, but the coach didn't get his wish.

"Obviously a disappointing, stunning loss at the end there," he said. "I thought our guys played their hearts out. We made plays and came up a play or two short at the end, but it doesn't lessen what they accomplished this year, and it doesn't lessen what they accomplished in this game. ... I like our football team and I like where we are going."

The Ravens played exactly the game that they wanted against the Patriots, giving up plenty of ground on defense but holding in the red zone, and gaining chunks of yards on offense behind a sharp Flacco, who was 22-for-36 for 306 yards, two touchdowns and one interception.

A 16-10 deficit early in the third quarter became a 20-16 Ravens lead by the start of the fourth. That's because Flacco hit Smith (Maryland) for a 29-yard touchdown pass with 3:48 left in the third quarter, and then the Ravens converted Danny Woodhead's fumble on the ensuing kickoff into a 39-yard field goal.

But Brady, who was 22-for-36 for 239 yards and two interceptions but consistently moved his team down the field behind short passes and the running of BenJarvus Green-Ellis, answered with an 11-play, 63-yard drive. It ended with Brady plunging in on fourth-and-goal from the 1.

"I thought it looked soft in there, so I tried to take advantage of us getting an easy touchdown," Brady said. "I don't do that very often. I'm glad we had a chance to score there. That was important."

Trailing 23-20 with 11:29 to go, the Ravens quickly marched into Patriots territory before Flacco was intercepted by Brandon Spikes. But on the very next play, Brady was picked off in the end zone when Pollard deflected the ball and rookie cornerback Jimmy Smith made a diving catch and returned the ball all the way to Ravens' 38.

The Ravens drove into Patriots territory again, but on fourth -and-6 at the 33, Harbaugh opted to eschew a 50-yard field goal and go for the first down. Flacco was pressured by Vince Wilfork and threw a floater over the head of Dennis Pitta.

"We just felt like from a percentage standpoint, we probably had a better chance of getting the first down," Harbaugh said.

At that point — trailing by three with 2:46 to play and two timeouts — the Ravens' Super Bowl dreams were on life support. But the defense forced a three-and-out for just the second time all game, and the Ravens had the ball back at their own 22 with 1:44 to play.

The stage was set for Flacco, who has been hearing criticism for weeks that he wasn't good enough to get the Ravens to the Super Bowl. He hit Anquan Boldin for 13 and 9 yards, and then on third-and-1 he completed a 29-yard pass to the veteran wide receiver to get the Ravens to the Patriots' 23.

"It wasn't me today, it was Joe Flacco," running back Ray Rice said. "I would appreciate if some of the people that criticize him lay off him now. That's my quarterback."

Another completion to Boldin got the ball down to the 14, but it would agonizingly get no closer. Moore separated the ball from Evans, and then knocked away a potential touchdown pass to Pitta. That's when Cundiff stepped up with a chance to prolong the season and pushed it wide left.

"When you lose, you have to suck it up like a man and as a man you got to keep moving," inside linebacker Ray Lewis said. "We've got to keep building and remember this taste no matter how many times you go through it."

Lewis answered one of the Ravens' primary offseason questions by saying he has "absolutely not" played his last game as a Raven. But a host of questions remain. Will safety Ed Reed or center Matt Birk retire? Will much-maligned offensive coordinator Cam Cameron be back? How will the Ravens handle their huge list of potential free agents, which includes Rice, guard Ben Grubbs and linebacker



Jarret Johnson?

Those questions will have to be answered in the coming days, but the Ravens will have to get over this setback first, and that won't be easy.

"It's definitely tough to be as close as we were going to Indianapolis and not having it go our way," Flacco said. "We played a hell of a game. They played a hell of a game. They played better."

Eisenberg: Ravens Getting Old? That's A Myth

The Ravens' window to win a Super Bowl is still open with plenty of youth on the roster.

By John Eisenberg
BaltimoreRavens.com
January 24, 2012

While everyone is wallowing, let's just go ahead and start with the bad news.

The Ravens came as close as you can get to the Super Bowl without actually making it this season, and they were obviously good enough to hoist the Vince Lombardi Trophy, but that guarantees nothing going forward.

What happens in one season in the NFL is seldom a precursor to what happens in the next season. That's just the way the league works. That's actually the best thing about the league, what makes it so addictive. Strange things unfold. Unpredictability runs rampant.

The Ravens came frustratingly close this season (to put it mildly, huh) but there's no telling what lies ahead.

It's only natural – for fans as well as for players – to respond to the anger and frustration they're feeling by setting their jaws and dreaming of revenge scenarios, but honestly, those thoughts are moot. A whole new set of circumstances will arise next season, much of it unimaginable at this point.

That is not intended as a commentary on the Ravens' coaches, players or front office decision-makers, who are good at their jobs and will certainly strive to keep the momentum going. You don't go 44-20 in the regular season over four years and earn four straight trips to the playoffs by accident. The Ravens have a lot going for them.

But the difference between success and failure is so thin and the league is so well-balanced that superior talent, sound preparation and wise decision-making alone aren't enough.

Just ask the Green Bay Packers, who won the Super Bowl a year ago, went 15-1 this season and began the playoffs with every right to believe a reprise was in the offing. They didn't even make the conference title game as injuries caught up with them and they picked a really bad time to throw in a clunker.

Strange things happen.

To get to the Super Bowl, you have to have things go your way, avoid key injuries, win the right big games, get a fortunate bounce or three. You need fate on your side.

The Ravens had it this season right up until that catch slipped out of Lee Evans' hands and Billy Cundiff's kick flew wide. They went undefeated at home, undefeated in their division, swept the Pittsburgh Steelers. That's not going to happen every year. They avoided big injuries. They earned a home playoff game by dint of a tiebreaker, which got them to the conference title game, which got them within a couple of plays of the Super Bowl.

The good news is they're well-constructed to make another run. They've sought consistency as an organization and seemingly have found it, a colossal achievement, not to be underestimated.

Beyond the borders of Ravenstown, a popular notion is that their window of opportunity is closing because their superstars are getting old. Several national radio talk-show hosts suggested that to me just last week, as did a TV guy in New England. I don't buy it for a second. The notion that the Ravens are getting old is really a myth.

They have a 27-year-old quarterback, a 25-year-old Pro Bowl running back. They had two players make All-Pro on defense this year under the age of 30. Their offensive guards will both start in the Pro Bowl Sunday, both under 30.



Sure, Ray Lewis will be 37 next season, and Ed Reed will be 34 if he comes back. But while they may still lead the defense, they don't carry it anymore.

The idea that the Ravens will go as far as Lewis and Reed take them might work well as conversational fodder for national talking heads, but it's a superficial gloss-over, outdated, simply not true.

The Ravens will have to navigate a long, tough road to get back to where they were Sunday, but they're a good bet to at least contend again because they have young talent in crucial places, particularly on offense.

They have a stable core and more going for them than most teams, which is certainly a good starting point, and really, all you can ask for.

Now all they need is for their luck to hold and that next big kick to fly straight.