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Feature Clips



**AFC Championship
Chiefs vs. Ravens**



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Ravens WR Rashod Bateman Hasn't Had His Breakout, But He's Made Several Breakthroughs

THE ATHLETIC | JANUARY 11, 2024 | JEFF ZREBIEC

Rashod Bateman is fine acknowledging it now. Sixteen games and only a few missed practices later, the wide receiver has answered the persistent questions about whether he could make it through a regular season healthy.

But when he reported to the Baltimore Ravens' facility for the start of training camp in late July, Bateman wasn't sure whether there would be a season for him at all.

"Nobody really knows that, but I think I can tell that story now because I've made it this far," Bateman said last week. "When I first got back here, me and the coaches and training staff, we didn't even know if I was going to be able to play this year. We thought I might need another surgery."

"I was in pain and I wasn't seeing the results. I wasn't able to physically run or cut or put pressure on my foot. Based on my rehab, I was supposed to be able to train this offseason and show up for training camp in tip-top shape. That was according to my surgery date and the rehab process. Unfortunately, my foot took a left turn this past offseason."

Bateman, a 2021 first-round pick, didn't have a breakout 2023 regular season statistically. He finished fifth on the Ravens with 32 receptions and sixth with 367 receiving yards. He had one touchdown catch. In nearly 70 percent of the games in which he played, Bateman had two receptions or fewer.

But in every other area, he experienced a breakthrough. Physically, he learned to manage his surgically repaired foot and missed just one game with a hamstring injury after being sidelined for 16 over his first two NFL seasons.

Mentally, he handled the weight of losing two people close to him and learned to block out the outside negativity and criticism that came from drops, missed opportunities and the expectations of a first-round pick.

Emotionally, he channeled his frustration from not getting the ball as much as he'd like into embracing whatever he was asked to do to help Baltimore win. With the Ravens taking the AFC North and finishing with a conference-best 13-4 record, that, in itself, has been plenty satisfying for Bateman.

"I'm not going to say it's been easy, but that's because I'm hungry, I know my abilities, I know what I'm capable of," Bateman said. "As a competitive player, it's easy to get frustrated. I feel like I've been there, but I've matured. What we're chasing this year is bigger than how many targets I get. You just have to be able to put the organization first, put the team first and trust the process of what's going on. I've kind of fallen in love with that. Being able to be in the position that we're in now has helped me fall in love more so with the process and just enjoying my time here."

After the 56-19 throttling of the Miami Dolphins in Week 17, Ravens coach John Harbaugh summoned Bateman into the middle of the locker room for an embrace. "How about 'Big Day Bate,'" Harbaugh exclaimed. Harbaugh predicted to Bateman during the week that he'd make some big plays against the Dolphins. Bateman went out and had his most productive game of the season, catching four passes for 54 yards.

As Bateman prepared to address his teammates and coaches, the celebratory locker room became quiet. Pounding his fist into his palm, Bateman said, "I appreciate y'all boys. I love playing with you all. There wouldn't be a better place to be right now. I've been through a lot. This feels amazing. Let's keep stacking these wins."

Several Ravens players said in the days that followed, seeing Bateman smile was one of the highlights when the team clinched a division title and a first-round playoff bye.

When he's right, Bateman, 24, makes things look effortless on a football field. He chews up space with long strides and precise routes. Metrics show that when it comes to separating from defenders, Bateman has been one of the most effective receivers in the NFL this season. When his fundamentals and focus are sound, he snatches balls out of the air in one fluid motion. It's pretty to watch.

The challenge for Bateman, though, has always been making sure everything is aligned. His body has already abandoned him far too often since he's been in the NFL. There was the abdominal injury sustained during the 2021 training camp, requiring surgery and delaying his much-anticipated rookie year. There was the Lisfranc foot sprain last season that also triggered surgery, ended his sophomore campaign and extended into the summer.

There have also been times, Bateman acknowledges, where he's allowed negative thoughts to seep in or other issues to steal his focus, and it's impacted him and/or his game.

"He's been through so much adversity, personally, with basically the injuries," Harbaugh said. "A high pick and high expectations, and then fighting through injuries."

The tough times didn't just intervene after Bateman made it to the NFL. They've been omnipresent since he was a young child forced to grow up fast. LaShonda Cromer, Bateman's mother, worked tirelessly to provide for her three boys. The family moved around Georgia often, even living in a trailer, where running water and electricity couldn't be counted on and food wasn't in constant supply. Bateman's stepfather was abusive to Cromer for years. Bateman's uncle, Anthony, had always been a father figure to him, picking up some of the slack. However, he died suddenly in 2019 while the receiver was starring at the University of Minnesota.

Bateman's first NFL contract allowed him to buy Cromer a new car and a new home. But the difficult times didn't end when he entered the league. Last January, Bateman's grandmother, Ida Mathis, died of cancer. Mathis helped take care of Bateman when he was growing up and had a major influence on his life. Not long after that, Bateman learned that his high school-aged cousin committed suicide.

The injuries had already taken a significant toll on Bateman's psyche. He had foot surgery in November and physical progress was slow going. The loss of loved ones wrecked him emotionally.

"I thought the first time I got hurt, I was at my lowest," Bateman said. "Then, I thought the second time I got hurt, I was at my lowest. But last summer, all that was going on and then in the offseason, my grandma passed and stuff. I've been through a lot, but as a young adult, that hit me pretty hard. It hit my family pretty hard. I'm in a position now where I have to take care of my family in certain areas. I've had to do a lot of that stuff and be there for them in ways that I didn't know that I'd have to. A lot of my time and efforts go to my family, as they should. But there are times in my career where I've had to put my attention there because of major life changes."

The first indication that something wasn't quite right last offseason came when Bateman went after general manager Eric DeCosta in a tweet during the NFL Scouting Combine in March. Reacting to a seemingly innocuous quote from DeCosta about the organization's struggles drafting receivers, Bateman accused the general manager of "pointing the finger" at players and quarterback Lamar Jackson, and he challenged him to "keep us healthy (and) care" about the players.

It was an odd reaction, considering that Bateman and DeCosta, by all accounts, had and have a strong relationship. The air, however, was cleared long before Bateman returned to Baltimore to ramp up preparations for the 2023 season. His foot, though, had not progressed the way anyone had hoped.

Cognizant of how much time he had already missed and how his durability and toughness were being questioned by outsiders, Bateman dreaded the prospects of having another surgery that would have cost him most, if not all, of the season. He dreaded how people would react to that, too.

"Honestly, I feel like a lot of people have a negative view of me for being in touch with my emotions, for caring about the sport that I love," Bateman said. "This is my life. This is how I pay my bills. I don't have a college degree. At the end of the day, I have to stay true to myself. I feel like last year, maybe, I let the negativity get to me, because of other things that I've been through, and because of injuries and the perspective that people have on my game and me. At times, that's been tough. Nobody knows what it's like to be in this position. Everybody from the outside looking in is just looking in. I have a very good understanding of that now."

Bateman started turning the corner physically a few weeks into training camp. He returned to practice and began to make plays. The confidence in his foot started building. His demeanor was brightening, too.

"Dealing with injuries, this business will have you lose confidence in yourself," said Ravens wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr., who has been a sounding board for Bateman. "There's a lot of things that go on. Just to see him have a smile on his face, to see him make plays and to see him have the confidence in himself, that's probably the biggest blessing. I'm just truly happy for him. It feels good to see people that you spend most of your day with happy and loving what they do."

Bateman has been tested all season. When he dropped a routine touchdown pass in a close loss to Pittsburgh in Week 5, he answered critics on X (formerly known as Twitter) by writing, "That negativity ain't going to work on me this year," and vowed to bounce back. At different times, he's responded to questions about his modest numbers by reminding everyone that the Ravens are winning.

"This game isn't easy," said Ravens wide receiver Nelson Agholor. "He's super talented, and sometimes when you get so caught up in statistics, you forget how much you impact the game. He impacts the game for us. He has the speed, route-running ability, separation, clutch plays. He's got the ability to change a game at any moment, and I think he's at his best when he's at peace and happy."

If Bateman is miffed by his number of targets — he's averaging just 3 1/2 per game — and his struggles at times to connect with Jackson, he hasn't voiced his frustration publicly. Instead, he's been one of the first receivers out on the practice field every day. He's also been one of the first players to celebrate Jackson or another teammate's success.

"It's disappointing sometimes after games, you know? Maybe he didn't get as many balls as he wanted, or maybe he didn't make a catch he wanted to make," Harbaugh said. "Yet, he was not letting that get him down."

Harbaugh predicted that Bateman's performance in the Dolphins game would be a "prelude to what's coming."

It still bothers Bateman that nobody has seen his full potential, whether it's because of injuries, lack of opportunities or other circumstances. There would be no better time than now for Bateman to show it as Baltimore is readying for a potential Super Bowl run.

But Bateman has made it to this point of the season by not getting ahead of himself and not worrying about things he can't control. He says a prayer to his late grandmother every day, asking her to watch over him. He paints his fingernails black to honor his late cousin, who was a burgeoning musician.

He still thinks about everything he's been through, but not without acknowledging how far he's come.

"I feel incredibly better, physically, as well as mentally," Bateman said. "To be here today, to be able to physically play, to know that things mentally are good, all is well. I'm just letting the chips fall where they fall."

Cover Story: Odell Beckham Jr. Wants His Son To Watch Him Shine

Odell Beckham Jr. has fame, fortune, and a Super Bowl ring. But being a father has given him new motivation to produce an electrifying season.

BALTIMORERAVENS.COM | **SEPTEMBER 2, 2023** | CLIFF BROWN

Being recognized wherever you go, front row seats at midcourt and hanging with A-list celebrities is the norm for Odell Beckham Jr. However, since his son Zydner entered the world, being a father for the first time has given Beckham a deep joy that fame, fortune and athletic achievement can't touch.

"Being a father has definitely settled him," said Beckham's mother, Heather Van Norman. "Zydner is like his light. He's always loved children. But being with Zydner brings out all the goodness in Odell. It's really fun to watch."

Entering his much-anticipated first season with the Ravens, Beckham hasn't played a game since his girlfriend, Lauren Wood, gave birth to Zydner 18 months ago, just four days after Beckham tore his ACL playing for the Rams in Super Bowl LVI.

During Beckham's long layoff from the NFL, it has taken tremendous physical effort through rehab and training to return his chiseled body to the world-class athletic level he expects. Beckham's career has been filled with emotional peaks and valleys and he has already decided that he doesn't want Zydner to play football.

However, before he leaves the game, Beckham wants Zydner to know that his daddy is still one of the baddest wide receivers who ever played. For Beckham, that's a big part of what's going on this year. He's doing it for himself. He's doing it for the Ravens. And a piece of his heart is doing it for Zydner, even though he's still too young to comprehend everything that's going on.

"I have a son now, I have a legacy," Beckham said. "He's impacted me in ways as a man, and as a person, that I could've never imagined. I just know I'm going to make him proud."

'You Don't Lose Route Running'

Zydner doesn't know about his father's five 1,000-yard seasons, his spectacular catches, his precise route-running that can make opposing cornerbacks take a knee. Major injuries have stolen a significant part of Beckham's career – including a fractured ankle in 2017 and a torn ACL in 2020.

However, Beckham feels all the way back at age 30, and it has looked that way during training camp, where Beckham has chemistry with Lamar Jackson that will be crucial to Baltimore's offense.

New Ravens Offensive Coordinator Todd Monken coached Beckham in 2019 as coordinator with the Browns and is thrilled they are reunited. Could Monken tell with his naked eye that Beckham is coming off knee surgery if he didn't know it?

"No, you can't tell," Monken said. "And you don't lose craftiness. You may lose a little bit of top-end speed, as you get older, but you don't lose route-running."

"He definitely sees the game, processes it. He's a very astute football player. He sees coverages. He sets defenders up. He has elite body control. Once he knows how he wants to run a route, he's got the advantage."

'Odell Is One of Those Guys'

The last time Beckham played an NFL game, he was in the zone, giving the Bengals fits on the game's biggest stage. He scored the first touchdown in Super Bowl LVI on a 17-yard pass from Matthew Stafford and made a catch for 35 yards in the second quarter that led to another touchdown drive.

Beckham may have been the MVP of that Super Bowl if not for the devastating second-quarter knee injury. Former Ravens safety Eric Weddle was Beckham's teammate on that Super Bowl-winning Rams team, and moments before kickoff, Weddle and Beckham shared a special moment on the sideline that exemplified how much respect Weddle has for Beckham as a player and person.

Weddle believes Beckham will be a great fit in the Ravens' locker room, even with his superstar aura. He has unique physical gifts, including enormous hands that enable him to snare a football like it's a sponge. Weddle wishes people would pay less attention to Beckham's celebrity, and more attention to his devotion to his craft.

"Odell is a perfect example of perception versus reality," Weddle said. "He's full of personality, energy and charisma. He's one of the hardest-working guys on the practice field that I've ever been involved with. The great players in the league love to practice and compete. That's what separates guys in my opinion. The great ones love to grind."

"It's a lot like when Steve Smith came to the Ravens. When you bring in a vet that's a high-level, talented dude that can win one-on-one matchups at any moment, it's calming to the quarterback. If you get the coverage you want, you know where you're going with the ball. There is no thinking at that point. That's the difference between a bona fide star and other guys."

"Everyone's good in the league, I'm not disrespecting anyone. But schematically, there are certain guys that you have to do special things for. That's just reality. Odell is one of those guys. I know he hasn't played in a minute, and he's still got to prove it. But what a great place to do that, in a great organization, with Lamar and a Pro Bowl tight end in Mark Andrews and other weapons. I can't wait to see what he does."

The Ravens Made Him Feel Wanted

Beckham's return to the NFL is the kind of script that seems suited for Hollywood or New York, but it will play out in Baltimore and Beckham is thrilled with his decision to sign with the Ravens in March.

The chance to team with Jackson is just one factor that drew Beckham to Baltimore. He was strongly considering signing with the Jets, returning to the city where he began his career with the Giants. But after meeting with General Manager Eric DeCosta and Head Coach John Harbaugh at the League Meetings in Phoenix, Beckham began feeling that Baltimore was the right fit. That belief was reinforced during phone conversations with Owner Steve Bisciotti.

"My initial reaction when I heard Baltimore was interested was like, 'No way,'" Beckham said. "I've gone against Baltimore many times. I don't want to say there was beef, but it was definitely, 'You want to kick that team's ass.'

"But they won me over quickly. Other places, it kind of felt like 'We would love to have you.' Of course, they would. But it wasn't like, 'We see you as a guy who could make a difference here.' Coming back to New York (Jets) would've been cool. I know it would've been less money, but I can make money off the field, I know what New York brings. But it just didn't feel like, 'We absolutely want you here.' That's the feeling I got from this place. I was just happy I was able to listen to them and to God."

Would Beckham have chosen the Ravens over playing for New York when he was much younger?

"I doubt it," Beckham said. "But that's just life. Maturity. Experience. Things that happen to you. Either you humble yourself, or life's going to humble you. And in my life, I've been humbled. Those lessons have made me the man I am today."

"Everyone thinks it's the money I got from the Ravens. I could play for \$1 million. It doesn't impact my mindset. If I drop a pass, I'm going to be pissed the same way I'd be if I made \$40 million. But the Ravens showed they valued me. Go where you're celebrated, not where you're tolerated."

Odell-Lamar Connection is Key

How Beckham and Jackson click both on the field and as teammates will be a major storyline during the season, and Beckham has nothing but high praise for his new quarterback. He sees many similarities between them – highly competitive and constantly under the microscope.

Beckham has great respect for Jackson and feels their bond getting stronger every day. He reflected on a night this spring when they had dinner together in South Florida after Beckham had signed his contract but Jackson had not yet agreed to his five-year contract extension.

"He hadn't signed yet, but we were sitting there talking about the things we wanted to do," Beckham said. "He's a really good man. I'm sure he's more quiet with the media, but he's hilarious, and he loves ball, and he loves winning. He wants to win a championship. You can see it written all over him, the sheer determination to be great."

"I know we haven't played a game yet, but I can just see great things, knowing it's going to take a lot of hard work. I have to put myself in a position where he can trust me, and I embrace that challenge. I want him to know he can rely on me. That's very big for me."

The Spotlight Found Him

Whatever Beckham does this season will draw attention. "The Catch" skyrocketed his fame, turning him into what Jackson often calls, "a household name".

Beckham doesn't hide that he's an entertainer who loves playing to the crowd. When kids screamed "Odell" every day at training camp, he smiled and waved, making their day by acknowledging them. When music blares over the loudspeaker at practice, he often danced.

That's Beckham being himself, and his charisma would be difficult to turn off even if he wanted to. He has learned to deal with the perks and pitfalls of being one of the world's most recognizable athletes.

"It's a blessing and a curse," Beckham said. "I would love to go into CVS and get some sour patch straws and not have anyone know me, but that's probably not happening. Now that (Tom) Brady's gone, there's probably nobody in the NFL that's more recognizable than I am. That came with a lot of hard work. It's a blessing to be able to go anywhere and be recognized, but with it comes major responsibility. I can't do everything that anyone else does. I've got to move accordingly."

Beckham had a typical whirlwind offseason – courtside at numerous NBA playoff games, Kylie Minogue's birthday party in Monaco, Michael Rubin's White Party in the Hamptons, DJ Khaled's Golf Event in Miami to name a few stops. His fame allows him to go places you can't and meet people you won't. He's such a celebrity that celebrities want to meet him.

But don't get it twisted. Wherever he was during the offseason, Beckham was working and keeping himself in tip-top shape. He's content knowing that he doesn't cheat his dedication, and people who know him best swear by his work ethic, sincerity and devotion to his family and friends.

"Believe or not, Odell was a soft-spoken guy in high school," said Nelson Stewart, longtime head coach at Isidore Newman (New Orleans) High School where Beckham played. "He didn't seek out the spotlight. He hated doing interviews. He liked to just be a guy in the locker room. Everybody liked him. I feel like the spotlight found him, he didn't chase it.

"Did I see the celebrity part coming? No. But there's just no half-speed with Odell. Once he wants to do something, he's all in. If he wants to go to Europe, he'll do it. Fashion, tattoos, world travel, you name it. That's part of the magic of him. But I'm so proud of him. He's earned everything he's gotten."

Ready for the Show

The Ravens have had many big personalities in their history who have flourished, and Van Norman senses that her son is extremely happy with his new surroundings and teammates. Finding a comfort zone in Baltimore has come quickly.

"He's never wanted to be put in a box," Van Norman said. "He doesn't want to be generalized. He appreciates being unique and people respecting that.

"He's doing something that he loves to do and has loved for so long. I asked him often after he hurt his knee this last time: 'What do you want to do? You don't have to play football.' But he really wanted to come back. He's really still in love with football and wants to do it in Baltimore."

Beckham isn't sure how much longer he wants to play, but when healthy he has put up Hall of Fame-type numbers. He ranked No. 1 in NFL history in yards per game (92.9) through the first 62 games of his career.

But at this stage, Beckham sees a bigger role than just making plays. He wants to be a mentor to young teammates such as rookie Zay Flowers, Rashod Bateman and Devin Duvernay, showing them what it takes to be a great receiver. Monken can already see Beckham's influence paying off in meetings and on the field.

"Those guys may listen to me, but they want to be like him," Monken said. "He leads them by example."

Beckham wants to do the same for Zydne. When his son attended the first practice of training camp, Beckham posted the visit on Instagram and wrote about how much it meant to have his son there.

Beckham is at peace, but he's driven. Living in Phoenix will make it tough for Zydne to make every game, but Beckham said he will attend as many as possible. Being a father, playing for the Ravens, being teammates with Jackson feels right. Healthy, happy and hungry, Beckham plans to show the world he's still got "it," with a front row seat reserved for Zydne.

"Sure, there's a little Revenge Tour feeling I have coming into this year," Beckham said. "I wish I could've been healthy my whole career, to show people I was one of the best to have ever done it. Maybe that wasn't in God's plan, but I'm just rocking with this and seeing what He's got for me.

"Zydne may not remember, but I want to make new memories for us. I don't want him to just hear stories about his father. I want him to see what his pops does, know that his pops works hard. I'm going to be playing for far more than just myself."

'I Thought It Was Over': Behind Odell Beckham Jr.'s Unlikely Comeback With The Ravens

THE ATHLETIC | JULY 24, 2023 | DAN POMPEI

Tears of joy, tears of devastation.

Tears streamed down the cheeks of Odell Beckham Jr.

It was the second quarter of Super Bowl LVI against Cincinnati, and Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford had just thrown him a pass on a shallow crosser. The ball hit Beckham's hands and bounced back toward the quarterback, a brick off a rim, and the wide receiver dropped to the ground without being touched. He grabbed his left knee.

Beckham knew right away. He couldn't play anymore. Not that February night in 2022, maybe not ever. One season prior, he had torn the ACL in the same knee, and he remembered what it felt like.

And so the tears flowed as he lay on the field.

He was already damaged goods. In March 2019, the Giants traded him, seven months after making him the highest-paid wide receiver in history with a \$95 million contract extension. Just over a year and a half later, he was sacked in the middle of the season by the Browns after a failure to connect with quarterback Baker Mayfield. That same week, the Rams signed him to a three-month contract.

Shortly after, team physician Neal ElAttrache told him he needed to see him. Beckham had breezed through rehab after his ACL surgery in 2020. The knee, however, never felt quite right.

ElAttrache told him why. His physical exam showed the surgery had not repaired anything. There was no ACL holding his knee together. The suggestion was to stop playing and have a second surgery.

Beckham looked ElAttrache up and down.

"There's no way I've been through everything I've been through and came here just to have surgery," he told him.

Only a select few on the team — Stafford, Cooper Kupp, Von Miller and Jalen Ramsey — would know. Beckham didn't make it public until the following summer.

Every week, the doctor asked him how he was staying on the field. After the NFC Championship Game, Beckham told Kupp he was relieved there was only one more game because he didn't think his knee would hold up for two.

During pregame warmups before the biggest game of his life, Beckham was in a zone. "When the ball was coming at me, I could see the dots on the ball and the word 'Wilson,'" he says. "That's how laser-focused I was."

It would be, he was certain, the best game of his career, his redemptive performance.

The first points of the game were scored by Beckham when he turned around and reached over the head of Bengals cornerback Mike Hilton, then held on as Hilton swatted between Beckham's arms.

Then, a moonwalk. Finally, he tossed his gloves into the stands.

Vintage Odell, all of it.

Beckham had a 35-yard reception that led to another touchdown. While watching the game on television, Ravens general manager Eric DeCosta thought Beckham was the best player on the field.

Then came the injury.

After the Rams won 23-20, Beckham wore the champion's hat and T-shirt like his teammates. He smiled and hugged. But he cried, too. Cried hard. The feelings were powerful and confusing, unlike any he had ever experienced.

He thought he would be the Super Bowl hero and be rewarded with a contract that would enable him to finish his career in Los Angeles, the city for someone like him.

Now? He had just played for his third team in four years, had missed 25 games with injuries in five years and would be 30 years old before he could play again.

So many thoughts.

History, destiny, legacy.

His secret truth is he was contemplating retirement.

As the tears flowed, his mother, Heather Norman, looked him in his glassy eyes.

“What do you want to do?” she asked him after the game. “If you fall out of love with football, you’re done. You won’t get a good rehab. You have to love it. If you don’t want to play, so be it. No one says you have to play. It’s up to you.”

Odell Beckham Jr. had a decision to make.

On a Sunday night in November 2014, Beckham maneuvered around Cowboys cornerback Brandon Carr so smoothly that if Carr had a pocket, Beckham could have picked it. He bent backward as easily as a pool noodle, and with his right arm telescoping out far behind him, he used three fingers — that’s all he needed — three fingers that must have been as sticky as a Gecko’s foot.

“The Catch” made Beckham something more than a football player, more famous than his accomplishments suggested he should be.

He became “Odell.”

“Celebrity, stardom, I mean, it happened,” Beckham says. “It was about the timing, the place, the moment. And that moment changed my life forever and put me in these situations to where I’m like, good for life. Any catch that happens still to this day, they bring it up, which is cool, great and a blessing. It was cemented in time. It’s crazy.”

How else can 17.2 million Instagram followers be explained? That’s 11.6 million more than Patrick Mahomes, the second-most followed NFL player has, and 3.3 million more than recently retired Tom Brady.

Drake didn’t just sing about him; he asked him to house-sit. Justin Bieber, various Kardashians, Conor McGregor and DJ Khaled have been in his circle. In recent months, he attended the Monaco Grand Prix, Kylie Minogue’s birthday bash and Michael Rubin’s White Party.

It’s all about The Catch. To people who don’t really know him, Beckham is The Catch.

There were 530 other catches and more receiving yards in his first 62 games than any other player over an equal span in the history of the game. Eli Manning once said he was the most gifted teammate he had known in 19 seasons.

But the other catches and yards often aren’t talked about as much as the fact that Beckham was the guy in the middle of the infamous party boat that some blamed for the Giants’ 2017 playoff loss.

Or that he is the one who wore a \$200,000 watch during a game. And a \$2.2 million watch for a pregame warmup. He is known as the player who punched a water cooler, a kicking net and a wall. And the originator of the peeing dog touchdown celebration, as well as the driver of a blood orange-colored Rolls-Royce Cullinan with a hood ornament of The Catch.

Beckham is the athlete who made his body into a human version of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, with tattoos of The Creation of Adam, Jesus, a stairway to heaven, Martin Luther King, Mike Tyson biting Evander Holyfield’s ear, Michael Jackson, former President Barack Obama, the Statue of Liberty, Bob Marley, an ape from “Planet of the Apes,” and enough animals to fill a zoo — a lion, lioness, tiger, elephant, hippo, gorilla, zebra, giraffe, snake, shark, goat and owls.

Beckham is judged by Twitter fire bombers, “First Take” screamers, head-shaking scolds and almost anyone with a podium.

It is tempting to judge. Or misjudge.

“People,” Beckham says, “think I’m an a–hole.”

They think he’s Diana Ross elbowing in front of the Supremes.

Nike came out with an Odell Beckham T-shirt that read “So Misunderstood.” “Misunderstood” also is the word his former Rams teammate Ramsey used to describe him in 2021.

“I love the guy,” says Andrew Whitworth, who played with Beckham on the Rams. “The idea of him being a bad teammate couldn’t be crazier. You see so many kids now that are stressed and wear themselves out with such little, minute things. He loves what he does and brings an energy and vibe where he makes everybody laugh and try hard.”

Rams coach Sean McVay says Beckham brought instant swagger and joy to his team.

“He had a great feel for when we needed some humor and laughter, but also when to lock in and go to work,” he says. “I really can’t say enough about how much I enjoyed working with him. Love Odell, and I am really grateful for our time together.”

Whitworth goes so far as to say the Rams would not have won the Super Bowl without him.

“When you saw him do things that were otherworldly when it comes to athleticism, it really brought a confidence to our group,” he says.

There is a magnetism to Beckham, maybe borne of his celebrity, but enhanced by authenticity and warmth.

He is known to be a giver, having bestowed entire teams with king-sized mattresses, cleats and Beats.

"If anyone doesn't know him, he's a people person," says Ravens offensive coordinator Todd Monken, who was Beckham's offensive coordinator in Cleveland in 2019. "He wants to be around people. He loves to help. He loves for you to help him. He loves to be gracious and thank you."

The Catch is nearly nine years old, which, in NFL time, might as well be 90.

So much has changed. The quarterbacks that day were Manning, now cracking jokes on Monday nights, and Tony Romo, who is preparing for his seventh season as CBS' lead NFL analyst.

Beckham is a father now. Four days after the Super Bowl victory, his girlfriend, Lauren Wood, gave birth to a boy, Zydin.

Five days after that, Beckham had his ACL and meniscus repaired.

The emotions of Super Bowl Sunday barely had subsided, and now, more waves, higher and harder.

It was one thing for a grown man to ask his mother to help him go to the bathroom. It was another to ask her to comfort his crying baby for him.

"I couldn't hold him, cradle him or love on him the way I wanted to," he says. "It was a lot. It was hard."

What came next, he says, were dark days — literal dark days when he didn't want to see light, talk or be spoken to. His mom remembers opening blinds to try to change the mood.

At one point, he slept for the better part of two days. "I went through a lot the last couple of years, and I thought it was over," he says. "I didn't want to get back up on the horse and do the same song and dance all over again."

In the early stages, he wasn't getting much satisfaction from rehab.

"Some days are like, we get a gold star for straightening out the knee," Norman says. "But he's a high achiever, so he wants huge milestones, like, 'I don't want to straighten my leg, I want to run.'"

She kept a football beside him and encouraged him to feel and think about it.

Beckham loved Los Angeles, loved McVay ("A great man," he calls him), and loved being a Ram.

In the offseason after the Super Bowl, he tried to talk Miller into re-signing with the team. He helped design the team's Super Bowl rings, suggesting that they pay tribute to SoFi Stadium, which they did. When McVay was married in June, Beckham crashed the party. He was there when they unveiled the championship banner before the opening game of 2022. The Rams kept his locker intact for that entire season.

Both sides kept acting as if he would be a Ram again. But the Rams didn't have the cap space, and he didn't have the knee.

When he left Los Angeles for Arizona, where he trained, it was a difficult day. "I remember when we got him in the vehicle," Norman says. "It was really, really hard, the unknown."

Eventually, the knee and his spirits came around.

By the fall, interested teams started inquiring. Ravens coach John Harbaugh made a personal pitch. The Chiefs, Cowboys, Giants and Bills reached out.

What if he could latch on to a contender for a playoff run and stay with that team in 2023? Intriguing.

But Beckham needed a break. He decided to sit out the season.

In the spring, the Ravens, Bills, Chiefs, Cowboys and Giants had not backed off. And the Jets had joined the chase. There were incentive-heavy offers and a three-year offer for a lower-than-he-wanted average.

Beckham waited. He didn't need to play. A tattoo written across his impossibly large, 10-inch left hand reads, "KNOW YOUR WORTH." It forms a cross with the words "GOD CREATED YOU DIFFERENT." The last word stretches to his ring finger, which takes a size 12 or 13 ring, he says.

During the NFL owners' meetings, he created a stir by showing up in the lobby of the Arizona Biltmore Hotel. The Ravens seized the opportunity and met with him in a conference room. For about an hour, DeCosta, executive vice president Ozzie Newsome and Harbaugh sat with Beckham. But they didn't talk much about football or his knee. They spoke of his hopes and dreams, and being a father.

Remembering that Beckham signed with the Rams instead of the Chiefs, 49ers, Packers or Patriots in 2021 because he said they made him feel wanted, Ravens owner Stephen Bisciotti made the unusual decision to involve himself, calling Beckham multiple times. Quarterback Lamar Jackson was trying to get a new contract of his own at the time, and he also spoke with Beckham about teaming up.

Beckham still had to answer his mother's question. "What do you want to do?"

Beckham could have spent the rest of his life golfing, beaching, daddying and being Odell.

"It wasn't like I felt I had to prove something to anybody else," he says. "I know who I am. I know what I'm capable of. I'm secure with myself and my life. But it's more about my people, for my son to be inspired. If he sees his dad work hard, maybe he will want to work hard at something and give it a go at whatever."

At one point, Beckham thought he would surpass career records set by Jerry Rice. Then came the injuries and the circumstances beyond his famous reach. "That will always be something I have to live with, part of my story, which sucks," he says.

He still could shape the story's ending, but he did not envision doing it with a black bird on his helmet.

"If I'm honest, I was resistant," he says. "There were other places I wanted to go. I wasn't necessarily a Ravens fan because the Ravens always whipped my ass."

The Ravens kept making him feel wanted. They made Beckham an offer unlike any other team — one year, \$15 million.

They were willing to pay Beckham more because they saw value beyond receptions and yards. The Ravens knew what he did for the Rams. They thought he could be a force multiplier in games, and, thanks to The Catch, he could put points on a team's financial scoreboard through social media bumps and jersey sales.

Beckham still needed more to convince him, though.

Five years ago, Beckham made his way through the reeds growing on the banks of the Jordan River and into the brown, murky water to be christened where John the Baptist dunked Jesus Christ some 2,000 years ago.

"I wanted to be close to where Jesus was, and I could feel it running down my spine in my spirit and my soul," he says. "It was amazing."

The faith that brought him to Jerusalem would bring him to another destination this spring.

He prayed about if, and he prayed about where. That's how he made his decision.

"It's that voice you hear in your head, the feel in your gut, kind of an intuition," he says. "Really, that's God's voice. I started hearing God louder than my resistance. That's God protecting you. The signs were showing me this is the right path."

The voice reminded him the Ravens were a contender and a premier organization. It made him dream about what he and Jackson could accomplish together. The voice told him to think about how he clicked with Harbaugh and enjoyed playing for Monken, who became the Ravens' offensive coordinator in February.

A one-year contract wasn't what he was looking for but probably what he needed.

"I'm thinking like this is my last year," Beckham says. "I'm going to give it my all this year. And then if something happens after that, we can go from there."

For the first time, he is being managed by his mother, who had been a Division I track coach for nearly her son's entire life. Her involvement comforts him, as does the presence of Zydner, who came to Baltimore for Ravens minicamp in June.

That's when a pass was thrown over Beckham's head. He arched his spine and reached backward and brought it in with three fingertips — just three.

It was the kind of play that invigorates.

"That was something I've done for a long time," he says of the offseason catch that caused a social media stir. "It's engraved in me."

By then, the answer to his mother's question could not be more evident.

Odell Beckham Jr. wants to play football.

Jadeveon Clowney's Fight To Finish

BALTIMORERAVENS.COM | JANUARY 4, 2024 | RYAN MINK

When Jadeveon Clowney was picked No. 1 overall in the 2014 draft, he fulfilled a dream and bought his mother a 50,000 square foot house on 12 acres of land in their home state of South Carolina. A few months later, he called her with a nightmare.

"We can't spend no more money," he told her.

Clowney was slated to be the NFL's next great defender – a freakishly-gifted athlete whose helmet-popping college hit on an unfortunate Michigan running back is still a highlight etched into every football fan's brain.

But Clowney thought his career might never get off the runway. A knee injury in his very first NFL game required microfracture surgery, a brutal procedure that has been cited with ending, or rapidly hastening the end of, numerous careers. Doctors told Clowney he had a 50/50 shot at returning to his previous dominant form.

More than nine years later, Clowney is having arguably his best season at 30 years old as a Baltimore Raven. At the top of Clowney's goals for the season was to play all 17 games, to get a full season to fulfill what he's capable of when healthy. On Saturday against the Steelers, he'll check that box.

"Here we are; 17 games, I made it. Thank God," Clowney said, raising prayer hands and his eyes to the ceiling of the Ravens locker room Wednesday. "I'm just happy to be here. It could have been over a long time ago."

'WE WERE REALLY SCARED'

The 2014 NFL Draft was absolutely stacked. Odell Beckham Jr., Aaron Donald, Khalil Mack, Mike Evans, and more star players were taken in the first round that year.

Before any of them were picked, the Houston Texans selected Clowney at the top. The expectations were massive for a player who had just turned 21 years old two months earlier. Clowney had a great training camp that summer, "tearing everybody up," in his own words.

Then, on the 23rd snap of his first NFL game, Clowney stepped in a "hole" in the turf of Houston's NRG Stadium and his knee gave out. It was non-contact and he had never suffered a major injury playing football before. That snap altered Clowney and his career forever.

Clowney had surgery to repair a torn meniscus and missed the next six games. He returned to play in three games but there was a bigger problem. In December, Clowney underwent microfracture surgery, which entails having small holes drilled into the bone near torn knee cartilage to stimulate blood flow to the injured area and help with recovery.

The results have been hit or miss for professional athletes. For example, Greg Oden, the No. 1-overall pick of the NBA's Portland Trailblazers in 2007, had microfracture knee surgery during his rookie season and he sat out more seasons (four) than he played (three) before an early retirement at 26 years old. Clowney was in danger of being next.

Clowney wasn't allowed to put any weight on his right knee for about two months. He required 24-hour assistance, so his mother, Josenna Clowney, moved back in with him. She and three nurses took care of him around the clock.

"We were really scared," Josenna said. "We didn't know whether his career was going to be over. It was devastating. We didn't know what was going to happen."

Jadeveon was scared too, but he didn't want his mother to worry. He told her he was going to get back out on the field. Deep down, he wasn't so sure.

"That was the first time in my life I had to face real adversity," Clowney said. "My whole life growing up, I was good at football – not just good, great. Just beating people.

"When I got off the couch, I'm like, 'I'm different now.' My body felt different. I had to become a new Jadeveon Clowney. That guy they drafted was gone the day I got hurt."

'THE VIOLENCE NEVER CHANGED'

Clowney was back on the field for the start of the 2015 season, but still wasn't right. His knee swelled up after every game, bothering him throughout the following week. Every week was a battle to feel good enough to play.

He flew around the country consulting different medical professionals, taking blood tests, doing anything he could to try to manage the pain. The biggest tangible change was his weight.

Clowney was a burly 270-275 pound defensive end at South Carolina. After the surgery, he would feel pain in his knee any time he was over 260. Clowney slimmed down to about 250-255. He looked more like a basketball player than the defensive end who blew up that Michigan running back.

Clowney's game was built on power. Now he knew he had to add more moves and more quickness to his game. The changes worked, as he put together three straight Pro Bowl seasons as a Texan from 2016-2018, with 24.5 sacks during that span.

Anthony Weaver, the Ravens' assistant head coach/defensive line coach, was the Texans' defensive line coach at the time, and he was quite familiar with Clowney's physical battle. Weaver, a Ravens second-round pick in 2002 who spent four seasons playing in Baltimore and three in Houston, saw his career end prematurely with microfracture knee surgery in 2008.

"If you watched Jadeveon his rookie year, the size of his legs and lower torso were completely different. There was an aspect of his game that needed to change. But the violence that he played with never changed," Weaver said.

"There are some people that when you come to the point of contact, they brace. Jadeveon has no governor. He runs through contact."

Weaver said much of the strategy was body maintenance throughout the week, not putting too much strain on Clowney. Weaver would tell his bosses they needed to be careful with him.

"He just went through 60 car wrecks when he runs a 4.5," Weaver would say.

That violence has made it tougher for Clowney to stay healthy. How he plays the game isn't good for him, but it's the only way he knows how. He just added more tricks to his arsenal.

Ravens Outside Linebackers Coach Chuck Smith, who was a longtime personal pass rush coach before joining Baltimore's staff, "stalked" Clowney all the way back to when he was in college. He wanted to work with somebody that big and talented for a long, long time but was getting nowhere.

Clowney called Smith out of the blue in 2020. Clowney had one of his most challenging years with the Tennessee Titans when he had zero sacks and his knee landed him on injured reserve midway through the year. The following season, this time with the Cleveland Browns, he had a resurgent season with nine sacks.

"He plays so hard he ends up hurting himself. He's so reckless and so violent," Smith said. "I always knew if you could teach this cat the moves, get him one skilled move with his power, he's going to kill it."

'A REJUVINATED ATHLETE'

When Clowney was younger, he didn't really take football seriously. It was something he did because it was fun and he was really good at it. The knee injury changed that.

"If you want to play the game you love, you better take this thing seriously," Clowney told himself. "My work ethic shot through the roof – shot through the roof. I had the mindset that I'm just going to outwork people. That helped me become more of a pro."

That work ethic carried Clowney throughout his career, and he took it to another level in recent years as more injuries, and his age, kept piling up.

In March of 2021, Clowney began training with Ben Fairchild at Fairchild Sports Performance in Houston. He also began working with Toko Nguyen, a physical therapist and partner of Fairchild, at the Institute for Athlete Regeneration. Fairchild's specialty is tailored workouts for athletes such as Clowney, and his clients include J.J. Watt. The workout focused on strengthening Clowney's quads in particular, to take stress of his knee.

The daily regimen this summer, before signing with the Ravens in mid-August, was a 9 a.m. workout, Monday-Friday, followed by Pilates, and then a massage or IV treatment. On Saturdays, they would often head to the track for speed training. Fairchild said Clowney's physical output and health this year has been several years in the making.

"From an output perspective, in no way is he over the hill. In fact, I think he's nearing his prime," Fairchild said. "He's been so beat up from Game 1 of his rookie year and from there it was a cascade of injuries, one after another. Without being able to set aside the time and get into an appropriate program for what his body needs, he didn't really have a chance."

"With chronological age, we attach meaning to being 30 years old in the traditional sense. But I think in his case, I think you're going to find a rejuvenated athlete on the back half of his career. When we look back, we may see more statistical prowess than we saw on the first half of his career."

Over the past two years, Clowney said his knee pain has "kind of faded."

"Playing against people wasn't the hardest thing for me. My hardest thing was walking into that game, how would my body be? I always thought if I walked into a game not thinking about my knee, I would be OK," Clowney said. "I got to that point the last year or two. This year has been great. I love this game and I wouldn't trade it in for the world. As long as my body is feeling good, I would play forever if I could."

'I SHOULD BE LEADING THE LEAGUE!'

The Ravens have done a good job managing Clowney's snap counts. Even though he's played in every game, he's played just 57% of the defensive snaps. That's the lowest percentage since his rookie year.

It's been all about effectiveness, and Clowney has had plenty of that.

He already has a career-high 69 pressures, five more than his Pro Bowl 2017 season. According to ESPN analytics, Clowney has the fifth-best pass rush win rate among all NFL edge rushers, only trailing the Cowboys' Micah Parsons, Browns' Myles Garrett, Texans' Will Anderson, and Steelers' T.J. Watt.

Clowney ranks among the best pass rushers in the game, right where everyone imagined him a decade ago.

He hasn't made it a big thing, but Clowney has beaten all four of his previous teams this season – the Texans, Seahawks, Titans and Browns. He also lost to the Browns, but could get another shot at them in the playoffs.

The only flaw Clowney sees in his season is the sack total, which sits at 8.5. He badly wants double digits for the first time in his career and will have one more chance to do so against the Steelers, though it remains to be seen how much key veterans such as him will play. Clowney also reportedly would earn a \$750,000 bonus if he gets at least a half sack in the regular-season finale.

Countless sacks have slipped through Clowney's fingers this season. Well, actually, he's kept count and can run through them with ease – two against Houston, two against Cleveland, one against Seattle, two against San Francisco (and there's more).

Watt and Bengals defensive end Trey Hendrickson lead the league with 17 sacks. Nobody finishes all their sacks, but Clowney has a legitimate case that he could've been right up there considering all the pressure he's gotten.

"I should be leading the league," said Clowney, who was named as one of ESPN's biggest Pro Bowl snubs.

Baltimore's defense is top in the league, and over the team's six-game winning streak, Clowney has been the Ravens' best defender, per Pro Football Focus.

As the Ravens enter the playoffs, Clowney will be a huge part of how far they go. It isn't his first playoff trip; he went twice with the Texans (2016 & 2018) and once with Seattle (2019), but he's looking for his first ring.

Now that he's checked off 17 games and proven what he can do when healthy for a full year, Clowney has a new goal. His 31st birthday is three days after Super Bowl LVIII in Las Vegas.

"My hard work is finally paying off and I'm happy to be here in Baltimore doing it right now," Clowney said. "I'm just glad to be here, 30 years old, Year 10, doing the things I still love to do and achieving goals I set up for myself.

"I'm excited to go to a Super Bowl and looking forward to this opportunity. I want to play my best football in January. I want to keep the ball rolling."

How Ravens Offensive Line Coach Joe D'Alessandris Coped With A Crushing Loss

THE ATHLETIC | NOVEMBER 22, 2023 | JEFF ZREBIEC

Joe D'Alessandris did what he's done for the past 45 years. He put his head down and worked. The Baltimore Ravens veteran offensive line coach knew no other way.

Teaching and molding young offensive linemen is his passion. During the 2022 season, it was also his escape. He poured over game film, digested game plans, led meetings and worked tirelessly with his "boys," often staying on the field to drill young linemen long after other Ravens players and coaches had gone inside. There was comfort in spending so much time with his players and seeing them develop.

Grief, though, was a constant companion. There were reminders on his phone in the form of pictures and Bible verses. There was a quiet downtown Baltimore condo to return to after a long day's work and the reality that the person who always listened and dispensed the best advice wasn't going to be there.

"I don't have that person to just talk to," D'Alessandris said. "I miss that."

Toni Mayfield D'Alessandris may not have been the reason her husband got into coaching, but she is one of the main reasons he's stuck with it for parts of five decades, a journey that has taken his family to football hotbeds like College Station, Texas, and Buffalo, N.Y., and non-traditional outposts like Homewood, Ala., and Ottawa, Canada.

Toni loved being the wife of a football coach and everything that entailed, from packing up the car and selling a home at a moment's notice to cheering on her husband's team from the stands. When she died on May 4, 2022, due to a rare form of Parkinson's disease, D'Alessandris lost his wife of 42 years, his most trusted confidant and biggest fan.

Ravens coach John Harbaugh, who hired D'Alessandris in 2017, likes to use the phrase, "The days are long, but the years are short." For D'Alessandris and his three adult-aged daughters, Anna, Kelly and Emily, it felt like time had stopped altogether.

"Getting through that first year, if you've ever lost somebody close to you, they are on your mind all of the time," said Anna Thomas, 39, the oldest of Joe and Toni's three daughters. "You replay everything in your head."

D'Alessandris and his daughters braced themselves for the one-year anniversary of Toni's death. When that day came, the overwhelming feeling of loss was joined by the exhilaration of familial gain.

"We went from being so anxious about the anniversary to elation that my daughter is having a little baby," D'Alessandris said. "Maybe the good Lord shined his light on us that way. That's how I look at it. We lost a life and he provided one exactly a year later, right back in our hands."

On May 4, Kelly Olsen, Joe and Toni's middle daughter, gave birth to a baby girl: Charlotte Lynn Olsen, Joe and Toni's fifth grandchild. Lynn was her late grandmother's middle name.

After a year of questioning why certain things happen, this was one thing that made sense.

"It was like, '(Mom) did this,'" said Emily, the youngest of the D'Alessandris sisters. "She gave us that blessing."

They met in sociology class at Western Carolina University. He was a football star. She was an accomplished athlete in her own right. Toni skied, played tennis and danced, once participating in the opening act of a Rockettes performance at Radio City Music Hall.

She was from the suburbs, having grown up in Hickory, N.C., a furniture town 60 miles northwest of Charlotte. He grew up in a Plan-11 neighborhood outside Pittsburgh in Aliquippa, Penn., once a steel industry hub. D'Alessandris' parents, like most of their neighbors, were descendants from Italy. They still spoke the language and lived the culture.

"I did talk like a city kid. I acted like a city kid," D'Alessandris said. "(Toni) polished me up a little bit. I needed that. I was a little tarnished."

D'Alessandris' father, Giuseppe, worked long days and sometimes nights at the steel mill, providing all he could for his young family. D'Alessandris worked at the mill during the summer with his father, but Giuseppe made clear that would not be his son's future. Giuseppe had a sharp mind and the hands of a surgeon. He could fix and build just about anything. Yet, he only had a seventh-grade education. His son needed to strive for better.

Growing up in a football-crazed area, D'Alessandris heard stories about kids who avoided factory or mill jobs by getting college scholarships. One such kid, a future NFL Hall of Famer by the name of Mike Ditka, was an altar boy at the church D'Alessandris attended.

D'Alessandris played football in the street or on a little patch of grass/dirt in the neighborhood that was known as "The Polo Grounds." As he got older, he went up to the high school and worked out with his cousin Willie Costanza, a linebacker on one of the University of

Minnesota Rose Bowl teams. When he didn't feel like training one afternoon, D'Alessandris asked his mother, Mirella, to tell Costanza that he wasn't coming. Costanza dragged D'Alessandris out of his parents' house and into their car.

"That was a lasting lesson," D'Alessandris said. "They were trying to teach me that you don't have a quitter attitude. You start something, you finish it and you learn how to do it."

He played guard at Western Carolina University and was a team MVP and captain. When his college football career ended, D'Alessandris sought opportunities to play more. He tried out for Marv Levy's Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League (CFL). When he didn't make the second cut, his college coach, Bob Waters, offered him a spot on his staff at Western Carolina. D'Alessandris was lukewarm about coaching. Within a few years, he was hooked.

So much so that D'Alessandris left his and Toni's wedding reception to find a pay phone. At a nearby gas station, he interviewed with Livingston University head coach Frank North for an offensive line coaching position. He got the job and the girl, but he had some explaining to do.

"I left for a little too long," D'Alessandris said sheepishly. "I came back in time for the cutting of the cake. I can just see it in Toni's eyes. She gets the cake in my mouth and she's trying to stuff it down my throat."

Affectionately known as Joe D., D'Alessandris has coached in high school, NCAA Division I and II, the CFL, the World League of American Football (WLAF) and, for 15 of the last 16 years, the NFL. The 69-year-old is a football lifer at his core.

He and his family moved so often that his daughters started pondering their next stop the second their father's team was assured of a losing season. Once while D'Alessandris was coaching at Samford University, Anna picked up the phone and a coach from Texas A&M was on the other end. Knowing what that meant, the D'Alessandris girls ran upstairs to their bedroom closets and immediately pulled out cowboy boots, overjoyed about moving to Texas.

"We didn't know any different," said Emily. "We loved that we moved around a lot. We got to live in so many different areas and understand different cultures. Living in College Station, Texas, and seeing the oil rigs and being next to cattle was different from our upbringing in Birmingham or Pittsburgh. We enjoyed it. He would take the job and months later, we would show up."

From 1992 to 1997, D'Alessandris went from the Birmingham Fire (WLAF) to Samford to Texas A&M to the Memphis Mad Dogs (CFL) to the University of Pittsburgh to Duke University. To D'Alessandris, it was the cost of establishing himself as a coach.

"I tried to get him everywhere I could. There was nobody I'd rather go to war with than Joe D.," said former NFL and college coach Chan Gailey, who worked with D'Alessandris at five stops. "There was no fluff. He's not a politician in any way. He's not a glad-hander. He's not a backstabber. What you see is what you get. He's a great football coach — fair, but tough. He worked their butts off, but these young men loved him."

ESPN NFL analyst Field Yates worked with D'Alessandris for two years in the Kansas City Chiefs' organization. D'Alessandris was the assistant offensive line coach and Yates was a scout and assistant to the head coach. Rarely does Yates remember a Chiefs practice where D'Alessandris wasn't the last coach on the field working with players.

"You could tell that in a game that has innumerable complexities you could draw up on a whiteboard, Joe D. knew that football players got better by playing football on a field," Yates said. "His passion for teaching was hard to match."

North, his boss at Livingston, sold D'Alessandris on the idea that the best way to build a winning program was to stockpile as many big linemen as possible and work hard to develop them. D'Alessandris loved teaching the fundamentals and was determined to not be outworked.

Albert DeFilippi, D'Alessandris' youth baseball coach, was an Italian man who spoke broken English. But he had a way of getting his point across. He ran two-hour practices and drilled the fundamentals over and over. D'Alessandris quickly realized just how much better his teams were than their opponents. Just about every year, DeFilippi's team of Italian kids was playing for a championship.

That's something D'Alessandris has never forgotten. He believes in repetition and attention to detail. If you don't do something right, you do it again.

"It took me a while to kind of figure him out as a person," said former Bills Pro Bowl center Eric Wood, who played three seasons under D'Alessandris in Buffalo. "He was grinding us into the ground. Nobody works a guy harder pre and post-practice in the developmental stage. But he was so smart and meticulous in how he approached every day. You give Joe a big body and somebody who wants to work and he's going to ingrain some technique in him."

Wood acknowledged that most of the "old-school" offensive line coaches have "washed out" of the NFL, but not D'Alessandris. He's as hard-driving as ever. He's constantly coaching, congratulating or cajoling his linemen. He doesn't let much go, either.

Whether it's the middle of training camp during a sultry Baltimore summer or a December regular-season practice, D'Alessandris is a hard guy to miss. He's the one in a short-sleeved black shirt, black shorts and black Nikes. He's the guy in a lineman's stance, observing and correcting.

“He’s as old school as it gets,” Ravens center Tyler Linderbaum said. “He’s always telling stories about working in the steel mills and stuff like that. I don’t know if there’s any other offensive line coach in the country that can talk about working the night shift at the steel mill.”

The picture is saved on D’Alessandris’ cellphone. There is Toni, 61 years young, her shoulder nearly touching the ground as she skis on a slalom course. She is graceful and fearless. Yet, during the fall of 2016, she no longer felt like herself. It wasn’t one thing that was bothering her. It was more a general malaise, a sense that something wasn’t quite right.

She saw neurologists, cardiologists and ear and nose doctors. There were no definitive answers until Toni went to a neurologist at Emory University Hospital in March 2016. It took 20 minutes for the specialist to examine Toni and say, “You have Parkinson’s.”

“We looked at everything,” D’Alessandris said. “Was it caused by a head injury? Was it living under electrical lines? Did she drink well water with the minerals and lead? All these things that the neurologists ask you, she didn’t have any of that. And the doctor said, ‘Toni, I hate to tell you this, sometimes it’s just called s— luck.’”

Toni lost some dexterity in her fingers, but she otherwise felt OK. The way to combat the disease was through exercise, and she never needed an excuse to be active. She did boxing workouts at a club that had a program for Parkinson’s patients. Sparring with objects helped from an exercise standpoint, but knowing how many combinations to throw and where to throw them kept the mind engaged, too. Doctors marveled at the progress she was making.

A few months before Toni’s diagnosis, D’Alessandris was let go by the San Diego Chargers after two seasons coaching their offensive line. When 2017 arrived, he was itching to get back in the game. He, too, needed to stay sharp and keep his mind occupied. Truth be told, a job with good benefits was necessary at a time like this.

The Ravens had an opening after offensive line coach Juan Castillo left for Buffalo. On D’Alessandris’ behalf, Wood put in a call to Greg Roman, his former Bills offensive coordinator who had just joined Harbaugh’s staff in Baltimore. Roman helped D’Alessandris get an interview — D’Alessandris did the rest. He felt the job was a great fit, working for a coach like Harbaugh and a blue-collar organization that emphasized winning in the trenches.

He didn’t yet realize how fortunate he and his family were that the job came open when it did.

Two months after he started in Baltimore, Toni visited another specialist at Emory. She wanted to have as much information about her condition as possible.

“The doctor looked at her, looked at some of her testing and he said, ‘I hate to tell you this, but you have something worse than Parkinson’s. You have MSA-P, and that’s multiple system atrophy Parkinson’s,’” D’Alessandris said. “Multiple system atrophy means that different parts of this disease are attacking your brain, and wherever the protein doesn’t go into your brain, those neurons begin to die and parts of your body begin to fail.”

The harsh reality of MSA-P is the life expectancy of a patient is just six to 10 years from when the symptoms first begin.

“The doctors were like, ‘There’s nothing that can be done.’ I just said, ‘I can’t accept that answer,’” Anna said. “Once we did some research, we found that Johns Hopkins (Hospital) had specialists. That’s when we were like, ‘OK, this is much more than football. We were put here for a reason.’ It really was the stars aligning.”

The D’Alessandris family learned about Johns Hopkins’ Dr. Alexander Pantelyat, who cares for patients with movement disorders. The only problem was that it was many months before Pantelyat had an open appointment. A chance meeting at a local Whole Foods with a neighbor, Victor Warren, whose wife worked at Hopkins, resulted in Toni getting seen by Pantelyat within two weeks. That led to Toni being enrolled in a clinical trial for MSA-P patients. While in the trial, Toni was examined every eight weeks, which helped from a recognition standpoint.

“It gave us a chance,” D’Alessandris said. “It probably bought us two, two and a half years.”

Dr. Andrew Tucker, the Ravens’ head team physician, opened up other doors for Toni. Whenever she had an issue come up, he made sure she got in to see the appropriate doctor. When D’Alessandris got COVID-19 as part of a teamwide outbreak during the 2020 season, Tucker had Toni, who was immunocompromised, hospitalized immediately for monitoring. She was released after five days.

Toni continued to train through a Rock Steady boxing program for Parkinson’s patients. She did speech and physical therapy. She stayed extremely active.

“With all the athletes I’ve worked with, I’ve never seen someone so determined, driven to succeed,” D’Alessandris said. “She would not give up. She never looked over her shoulder.”

Toni knew the repercussions of the disease, yet she decided to fight it on her terms. In the early stages, she and D’Alessandris traveled to Banff and Lake Louise to see the Canadian Rockies. It was a 10-day trip and Toni was well enough to hike anywhere from four to six hours a day. They visited some friends in Seattle and walked part of the way up Mount Hood.

“I think her competitiveness, her drive, all of that really came through,” said Emily, 36. “She handled it with such grace.”

The awful disease, though, was taking a toll on her independence. At first, Toni used a walker to get around. Then, she moved to a regular wheelchair and ultimately an electric one.

A team of caregivers from Second Family helped Toni during the day. When his workday was over, D'Alessandris returned home to help feed Toni and get her ready for bed. Harbaugh urged D'Alessandris to take whatever time he needed. Anna, Kelly and Emily pitched in whenever they could.

Toni wouldn't have let her husband quit his job even if that's what he planned. She knew how much he loved coaching. At that point, he needed it for his health, too.

"It's hard to think back at my dad's success and not automatically think of my mom," said Kelly, 38. "They were a team and they were the best team. Anything that was difficult, complicated, going through adversity, they did it together."

The downturn in Toni came when she broke her hip late in 2019. Even when the hip ultimately healed, Toni was reluctant to move around as much as she used to, because of a fear of falling again. The progressive disease started to take over more and more.

"I don't know if you call it denial or not giving up," D'Alessandris said, pausing several times to collect himself and dab away tears. "I just didn't want to give up on hope. "Whatever stage it was going to carry us to, I used to always tell her that I was going to be there for her, no matter what. She would be there that way for me. She followed me everywhere."

D'Alessandris was home with his wife on Day 1 of the 2022 NFL Draft. He normally helped her get in bed at 9 o'clock, but she asked if she could stay up to see who the Ravens picked. Baltimore selected safety Kyle Hamilton No. 14 overall. After learning the Ravens acquired another first-round pick by trading wide receiver Marquise Brown, Toni asked to stay up for that one, too. With the 25th pick, the Ravens selected Linderbaum.

"She looked at me and smiled," D'Alessandris said. "She said, 'You finally got your first-round draft pick. I'm ready to go to bed now.'"

The day after the draft ended, Toni was admitted to the hospital because her oxygen levels were low. The doctor gave a dire prognosis. D'Alessandris notified his daughters, giving them enough time to get into town to say their goodbyes.

"They say you never know when it's going to happen," D'Alessandris said. "You just know in a blink of an eye. She was coherent the whole time. She knew what was taking place and she didn't bat an eye. She was as sweet and loving as can be."

A week and a half later, a memorial service was held for Toni in Georgia. People that the D'Alessandris family met throughout their football journey came to pay their respects. Stories were told about Toni's selflessness, community involvement and devotion to her family.

When D'Alessandris returned to the team, he didn't talk much about the situation. That was not his way. His players, who had filmed a video for Toni as she battled the disease, obviously knew what he was going through.

"An unbelievable example of how to go through that period with grace and take care of responsibilities, both on and off the field," said Ravens veteran guard Kevin Zeitler. "It was absolutely heartbreaking, but he just got after it every day."

In many ways, D'Alessandris needed football. That's the way his daughters saw it. He needed something to occupy his mind and time. He needed something to rally behind, and football always served that purpose. All these years later, he still feels a "spark" whenever he takes the practice field or stands in front of a meeting room.

"This Ravens organization, these players, it's family to me," D'Alessandris said. "Those boys in that room, they're my boys. I've got my children, my biological family, and I've got my family that I love here. I give them the best every day because I know they're going to try to give me their best. That's all I can ask for."

D'Alessandris acknowledges that his wife's death has forced him to "readjust" his life. He now leans on his daughters. When they tell him something, he can almost hear his wife talking to him. The arrival of his granddaughter, Charlotte, has helped in that way, too. He spent part of this past offseason helping Kelly and her husband Eric, who live in Wilmington, Del., with the newborn.

When Kelly learned the due date for her first child fell right around the one-year anniversary of her mom's passing, she broke down in tears when informing family members of the news. "That's just not going to work," she said.

Now, she realizes that May 4 of this year was the day it was supposed to happen. It was a day that the D'Alessandris family needed it to happen.

"It just brought us a little bit of light on a day that could be so dark," Kelly said. "I'll always think that my mom had a hand in this."

How Ravens GM Eric DeCosta Salvaged The Offseason And Made His Team A True Contender

THE ATHLETIC | **SEPTEMBER 7, 2023** | JEFF ZREBIEC

The movie “Air” was just reaching its climax — Michael Jordan’s mother telling Sonny Vaccaro that the basketball star would sign with Nike — when Eric DeCosta’s phone started buzzing. It was normal for a DeCosta family outing, in this case a night at the movies with his two sons, to be interrupted.

For an NFL general manager, business rarely rests. For DeCosta and the Baltimore Ravens, business over the previous month had not been good.

At the NFL Scouting Combine in March, DeCosta was notified that star quarterback Lamar Jackson wanted a trade, a revelation that the rest of the league would learn a few weeks later. An NFL Players Association study eviscerated the team’s strength and conditioning program. Wide receiver Rashod Bateman took to social media to go after DeCosta directly, challenging him to “care about us.”

Over the first 10 days of free agency, the Ravens endured only roster losses and enjoyed no outside gains. They neared a deal with Darius Slay, but the Philadelphia Eagles matched it and kept the shutdown corner. They hit a wall in their efforts to acquire Denver Broncos wide receiver Courtland Sutton. Jackson remained unsigned, and running back J.K. Dobbins and inside linebacker Patrick Queen made it clear they weren’t happy with their contract situations, either.

DeCosta learned from his predecessor, Ozzie Newsome, to block out the noise. As the calendar turned to April, that was getting harder and harder to do. The Ravens were having one of their most frustrating offseasons in team history. There was no hiding from it.

When DeCosta peered through the darkness in the theater and glanced at his phone the night before Easter, you could hardly blame him if he was wondering what bad news was going to stretch across his screen next.

“Things are heating up with Odell (Beckham Jr.),” Ravens vice president of football administration Nick Matteo wrote to DeCosta. “I think we’ve got a shot.”

DeCosta, who had been pessimistic about the team’s chances of landing the veteran wide receiver, watched the rest of “Air” with his head in the clouds.

“I couldn’t believe it,” he said of signing Beckham to a one-year, \$15 million contract. “We closed the deal that night, maybe the next morning. It was a crazy thing. Nobody thought that was going to happen and it did. You could start feeling the momentum a little bit, building and building.”

Two and a half weeks after the Beckham deal, the Ravens reached agreement on a five-year, \$260 million extension with Jackson, mercifully ending an awkward year-plus dance with their franchise quarterback. On the same day Jackson’s deal became public, DeCosta completed his offseason wide receiver makeover by selecting Zay Flowers in the first round of the 2023 NFL Draft. The ensuing weeks and months brought defensive additions Rock Ya-Sin, Arthur Maulet, Ronald Darby and Jadeveon Clowney.

The Ravens still have a few questions they’ll have to answer. However, when they open the season Sunday against the Houston Texans, they believe they are as equipped to make a Super Bowl run as they’ve been in several years. For much of the offseason, that would have been a hard claim to make.

“I feel like it’s a very good roster,” said Ravens coach John Harbaugh. “We’re deep. I’m just excited to go start playing some games.”

DeCosta, a big believer that momentum plays a role in an NFL offseason, can’t isolate one move that shifted Baltimore’s fortunes over the past couple of months. The tenor of the offseason was probably set a few weeks after Super Bowl LVII when DeCosta boarded a plane bound for South Florida for a private meeting with his star quarterback.

Jackson’s rookie contract was up. While there was no way the Ravens were going to let him hit the open market, they still had to work out a deal. They tried for over a year and little progress was made. That Jackson missed the final six games of 2022 with a knee sprain only complicated the negotiations, as did the player’s decision to represent himself. There was much to discuss upon DeCosta’s arrival in Jackson’s hometown of Pompano Beach.

“We spent three hours together,” DeCosta said. “He had a chance to talk to me. He had a chance to voice his thoughts on the team, me, the organization, his contract, his dreams, his hopes. I heard him. I heard what he said. I heard his frustrations. I saw who he was at that moment. That really helped me. It didn’t help us necessarily get a deal done at that point, but that was an important step.”

It was at that meeting when Jackson brought up the names of a few guys he would like to throw passes to in 2023. One was Beckham, who the Ravens tried to sign during the 2022 season, but he wasn’t ready to commit given the state of his surgically repaired knee. Another was Flowers, a fellow South Floridian who ascended up draft boards after a dynamic career at Boston College.

DeCosta's focus, though, was on finding a resolution with Jackson, who was applied the non-exclusive franchise tag, a risky move that gave the quarterback a license to field offers from other teams. The situation was consuming, a black cloud that wouldn't part. DeCosta doesn't sleep well to begin with. Four hours is a good night's sleep for him. Yet, Jackson's status weighed at all times.

Tired of the stalemate, the fan base broke into factions: one blaming Jackson for being unreasonable with his asking price and the other criticizing DeCosta for allowing the situation to get to that point.

DeCosta took his sons to a local high school football game early last year. They were stopped at a red light following the game when a Jeep pulled up next to them. A kid stuck his head out and yelled at DeCosta, "Sign your quarterback, you (expletive) jerk."

"I definitely felt at various times, the frustrations," DeCosta said. "But I'm always trying to figure out the next thing. If this doesn't work, maybe this will. If this doesn't work, let's try this. What's the solution? When I think about my role as a general manager, one of the most important responsibilities is being a problem solver. This is a problem: How do we fix it? You may not have the perfect solution, but there is a solution out there that improves the situation you're in."

Neither Jackson nor DeCosta blinked. The Ravens acted like a team early in free agency that was handcuffed by the financial uncertainty with their quarterback. They let tight end Josh Oliver and guard Ben Powers walk. They had already jettisoned Chuck Clark and Calais Campbell. Their early signings consisted of bringing back Justice Hill and Geno Stone, known more for special teams, on modest contracts.

Almost all their deals, including pay cuts with Gus Edwards and Michael Pierce, involved adding void years, a contract mechanism the Ravens never previously used that allowed them to push money onto future caps. It helped maintain some salary-cap flexibility if another team signed Jackson to an offer sheet. The Ravens, though, were confident Jackson would learn that no team loved him as unequivocally as they did.

Meanwhile, their pursuit of Slay, who was so close to joining the Ravens that cornerback Marlon Humphrey foreshadowed the potential addition on social media, showed that DeCosta was still interested in making a significant move for the right player.

"I'm not on social media. I don't really open myself up to a lot of people's opinions," DeCosta said. "I try to be as clinical as possible: assess the situation, what can be our strategy to get better, not become too emotional. I'm emotional by nature. That has gotten me in trouble over the years. I can think of specific examples where I got into trouble because I made a decision too quickly. I've learned a lot from Ozzie by just sitting back and letting things happen organically, not trying to force the issue, just letting time take over."

The Ravens' March 24 signing of veteran wide receiver Nelson Agholor didn't generate a lot of fanfare, but it did break the ice. DeCosta sat across from Agholor during the receiver's free-agent visit and came away convinced he was a good fit. Agholor wanted to be a Raven, too, and that hasn't often been the case with free-agent receivers.

DeCosta wasn't as sure another meeting with a free-agent wideout would yield a signing. The Ravens were in touch with Beckham long before the receiver strolled through the Arizona Biltmore Resort, alongside his agent, Zeke Sandhu, at the NFL owners' meetings in April. Beckham met with a few teams, and that included the Ravens, who were represented by DeCosta, Newsome, Harbaugh and team president Sashi Brown.

The charismatic Beckham, as he is wont to do, made a strong impression. There was a humility in Beckham's voice that resonated with Baltimore's decision-makers.

"I really liked him and I think it meant a lot to them that we were interested in putting the time in to meet. It showed people that we were serious about it," DeCosta said. "But I didn't leave that meeting thinking, 'Oh, man, we're going to get a deal done.' I still didn't think we had a chance."

The talk in the industry was that Beckham wanted to play in a big city and join a prolific passing offense. Most pundits had him fitted for a New York Jets jersey. Beckham said a phone conversation with owner Steve Bisciotti sold him on the Ravens. The \$15 million financial commitment, well more than what anybody else was offering, surely helped.

Baltimore wanted the player, but it also was cognizant of how a Beckham signing would play with its quarterback and restless fans. Not long after Beckham agreed to terms with the Ravens, pictures surfaced of him in South Florida with Jackson.

Jackson's trade demand, which he revealed on social media seconds before Harbaugh sat down with reporters at the owners' meetings, provided more noise. It, though, didn't greatly impact the situation. No strong suitor for the former league MVP emerged.

DeCosta had very little contact with Jackson for the crux of the offseason. When the Eagles agreed to terms with their young quarterback Jalen Hurts on a five-year, \$255 million extension on April 17, it provided DeCosta with both the framework of a deal and an opening.

"We had just signed Odell and the Hurts deal came out. I thought to myself, 'Why not try again?'" DeCosta said. "We put some stuff together on paper. There were people who probably weren't optimistic about our chances. How many players request a trade and then do a long-term deal with their team like a month later? It doesn't happen very often, but I was optimistic, partly because I know Lamar. I had been with him in Florida. I know what he's made of and I know what's important to him."

The Ravens put their latest contract offer in an Excel document and attached it to an email to Jackson at the end of the business day on April 24. DeCosta followed with a text message to Jackson that alerted him to the email.

A response came a few hours later. Jackson wanted DeCosta to send him the full contract, so he could review the language. The response foreshadowed a breakthrough.

“So I said, ‘You’re accepting the deal?’” DeCosta recalled. “I couldn’t believe it.”

Jackson still wanted to see the language. Matteo rushed to the team facility and worked overnight on the contract language. The following night, DeCosta watched in agony as Atlanta Hawks star Trae Young beat his beloved Boston Celtics with a long 3-pointer. Shortly after the game ended, Jackson reached out to DeCosta to OK the deal.

The news salvaged DeCosta’s night. Better yet, it salvaged the Ravens’ offseason. DeCosta also wasn’t done.

The Ravens have a tradition on draft day. Team chaplain Johnny Shelton comes into the draft room and blesses the scouts and everyone else involved in selecting the team’s next rookie class. Shelton then opens the floor and encourages dialogue. DeCosta spoke up.

“I’ve learned in this business that you just have to have hope and faith. If you do, good things are going to happen,” DeCosta told the room.

“It was an emotional thing for me,” he said.

DeCosta was referring to the Jackson negotiations. Yet, very few people in a room filled with Ravens scouts, executives and team personnel made the connection. That’s because Baltimore’s top decision-makers, given the sensitivity of the Jackson contract talks, kept the deal a secret. Precious few people in the organization even knew that Jackson was the newly minted highest-paid player in NFL history. That would soon change.

“All of a sudden, you started hearing all of these phones beeping (with the news),” DeCosta said. “People were like, ‘Holy s—, holy s—.’ Nobody knew.”

When DeCosta retreated to his office to go over final preparations for the draft, Harbaugh dropped by with a small bottle of whisky. Each of them took a drink, celebrating the resolution of a situation that had impacted them for over a year.

“I just looked at him and said, ‘John, we’ve got to get back to work,’” DeCosta said. “We had the draft in an hour and a half, two hours.”

There was a chance, if Jackson hadn’t signed, that Baltimore would have selected a quarterback if the board fell a certain way. That was no longer on the table. But a receiver who Jackson vouched for back in the February meeting with DeCosta most certainly was.

The Ravens became smitten with Flowers during the pre-draft process. They loved his speed and skill set. They loved his story, too. Ravens director of college scouting David Blackburn was at the East-West Shrine Bowl practices, where Flowers made a brief appearance. DeCosta reached out to Blackburn to find out how Flowers looked.

“Fast as s—,” Blackburn said. “Nobody could cover him.”

Flowers was the No. 1 receiver on the Ravens’ board, and DeCosta really wanted to come out of Day 1 of the draft with a new toy for his quarterback.

“He was the guy for us,” DeCosta said. “Everybody thought (Jaxon) Smith-Njigba, Quentin Johnston, (Jordan) Addison. We loved all of those guys, but for us, it was always Zay.”

The Ravens’ rebuilt receiving corps flashed throughout training camp. Beckham looked healthy and hungry. Flowers was explosive. Agholor had a solid summer. Bateman, who said he talked out his differences with DeCosta, appeared more and more comfortable on his surgically repaired foot. It helped to have a healthy Dobbins back, too.

“I just look around and there’s so much talent on offense,” Beckham said Wednesday. “I don’t see too many pieces missing.”

When Beckham pondered in early April whether to sign with the Ravens, they had an uncertain quarterback situation, a host of questions at wide receiver and other roster holes. When he spoke Wednesday, they had a quarterback signed through 2027, one of the deepest receiving groups they’ve ever had and a roster that’s expected to contend.

In a little more than four months, the outlook of the team has changed and the tumult of the first half of the offseason has faded.

“I’ve had that feeling a few times, like I can’t believe that contract is behind me now,” DeCosta said. “I’m so happy for our fan base, for our community. I’m happy for our players, coaches and for Steve that we could keep Lamar. Watching him this summer made me feel so good about it.”

Ravens Leading NFL In Sacks Thanks To Team Approach: 'All 11 Of Us, Trying To Be Selfless'

THE ATHLETIC | **DECEMBER 8, 2023** | JEFF ZREBIEC

Baltimore Ravens inside linebacker Patrick Queen had what NFL defensive players dream about: a full head of steam and an open runway to the quarterback.

Los Angeles Chargers center Will Clapp and right guard Jamaree Salyer directed Ravens pass rushers to the outside, leaving a gaping hole in front of Justin Herbert. One of the league's fastest inside linebackers, Queen shot through the gap. As he got about 3 yards away from a vulnerable Herbert, he veered to his left to pick off Chargers right tackle Trey Pipkins III and give teammate Justin Madubuike an unobstructed path to the quarterback.

"In those situations, when you understand the protection schemes that you're getting, go ahead and make your layups. But he's doing what we're asking him to do," Ravens defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald said. "He's trying to set his teammate up."

How does a team that didn't have a single defensive player with a double-digit-sack season on their resume suddenly lead the league in that category? How is a defense that's blitzing less than 23 percent of the time dropping the quarterback more than any team in football? How has arguably the Ravens' biggest preseason concern become one of their foremost strengths?

The scheme has a lot to do with it. Macdonald and his defensive staff have consistently schemed up free rushers and found ways to get quarterbacks to hold the ball a little longer. Coaching matters, too. Assistant head coach/defensive line coach Anthony Weaver and outside linebackers coach Chuck Smith, a pass-rushing specialist John Harbaugh hired in March, have created a cohesiveness by merging the defensive line and linebacker position rooms while constantly drilling moves and techniques. Talent also tends to trump everything. Jadeveon Clowney, Odafe Oweh and Madubuike have always possessed enticing physical traits.

But if you ask what has led to Baltimore's surge in sacks — its 47 through 12 games are one fewer than the team had in 17 games last season — one of the first things players and coaches bring up is the selflessness of the defensive unit and how everyone has embraced their responsibilities on each play.

Whether that's setting a pick for another rusher to get through, absorbing a double-team, clearing out a lane or dropping into coverage to let somebody else get after the quarterback, the Ravens have taken a team approach to harassing signal callers. Madubuike has been the headliner, but it's not just about one guy. Essentially, everyone gets a turn to rush — and it's on them to make the most of it.

Fifteen Ravens players have at least a half-sack, and that group includes five interior linemen, five outside linebackers, two inside linebackers and three defensive backs.

"Our guys deserve a lot of credit for playing that certain way," said Macdonald, whose simulated pressures have confused offenses. "That's something we talk about as a unit all the time. 'Hey, look at this guy doing a great job that set up this guy. This guy made a great play, but he was able to make a play because these three guys are doing a great job setting this guy up for success.' That's definitely something that we've stressed, but credit to the guys (for) buying in."

With five games to go, starting Sunday against a Los Angeles Rams team that has surrendered only 22 sacks all season, the Ravens are on pace to finish with 67 sacks, which would comfortably eclipse a franchise record. The 2006 Ravens hold the record with 60. That star-studded 13-3 team featured four players with more than nine sacks: Trevor Pryce (13), Adalius Thomas (11), Terrell Suggs (9 1/2) and Bart Scott (9 1/2). Those four combined for 14 Pro Bowls during their careers.

This year's pass rush features a less heralded group. Madubuike, a 2020 third-round pick, has gotten better every year but never maintained consistency from one week to the next. He had 8 1/2 sacks combined over his first three seasons. He has 10 this year, which leads all NFL interior defensive linemen and has him poised to break the bank this offseason as one of the league's top free agents.

Clowney, the No. 1 pick in 2014 who has bounced around the league, has 7 1/2 sacks, just two away from tying his career high. Playing in his 10th NFL season and for his fifth team, Clowney is enjoying one of the best years of his career and has fit in seamlessly after joining Baltimore midway through training camp.

"Of course, you're going to always be evaluated because you were the top overall pick, but the dude right now is as good as any rusher in the league," Smith said. "He's a game wrecker."

Kyle Van Noy's six sacks put him just one away from setting a career high. The 10-year vet has long been lauded for his versatility and consistency. But he's having one of his most impactful years as a pass rusher despite signing with the Ravens nearly a month into the season.

Odafe Oweh, a 2021 first-round pick, has four sacks while missing four full games and a significant part of another. After a disappointing second NFL season, he's starting to figure things out and show why Baltimore was so bullish on his potential.

Then, there's a host of other contributors. Defensive backs Kyle Hamilton and Arthur Maulet have been effective blitzing from the slot. It was Maulet's hit on Herbert on a simulated pressure, during which defensive tackles Michael Pierce and Broderick Washington dropped into coverage, that secured a late fourth-down stop against the Chargers and preserved a tight win.

Seemingly once or twice a game, Queen bursts through the A-gap and gets a free shot on a quarterback or in the way of an offensive lineman to allow a teammate to do the honors. His pick against the Chargers led to an incompletion, not a sack. However, Madubuike has gotten a few sacks thanks to Queen's selflessness.

"We try to play as a unit — all 11 of us, trying to be selfless," Van Noy said. "That's kind of how we roll."

During one of his first meetings with his players, Smith, who had worked with many of the league's top pass rushers as a private coach, gave a presentation that outlined the group's priorities.

"One of the goals was, of course, we want to lead the league in sacks," Smith said. "On my PowerPoint, that was one of the first things."

How realistic was that?

The Ravens already had to replace the 18 sacks they got in 2022 from the veteran trio of Justin Houston, Calais Campbell and Jason Pierre-Paul, all of whom departed in the offseason. Heading into training camp, the Ravens believed their pass-rush mix would include veteran strongside linebacker Tyus Bowser and outside linebacker David Ojabo.

Bowser, who has 19 1/2 career sacks, has yet to play a game this season because of a confounding knee injury. Ojabo, a 2022 second-round pick, played in only three before he was shut down for season-ending knee surgery.

General manager Eric DeCosta planned on adding a veteran edge rusher all offseason. The addition of Clowney, whom the Ravens flirted with for a few years, satisfied the need, but he was still coming off a two-sack season and had been slowed in recent years by injuries. The signing of Van Noy a little over a month later was done out of necessity. Yet, he still had never had more than 6 1/2 sacks in his first nine seasons.

Clowney and Van Noy were touted as solid veteran additions for a young position group. However, nobody predicted that the Ravens were putting the final touches on a defense that would challenge to lead the league in sacks.

They still didn't have a Bosa, a Watt, a Parsons, a Donald or a Garrett. Oweh was a late-first-round pick. Otherwise, the Ravens haven't sunk a ton of assets into their pass rush. Clowney and Van Noy are making \$4 million combined.

To put that in perspective, the Chargers' total average per year for their two vaunted edge rushers, Joey Bosa and Khalil Mack, is just over \$50 million. The Chargers are tied for third in the league with 41 sacks, six behind the Ravens. The Buffalo Bills also have 41 sacks. Their defensive front includes two relatively recent first-round picks (Ed Oliver and Greg Rousseau), a recent second-rounder (A.J. Epenesa) and two notable free-agent signings in Von Miller (\$20 million per year) and Leonard Floyd (\$7 million per year).

The Ravens are doing a little more while investing much less.

"It's the work that we put in," said Oweh, explaining why he recently expressed he's not surprised by the team's sack total. "It's the new additions like JD, KV, obviously Chuck, the things that we're implementing every week. It's just helping us. If you put in the work, you're bound to reap the rewards."

The influence of Smith has been especially evident in the success of Oweh and Madubuike, who have shown off a more diverse set of pass-rush moves. Even Clowney, after nearly a decade in the league, has added to his repertoire. Smith has challenged the rushers to develop a go-to move and always have a pass-rushing plan before the snap.

"When it comes to developing a pass rusher, I'm going to teach him the signature pass-rush moves that work. As simple as that," Smith said. "We have guys that use push-pulls. We have guys that use pops. We have guys that use rip-humps. We have guys use chop-drives like Travis (Jones). The big thing is, when it came to the development of all of our guys, one thing me and Coach 'Weav' talked about, we wanted everybody on the front line to be a threat. When you look at it, everybody that we put in that game is a threat (who) has developed a move, and that's a credit to the offseason program."

Smith and Weaver credit the success of the group in part to the decision to merge the outside linebacker and defensive line position rooms. Before the season, they had met separately within the Ravens' facility. Now, Weaver works with not only the defensive linemen but also the edge rushers. Smith works with the interior guys, too.

"Everywhere I've been, that's been the structure. It's always been like that. The outside backer coach handles his room, and the defensive line handles their room," Weaver said. "It just becomes hard when you're in a four-down rush and two of my guys are in there and two of your guys are in there; sometimes there's a disconnect in terms of what you're seeing from a communication standpoint. When you're all in the same room, you can talk about all those things throughout the week, and it makes it more cohesive on game day."

Smith and Weaver have also been quick to credit Macdonald, who has had a hot hand for much of the season. The Ravens are in the bottom quarter of the league in blitz percentage, which is a departure from how aggressive some of their better defenses have been in the past.

However, Macdonald and his staff have done a commendable job marrying the pass coverage with the pass rush. Baltimore has been sound on the back end, giving the pass rushers more time to get home. Disguising coverages and where the rushers are coming from has also planted doubt within opposing quarterbacks. Oweh pointed out that several Ravens have gotten their first sack this year because of "games" the rushers have played at the line of scrimmage in terms of running stunts and picks.

Baltimore has one outside linebacker ranked in the top 20 in pass-rush win rate, according to ESPN Analytics, and that's Clowney, who ranks sixth with a 23 percent win rate. The Ravens have no interior defensive linemen ranked in the top 20.

Yet, when it comes to getting to the quarterback as a team, nobody has been better.

"We're trying to dominate, like our coaches talk about, like all of us talk about as a defense," Van Noy said. "We're trying to back it up."

Cover Story: For Zay Flowers, It's Always About Family

Growing up with nine brothers and four sisters, Zay Flowers has reached the NFL buoyed by the strength of a closeknit family.

BALTIMORERAVENS.COM | MAY 21, 2023 | CLIFF BROWN

As the 11th of 14 children in his family, Zay Flowers has always had a large cheering section.

"The best part about growing up with so many brothers and sisters is that you're never alone, and they're my best friends," Flowers said.

What was the worst part?

"Finding a place to sleep," Flowers said, laughing as he often does.

The Ravens' first-round pick is inspired by his large family in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., a loving unit that has endured triumph and tragedy by sticking together.

Flowers' mother, Jackie Walden, passed away when he was just 5 years old after suffering a head injury caused by a fall. His brother, Martin, was murdered when Flowers was in high school.

The rock of the family is Willie Flowers, a driver for a medical device company who accepted the challenge of raising 14 children and became an example of perseverance for 10 sons and four daughters. As Zay watched his father every day, working long hours and making many sacrifices, it left an indelible impression that became part of Flowers' DNA.

"My father said when you start something, you always finish it," Zay said.

"I used to see him get up and go to work at 4 a.m. in the morning; he did that every day Monday through Friday, and then he would get up Saturday, wash our clothes at the wash house, cook everybody breakfast and take us to football games. Then do the same thing Sunday, and then go back to work Monday. So, just seeing him do that, it gave me my drive."

Now, as Zay begins his NFL journey participating in offseason team activities, Willie believes the best is yet to come for his son.

"I'm so happy for Zay, that he's earned this opportunity," Willie said. "Through everything, Zay was always a happy kid, glass half-full, smiling. But he was driven."

New Car for Dad, New Quarterback for Zay

Flowers has already fulfilled one dream since joining the Ravens, surprising his father with a new Mercedes SUV after he wouldn't accept a new house that Flowers offered to buy. Willie has just two children living at home now and has the most living space he's ever enjoyed.

"That is the first house he's ever owned, so he wanted to stay," Flowers said smiling.

On draft night, Flowers wore a necklace with a picture of his mother in the center. He had 14 petals around it, representing the Flowers children. He wore the same necklace the next day when he arrived in Baltimore for the first time as a Raven.

"She started us off playing football, so I felt like I needed her with me last night, and I have her with me today," Flowers said of his mom.

Flowers began playing football when he was 4 years old. He would take on his older brothers wearing full football pads. They were competitive at everything inside and outside their five-bedroom house. The little brothers would team up to take on the big brothers, trying to run each other over or juke each other out. Flowers described it as "harassing each other."

"It was just meant to be that way, and it worked out perfect," he said.

Flowers wishes his mother could have watched her entire family grow up, but that wasn't meant to be.

"She actually fell over a wooden fence that was broken off from a hurricane that the park forgot to clean up," Flowers said. "She was walking backwards and talking, and hit her head."

Willie said he didn't always have words for his son after losing his mother, but that the family's closeness helped them get through it.

"Losing his mom was a rough time for all of us. Kids need their mother," Willie said. "I was really pissed at God for a while, feeling like it had to be a mistake. I stopped talking to God, but I'm glad he kept talking to me, and I came out of it."

Flowers came out of it too, following the determination of his siblings and father. Willie recalls that even when Zay was small, he would drop down and do pushups if his father asked him to.

"He was never afraid of hard work, and he had that 'it,'" Willie said. "When he gets on the field, he makes things happen. Always has. I'm looking forward to seeing what he does in Baltimore."

While his mind rarely strays far from family, Flowers is passionate about football. He is determined to become what the Ravens want him to be – an explosive weapon who can help elevate their passing game to another level.

The draft played out how Flowers hoped when the Ravens selected him with the 22nd-overall pick. Flowers loved the vibe when he met with the Ravens on his pre-draft visit and spoke with General Manager Eric DeCosta, Head Coach John Harbaugh, and others.

Most of all, Flowers wanted to play with Lamar Jackson, another South Florida native he could forge a brotherhood with.

"I wanted to play with either Lamar, or ... Lamar," Flowers said laughing. "I just wanted to team up with him. Down there (South Florida), it's not easy. Growing up as I did, I always knew things would never be handed to me. I had to go get it. Same as him. Even if you don't make it to the next level, you still congratulate guys, because you know what they went through just to get however far they did.

"When it got to around pick No. 21, I walked up to my Dad and said, 'We're going to Baltimore at No. 22.' He laughed and I sat back down. One minute later, they called."

Proving He's a Complete Receiver

Flowers' speed and elusiveness made him a prolific playmaker at Boston College last season with 78 receptions for 1,022 yards and 12 touchdowns. He blew past cornerbacks with his 4.42 speed, high-pointed balls to make contested catches, or eluded defenders in the open field with shiftiness that turned short passes into long gains.

The biggest question surrounding Flowers is whether he will be an effective outside target in the NFL, or whether he will work primarily from the slot in Offensive Coordinator Todd Monken's system. Flowers played much bigger than his 5-foot-9, 182-pound size at Boston College, but doing so in the NFL against more physical and more polished cornerbacks represents his next challenge.

Former Ravens wide receiver Steve Smith Sr. believes Flowers has what it takes to be a consistent NFL playmaker. Now an analyst for NFL Network, Smith had a heart-to-heart conversation with Flowers at the Combine, offering advice and encouragement.

That was special for Flowers, who watched Smith's tape back when he was just 6 or 7 years old and looked up to him ever since. While some of his brothers are 6-foot-2 or so, Flowers was never a big kid, so he always modeled his game after Smith.

"My dad always told me, 'It doesn't matter about size; it's about what's in your chest,'" Flowers said. "He always kept me motivated and said, 'You have to be like Steve Smith. Steve Smith was a dog.'"

It's not fair yet to compare Flowers to Smith, a Pro Football Hall of Fame candidate who had eight 1,000-yard seasons and caught 81 touchdown passes during a stellar 16-year career. However, Smith can relate to being a receiver who was underestimated until he proved that his ability mattered more than his size.

"Let him run all the routes in the route tree. Don't put him in a box," Smith said in a telephone interview. "He's not a gadget player. Let him develop and learn how to play wide receiver in the NFL.

"He's from a large family, which tells me that pressure is not going to make him shrink up. You can see that in his game. You can see that when he plays inside or outside. He's not supposed to be making these plays. But guess what? He's making them. That's what I like.

"I also like the fact that he stayed loyal to the school that recruited him. When all that NIL money was being offered to him last year, he didn't transfer from BC. Money ain't everything, but take it from a guy who has a little change in his pocket – money helps. The fact that he didn't leave BC shows me something about his character. How can you not root for a guy like that?"

Loyalty Over Money

Flowers was just a three-star recruit coming out of high school. He was ranked as the No. 139 wide receiver in the 2018 recruiting class, and the No. 165 recruit in Florida. He was drawn to Boston College because of the education.

After becoming a star at Boston College as a junior, Flowers received lucrative offers from name, image and likeness companies to transfer to another school last season and said he could have earned as much as \$600,000. He turned them all down.

"It was absolutely tempting," Flowers said. "I had never seen money like that. Nobody in my family had seen money like that. But what's more important? Grabbing \$600,000 or staying in school, being a first-round pick and making that money back and more, with a degree from BC? When I sat down and talked to my dad, I decided it wasn't worth it."

Flowers became the first in his family to graduate college. Boston College Head Coach Jeff Hafley wasn't surprised that Flowers stayed. But the way he handled the situation only made Flowers more respected.

"He didn't hide it from me. He was very forthcoming just like he always is," Hafley said. "It shows you a sense of honesty, loyalty and commitment that is very rare with young players.

"I don't know if Zay would've been a first-round pick last year if he had left college a year early or gone elsewhere. I'm glad he stayed with us. The question mark coming into last year was, 'Could he make the contested catches downfield?' I think he's erased any doubt about that."

When NFL scouts asked about Flowers this spring, Hafley told them to watch Boston College's season finale against Syracuse. It was cold and raining that night, and Boston College was 3-8, closing a disappointing season with no chance to play in a bowl game. Many kids in Flowers' position would have sat out that game, not wanting to risk injury as a potential first-round pick. Instead, Flowers played his heart out, throwing blocks 10 yards downfield.

"Turn on that tape," Hafley said. "Watch that effort. It tells you what you need to know about Zay Flowers."

Flowers had a direct explanation when asked why he played in that situation, risking his health in the final game of a lost season.

"I wanted to be there for my teammates," Flowers said. "They were like family."

In a Happy Place

When he entered the ninth grade, Zay was a 125-pound running back/cornerback who wasn't expected to play major college football, let alone reach the NFL. But he was a tenacious basketball and football player at NSU University School in Fort Lauderdale.

Flowers lived in the weight room, and as he got bigger, football became his best sport. He and Kenny McIntosh, a rookie running back for the Seattle Seahawks, led University to back-to-back Class 4A state semifinal appearances.

Their high school football coach, Daniel Luque, remembers the awful night in November of 2017 when he received a phone call that Flowers' 26-year-old brother, Martin, had been shot and killed while being robbed in Sanford, North Carolina.

When Luque arrived at Flowers' home to offer support, Flowers was of course surrounded by family. NSU had a football game the next night, and though Flowers was still grief-stricken, he decided to play.

"He felt it was his duty and obligation to play," Luque said. "His first family is his family. His second family was the football team.

"I want people to know that beyond being a great athlete, he was also a good student, with a 3.3 GPA in high school. Loved by teachers. Loved by teammates. He led by example. He'll always be special to us."

Flowers never missed a game in college and left with the school records for career catches (200), receiving yards (3,056) and touchdown catches (29). He was special there, too.

Now Flowers hopes to be special in Baltimore, where new teammates and the Ravens Flock will add to his already large cheering section. He was the third receiver taken in a historic stretch of four straight wide receivers drafted, which will lead to comparisons to his peers for years to come. He's come to a city starved for a homegrown star wide receiver.

Flowers says he doesn't feel the pressure or worry about how much he will contribute as a rookie.

"I know life can get hard, but being able to smile, being in a place where I feel good, has always kept me up," Flowers said. "I'm helping my family out, and I'm going to help the Ravens. I'm in a happy place."

Cover Story: Being Young Has Never Stopped Kyle Hamilton From Being Driven

Kyle Hamilton's emergence as a defensive star at age 22 seems fitting for someone who has always taken a mature approach to football.

[BALTIMORERAVENS.COM](https://www.baltimoreravens.com) | JANUARY 11, 2024 | CLIFF BROWN

When he was 3 years old, Kyle Hamilton asked his mother if he could play Pee Wee football. Told that the minimum age was 6, Hamilton calmly walked away, but he wouldn't forget.

"On the morning of his 6th birthday, he came into my room and said, 'OK Mommy, I'm ready to play football now,'" Jackie Hamilton said. "He hadn't mentioned it to me for three years.

"To hold that thought inside for so long, at that age? His birthday is in March, football season hadn't even started yet. But that's Kyle. When he sets his mind to something, he's serious."

Now 22 years old, Hamilton is still serious, determined not to be deterred by his youth. He's the youngest defensive starter named to the Pro Bowl, quickly emerging as a premier safety in his second season. His poise and maturity make people forget he's still the Ravens' second-youngest player, just a few months older than rookie linebacker Trenton Simpson.

No matter who the Ravens face in the playoffs, Hamilton will be a key part of the defensive game plan because he's capable of doing so much and absorbs his role in the game plan quickly.

Put him at deep safety, slot corner, near the line of scrimmage as a blitzzer or run defender and Hamilton can make something extraordinary happen. Perhaps the signature play of Hamilton's season came in Week 10 against the Browns, when he blitzed and leaped high to deflect the ball to himself for a pick-six.

It was a pass deflection, an interception, and a touchdown all in one play, as Hamilton filled up the stat box like his athletic idol, LeBron James. But Hamilton isn't satisfied yet, and winning the Super Bowl would be the perfect climax to his breakout season.

As Baltimore enters the playoffs as the AFC's top seed, Hamilton is one of the team's most critical players, perhaps only trailing quarterback Lamar Jackson.

"The way our roster is set up and the way we're coached, there's no reason we can't accomplish our goal," Hamilton said. "Everything's kind of clicking. I feel like we're the best team in the league.

"I feel like there's still a lot that I can improve on and a lot that I want to get better at. I've had let's say – a satisfactory year. I've had a good year, but I feel like I hold myself to a high standard, and I have a lot more getting better to do."

A Man of Many Talents

Hamilton's excellence isn't limited to sports. He's a member of Mensa International, an organization that recognizes people that score within the upper 2% of an approved intelligence test.

He had a 3.67 GPA at Marist High School in Atlanta. His decision to leave home in Atlanta to attend Notre Dame was made with a focus on academics as much as athletics. He's working on getting his degree in marketing, and in 20 years can picture himself as a chief marketing officer, working on the creative side of a business, perhaps his own.

But anything that involves a ball seems to be something Hamilton picks up faster than most. Don't challenge him in golf unless you're good – he shoots in the 80's and can blast a 3-iron around 270 yards.

His first college scholarship offers were in basketball, a sport that runs in the family bloodlines. His father, Derrek Hamilton, is a former third-round NBA draft pick who played professionally in Europe. Kyle's older brother, Tyler Hamilton, played college basketball at Penn.

However, Kyle's focus became football after a growth spurt between his sophomore and junior years put him on the radar of college recruiters after he attended a summer football camp at Duke. The physicality and complexity of football always intrigued him – traits that show in the way he plays the game.

"Football tests your ability to do a lot of things," Hamilton said. "You've got to be tough. You've got to be punctual. You've got to be smart, resilient, and thoughtful. I think the most rewarding thing in the world is playing football and doing it well."

Don't Let the Baby Face Fool You

Chris Hewitt predicted this would be a breakout season for Hamilton. The Ravens' pass game coordinator/secondary coach gave a classic description of Hamilton's ability to be charming off the field, but a terror on game days.

"I told you that he was going to be a Pro Bowl level player," Hewitt said. "He does everything. He covers, he blitzes, he tackles, there's nothing that kid can't do. Don't let the baby face fool you, he'll try to rip your face off."

Hamilton's easy-going personality makes him a favorite target with the media for interviews after practice. But as kickoff gets closer, he becomes singularly focused on diagnosing plays and destroying them.

In high school, Hamilton was often the last person to leave the locker room before kickoff. Running through a line of cheerleaders or bursting through a paper banner just wasn't for him. One of the other parents asked Derrek why his son never led his teammates running onto the field, especially since he was the best player and a team leader.

"I didn't know the answer, so I asked Kyle why he didn't do that," Derrek said. "He looked at me and said, 'Before games? That's when I go dark.'"

Handling a Full Plate Like a Waiter

Hamilton's versatility makes him one of the NFL's most unique and valuable defenders.

His 38.4% passer rating allowed led all NFL safeties. He led the team in passes defended (13), was second in interceptions (four) and tackles for loss (12), and third in tackles (81). He's the first NFL player since Tyrann Mathieu in 2015 with at least four interceptions and 10 tackles for loss. He's a key ingredient in Baltimore's record-setting, triple-crown defense that became the first in history to lead the league in points allowed (16.5), sacks (60) and takeaways (31).

Defensive Coordinator Mike Macdonald tries not to overload Hamilton, but the responsibility puts him in position to make more plays. Hamilton has learned to handle everything on his plate, like a waiter carrying soup through a crowded room without spilling a drop.

"You turn on the tape and he's constantly making plays that stand out," Macdonald said. "To do what he's doing you need to be able to cover, blitz, play the deep area, play the underneath zone, play the run fits. During the week I may ask, 'Is this too much?' Usually, it's not. There aren't many guys who can do all the things he can do. In fact, I can't think of any."

Studying a defensive playbook with diligence before games is something Hamilton has been doing since grade school. Even as a young boy, he didn't cut corners.

"I remember coming into his room at night to check on him and he'd be asleep with a Pee Wee playbook, if you could call it a playbook, on his chest," Jackie said. "Really, it was two pieces of paper that his coach had printed out. But Kyle knew it. He talks in his sleep like me, and he'd be mumbling stuff like, 'they're blitzing, block the linebacker.'"

Overcoming a Rocky Start

Hamilton's ride with the Ravens began with some bumps. In a stadium practice during training camp as a rookie, Hamilton was beaten badly in a one-on-one drill by free agent wideout Bailey Gaither. Hamilton was burned on social media far more severely than he was by Gaither, with people jumping to the conclusion that Hamilton was going to be a first-round bust.

When Hamilton called his family, they all started roasting him as well. That's how the Hamilton family rolls. They stick together, pull no punches, and share thick skin. A bad day at the office isn't going to shake Hamilton's confidence.

"We are a family, that for lack of a better way to say it, we talk trash a lot," Tyler said. "When that practice happened, we were all sending clips to him saying, 'Man, you suck.'"

"We're hard on ourselves. Even when he was at the Combine, when his first 40 time wasn't that great, he was texting us saying, 'Man, I'm slow.' We've always gone back and forth – we give it to each other. Around his friends and family, you'll see his sense of humor, but he was always focused, and he was always a tough kid. I don't ever remember seeing him cry, even when he was young."

In Week 2 of his rookie season, the Ravens blew a 21-point lead in the fourth quarter in a loss to the Dolphins, and the secondary made several coverage mistakes. That game became a turning point for the rookie, who appreciated how coaches and teammates stuck by him.

"They were honest with me," Hamilton said. "I can take it. Once you show somebody that you're tough, that you belong, then they start to respect you more."

Success Isn't Going to His Head

Jackie and Derrek both go to every Ravens game, home and away. Hamilton has a strong support system of family and friends from high school and college who often travel to see him play. Jackie says watching her son play in the NFL is a surreal experience, but that his inner circle remains grounded.

"Kyle's father and I divorced when Kyle was very young, and I was always stressing academics," Jackie said. "I was trying to raise men. They heard what they needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear."

"He's getting a lot of national attention now, but I don't see him changing. I've always told my children, money and success won't change who you are, it just makes you more of what you already are. If you're a kind and generous person, you'll do more kind and generous things. But if you're a jerk, you're going to be a bigger jerk. But I'm proud of the young man that Kyle is."

Derrek said he doesn't worry about how Hamilton will handle whatever comes his way.

"I've learned a lot from my son," Derrek. "He's helped me be a more mature father. I really respect him."

Hoping For a Return to Vegas

Jackie had to talk Kyle into attending the 2022 NFL draft in Las Vegas. A low-key guy, Hamilton was just going to invite some friends and family to watch the draft at home on TV. But his mother wasn't having it.

"We had to coax him to go," Jackie said. "He's just not a look-at-me kid. But that was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, a reward for the hard work it took to get there. Besides, it's Vegas!"

Going back to Vegas for the Super Bowl sounds like a great idea to all the Hamiltons. Derrek wore purple socks the night his son was drafted, not thinking Kyle would fall to No. 14 to the Ravens. Derrek keeps a picture of that night in his phone, his son surrounded by smiling faces, holding up a purple jersey in front of a purple background.

"None of it was planned, but it seems to me Kyle is right where he's supposed to be," Derrek said.

Hamilton agrees and appreciates where he is — still young, and doing exactly what he told his mom he wanted to do when he was 3.

"Things happen for a reason and God works in mysterious ways," Hamilton said. "You've got to trust him. I have faith, and coming to the Ravens has been great for me. But it's only the beginning."

With Ravens Safety Kyle Hamilton, Anything Is Possible: ‘There’s Nothing That Kid Can’t Do’

BALTIMORE BANNER | **DECEMBER 21, 2023** | JONAS SHAFFER

The question is a simple one: What can’t Kyle Hamilton do? The people who know him best cannot tell you much. It is not a long list.

Jackie Hamilton, his mother: “This is really hard because, again, he was one of those kids that, whatever he did, he was naturally good at it. Ummm, I’m going to have to get back to you on that. He can’t be perfect at everything, but ...” (She sighs, almost contentedly. She does not get back to you on that.)

Conor Ratigan, a college teammate and close friend: “Ummm ... man, what is he not good at? I’m trying to think what we did that he’s not good at. I don’t — gosh, this is killing me, because if I can’t come up with an answer, that’s going to not help him here.” (He does not come up with an answer.)

Dan Perez, a football coach at Hamilton’s high school and former baseball coach: “If there was a weakness in his athletic prowess, he wasn’t the smoothest swinger of the bat, I’ll say that.” (Funny, because baseball was Hamilton’s best sport as a kid, until he gave it up out of boredom.)

Doug Jackson, a longtime family friend: “Despite how smart he is, Kyle has never been able to figure out tipping.” (Surprising, considering he can recite the first few dozen digits of pi.)

Hamilton’s stumped, too. At the end of a recent week of practice, the Ravens’ second-year star fastens his gaze in concentration as the locker room empties. Five seconds of silence pass, then 10. “I’m trying to think,” he reassures a reporter. Finally, eureka.

“Diving,” Hamilton deadpans. “I could never get diving. It took me, like, a whole summer. It took me a whole summer to learn how to dive off the diving board.”

Of course he has the answer. In a season of revelations for the Ravens’ elite defense, Hamilton’s meteoric ascent has been the most consequential — and perhaps the least surprising. The former first-round pick is, quite literally, built differently, upending the modern prototype for NFL safeties with a generational blend of talents: a physique that inspires comparisons to NBA lottery picks, a dedication to film study that rubs off on family members, a versatility that lends itself to “unicorn” comparisons, and an “uber intelligence” that optimizes his every move.

This was the hope when the Ravens made Hamilton one of the highest-drafted safeties in recent history last year. Afterward, he’d called his surprising fall to No. 14 overall a “blessing.” Only now is the rest of the NFL realizing what was truly possible with Hamilton: everything.

“I told you that he was going to be a Pro Bowl-type of player,” Ravens pass game coordinator and secondary coach Chris Hewitt says. “He does everything. He covers, he blitzes, he tackles. There’s nothing that kid can’t do.”

The challenge has always been figuring out what more Hamilton can do. From there, he usually figures it out himself.

‘The best athlete I’ve ever seen’

At 13 months, Hamilton was already turning into a ball hawk. He had just started walking around the family’s home in Italy — where Kyle’s father, Derrek, a former third-round pick of the New Jersey Nets, was playing basketball professionally — when, his mother remembers, one ball rolled out of his grasp.

It settled under a windowsill with a marble ledge that jutted out somewhat. Hamilton went after the ball. It was a tight squeeze; he was too tall to just walk under the ledge. So he ducked his head and grabbed the ball. What happened next has stuck with Jackie.

“Most kids — a toddler — would just stand up, right?” she says. But Hamilton avoided bonking his head. “He grabbed the ball and he kind of backed out to clear the ledge and then stood up.” It was as if Hamilton instinctively understood where to be, how to move, his brain and body in precocious harmony.

“I mean, that’s minor, but for a 13-, 14-month-old, I’m like, ‘That’s clever,’” Jackie recalls. “That’s him understanding his surroundings and being aware.”

As Hamilton grew up, his talents flowered. Things seemed to come naturally to him, Hamilton’s upbringing nurturing his sense of what was possible. His dad’s basketball career had exposed him to athletic outliers. His brother, Tyler, was 4 years older and a gifted athlete and student himself. His mother was artistically inclined and keen on indulging her sons’ “curious minds” — and sharpening them, too.

“Again, I am Korean,” Jackie says, chuckling at the memories of their extracurricular workbook assignments in various school subjects. “I’m one of those parents.”

Jackie recognized the athletic potential of her children. (Tyler would go on to play college basketball at Penn and William & Mary.) But she “didn’t want them to be just complete jocks.” When they settled in Atlanta, she would take Kyle and Tyler to the High Museum of Art, to the Center for Puppetry Arts, to Zoo Atlanta. At home, they’d make finger paintings and other arts and crafts.

A couple of Kyle’s pieces won prizes at his school. Another was picked for exhibition at a local art museum. A drawing he completed in the second grade, of a spider and a sprawling spiderweb, still hangs in Jackie’s home.

“It just came naturally to him, and to be honest, I’m kind of saddened that he kind of stopped as he got older,” Jackie says. “The arts and crafts are not as cool when you’re older.”

Atlanta’s fields and courts were fast becoming Hamilton’s canvas. As a 5-year-old, an age at which tee-ball teammates were doing dirt angels in the outfield and chasing butterflies, he completed his first of two triple plays. At an LSU football summer camp, where Hamilton was competing with kids at least a few grades up, his athletic testing — 8.2-second 40-yard dash, 10-inch vertical leap, 4-foot long jump — earned an Outstanding Performance certificate.

Jackson, the family friend who coached Hamilton and his own son, Nick, now a standout linebacker at Iowa, in youth football, called him “one of the most naturally gifted athletes that I’ve ever seen.” Hamilton was of the smaller kids on his team, with an “Itty-Bitty” nickname to match, but one of the hardest hitters. “He’d blow ‘em up,” Jackson says.

As an eighth grader at Marist School, a private Catholic school in the Atlanta suburbs, Hamilton was playing touch football one day in Perez’s physical education class. Sean McVay had starred at the school over a decade earlier, but Marist was not a blue-chip football factory. Hamilton stood out. No one could touch him.

After the class ended, Perez, an assistant on the football team, remembers walking into head coach Alan Chadwick’s office. “Coach, I just saw the best athlete I’ve ever seen at this school.”

Where? “In my PE class.”

Really? Who is it? “It’s this kid named Kyle Hamilton.”

Getting past the ‘brick wall’

During the predraft process last year, Hamilton took a test called the Athletic Intelligence Quotient. Developed by psychologists Scott Goldman and Jim Bowman, the 35-minute exam was, in some respects, a repudiation of the Wonderlic test, which measured cognitive ability but had no correlation with on-field performance. The AIQ, crucially, did not draw on acquired knowledge; instead, it assessed attributes such as pattern recognition, decision-making ability and information retrieval.

Goldman, who’s worked as an embedded team psychologist in the NFL, had come to believe that four “buckets” determined an athletic profile: physical ability (Are they big, strong and fast?), personality (What’s their work ethic? How do they fit in the locker room?), experience (How long have they been competing?) and intelligence.

The challenge was understanding and then quantifying athletic intelligence. As they formulated their tests, Goldman and Bowman asked coaches and front-office officials across the NFL about the cognitive abilities that mattered most at each position. “What are the tasks that you really need?” Goldman remembers asking.

“Sometimes coaches look for players to run through brick walls,” he says. “But the reality is that what coaches really want is, they just want to get them to the other side of the wall. So I think people who are concrete thinkers” — those who use reasoning based on how they experience the physical world — “all they can do is run through brick walls and therefore oftentimes are more tolerant to discomfort, because that’s what they have to do.

“People with a higher level of intelligence, they can find creative ways and solutions to get around the brick wall. And isn’t that what we really want anyways?”

Hamilton’s AIQ test results, which he agreed to disclose to The Baltimore Banner, were exceptional. He had “superior” scores in visual retention, spatial awareness and manipulation rotation, an attribute measuring how he might adapt to his changing visual field as a play unfolds.

Hamilton, who in the third or fourth grade had tested into the high-IQ society Mensa, also had no weaknesses, the testing showed.

“Intelligence is one of the greatest predictors of success, and that’s across domains — lawyers, firefighters, police officers, airline pilots,” Goldman says. “And I think the reason for that is, people with high levels of intelligence, they can do a few things that just help them navigate life. ... When shit’s not working, they can scrap the plan and say, ‘OK, that’s not working. Let’s come up with something else.’ And you’ve got to think that’s just a huge, huge advantage in life.”

A natural talent

Especially in poker. Ratigan, a former Notre Dame wide receiver who roomed with Hamilton, was in a low-stakes league at the school with friends. When Hamilton found out about the games, he wanted to know more.

They hadn't lived together for long, and Ratigan was just beginning to grasp the extent of Hamilton's aptitude for, well, anything. Ratigan had considered himself pretty good at the popular "NCAA Football" video game — until he started playing Hamilton on their Xbox 360. Then he started losing. "Well, that's a little frustrating," he remembers thinking.

Ratigan invited Hamilton to the poker league anyway. Then Hamilton started winning. Again.

"And everyone kind of got sick of that," Ratigan says. "He goes from not really playing much to walking away with all the money, and all these guys are getting mad at me, like, 'So are you sharing in the profits with this guy? Is this, like, a team thing?'"

Ratigan didn't know how to explain it. "He just kind of picked up on how everyone played pretty early on, more so than others did."

Adaptability is Hamilton's superpower. He was raised to understand not only the inevitability of mistakes but also the lessons they offered. "The difference from somebody who succeeds and somebody who may not," his mother says, "is whether you can learn from it and make adjustments for your future." Hewitt, the Ravens' assistant coach, says Hamilton rarely makes the same mistake twice.

When Kyle was in school, Jackie says she would've liked him to have studied "a little harder." She also knows he didn't really need to. The natural talents Kyle had as a kid, he honed. The abilities he lacked, he learned.

Public speaking? "Good at it," Hamilton says. "I think the more notoriety you get, the more reps you get at speaking publicly, and you get naturally better at it."

Math? "Up and down. Depends what kind of math. Like, trigonometry, I was terrible at it. I was good at algebra and geometry."

His recall? "I know a good amount of pi," and he rattles off the first 41 digits of the mathematical constant without error, as if he's reading them off a graphing calculator.

Golf? "Yes and no. I feel like starting young with that sport is definitely a plus, because it's not a natural movement, really. Guys who play baseball, they're further behind because they're just always hacking at it. But, um, no, I feel like I picked it up pretty quickly."

Freestyle rap? "I would say I'm actually very good at freestyling. It's going to be explicit, but I'm pretty good at it."

As his mother explains: "Whatever he does, he does it better than most."

A defensive 'unicorn'

Hamilton doesn't mean to brag. This, those close to him say, is just his confidence in his competence. Even Hamilton's most fantastical notions — that he, a former NCAA Division I basketball recruit, could score on Victor Wembanyama, the San Antonio Spurs' 7-foot-4 rookie star — are rooted in pragmatism. (Hamilton's one-on-one strategy: Drive by the No. 1 overall pick and protect the ball by going up for a reverse layup, or bury Wembanyama deep enough in the paint that he can attempt a dunk.)

With Hamilton, there is value in believing anything is possible. As a rookie, he went viral on X (formerly Twitter) after losing badly in a one-on-one training camp repetition against undrafted wide receiver Bailey Gaither, who's never played an NFL snap. "[I] am getting fried on this app," Hamilton joked afterward. When the season kicked off, his role fluctuated. He didn't play more than half of the Ravens' defensive snaps in a game until Week 8.

Now Hamilton, who leads all AFC strong safeties in Pro Bowl voting, might be the most indispensable member of one of the NFL's best defenses. With him on the field this season, according to TruMedia, the Ravens have led the league in yards per play allowed (4.3) and ranked second in success rate (63.9%). With him off the field, the Ravens have ranked last in yards per play allowed (6.1) and last in success rate (52.2%).

"We always joke about the one clip he went viral for," says safety Geno Stone, a close friend. "And he always jokes about it, too, because he's like, you know, 'It's one-on-one.' You're going to lose your one-on-one reps, especially in a practice like that. They can run [routes] wherever they want. But it is funny because everyone tried to write him off then, and now he's, I would say, one of the best safeties in the NFL."

Partly because he does more than any safety in the NFL. Perez likens Hamilton to a Swiss Army knife; general manager Eric DeCosta has compared him to a "unicorn." At points this season, he's morphed into an explosive edge rusher, a shutdown slot cornerback, even a surprise inside linebacker.

At 6-4 and 220 pounds, with a lean, leggy frame that Cleveland Browns coach Kevin Stefanski likened to Wembanyama's, Hamilton has become a skeleton key in Mike Macdonald's defense, unlocking not only schemes but also his own untapped potential. His ever-changing skill set, coach John Harbaugh says, is a "gold nugget," enriching the defense with every evolution.

In coverage, Stone equates one Hamilton stride to "three steps for everyone else." As a pass rusher, Odafe Oweh marvels at how Hamilton seemingly mastered a spin move in training camp just one play after asking the outside linebacker for tips. Cornerback Marlon Humphrey jokes that, "if you cloned 11 of him, he could play every single position."

"It speaks to his intelligence and his ability to pick all those different schemes up and not hesitate," says Chadwick, his high school coach, who had to rebuild Marist's playbook to better feature Hamilton's talents — on offense. "He can analyze information. He can retain it, and that's invaluable, because they do so many things, so many schemes and fronts and coverages and all that. It's difficult. And, when you have somebody like that, it shows how they use him."

Added Jackson, his former youth coach: "He really does live at this intersection of marrying uber intelligence with uber athleticism. That's unique. And Kyle's a very cerebral athlete. He's smart as hell."

And, the Ravens hope, only getting smarter. When Jackie visits Kyle in Baltimore, he likes to turn his film study into a mother-son bonding activity. "You want to learn something?" Hamilton will ask, and he'll show her his iPad, explaining how, say, an offensive lineman's presnap posture is hinting at a run play.

"I'm actually learning," Jackie says. "I understand football. I'm a football girl. I love it, and I understand it."

As the AFC-leading Ravens prepared Wednesday for their Christmas Day showdown against the NFC-leading San Francisco 49ers, a possible Super Bowl preview, Hamilton was asked about the showers of praise he'd received this season: Did it mean anything? The acclaim was "cool," Hamilton acknowledged. He'd always dreamed of NFL success, and he felt he'd done "pretty well" so far.

"But I feel like I hold myself to a high standard," Hamilton said, "and I have a lot more getting better to do."

John Harbaugh, With Mix Of Love And Old-School Rigor, Has Ravens Set For Playoff Run

BALTIMORE SUN | JANUARY 18, 2024 | CHILDS WALKER

Anxiety percolated behind the scenes. How could it not? Lamar Jackson, the superstar quarterback around whom the Ravens had shaped their roster and their plans, asked to be traded.

John Harbaugh, entering his 16th season as the team's coach, faced the prospect of starting over at the most important position in football. He had made the call, back in 2018, to fashion a new vision around Jackson's unique talents. Now, it was in jeopardy. But he did not feel jeopardized.

"I was in a good place," Harbaugh said, reflecting on those uncertain days in March and April. "I felt really strongly that God had it, to be honest with you. Whatever direction it was going to go, it was going to be good. I was rooting for Lamar to be back because I knew Lamar, but I knew that if he didn't come back, there was going to be a reason for it, and I was going to be OK with that."

Jackson signed an extension with the Ravens in late April, and nine months later, he's poised to lead them into a playoff matchup with the Houston Texans at M&T Bank Stadium. It will be the team's 11th postseason run under Harbaugh. Though he still feels "like a young coach," with Bill Belichick and Pete Carroll at least temporarily out of the trade, he's the NFL's second-longest-tenured and second-oldest.

Never in that span has Harbaugh, 61, lost his team's attention, but Jackson's contract saga presented a fresh test. In his public statements, he reiterated his admiration for the quarterback and his faith that the team and player would both end up satisfied. His upbeat calm stood in contrast to fan and media roiling over Jackson's fate.

The man at the center of all that scrutiny heard and appreciated Harbaugh's tone.

"Being the quarterback of the franchise and knowing the head coach has your back, every quarterback would want that. Every player should want that," Jackson said recently.

ESPN commentator Domonique Foxworth played for Harbaugh from 2009 to 2011, when the coach was still feeling his way through leading an NFL team. Even then, Foxworth was struck by Harbaugh's understanding that the interpersonal side of his job was at least as important as the tactical.

"Some coaches are focused on the micro, which he is too, but he also has an awareness of the macro, the relationship side of it," Foxworth said. "He knows there are buttons there to be pushed also. The benefit of maintaining a good culture is that you will get the best out of your players no matter what the game plan is. I think the head coach can affect that more than anybody else in the organization. It's one of the few responsibilities you cannot delegate."

Harbaugh doesn't have a tidy explanation for why he's never lost the thread with his players. "Standing up in front of the team, it just always comes to me what to say," he offered.

But when current Ravens are asked why he has endured, they note the genuine interest he shows in them as athletes and people.

"You know when people care for you," said wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr., who's on his fourth NFL team. "It's not politics or you're just ... like this is your job to act this way. This is a genuine act that he has. I feel like it kind of reflects throughout this building and definitely reflects on values and things that I stand for — love, all of those things. He's been everything that I can ask for. He goes on my Mount Rushmore of coaches that I've had, for sure."

The thing is, Harbaugh's just as apt to converse with a practice squad player as with Beckham.

"He goes out of his way to make sure he has these relationships to every single player on the team," said fullback Patrick Ricard, who has played for Harbaugh since 2017. "Guys open up to him. I know guys who come here from other places, they tell me, 'I've had head coaches who didn't even know my name.' Harbaugh knows where everyone's from. He knows their families. I think that's why he stays very connected."

They don't hand out NFL Coach of the Year trophies for subtlety, and there's not much talk about Harbaugh winning that award as he did in 2019, the last time the Ravens claimed the AFC's No. 1 playoff seed. But his delicate hand with Jackson, on top of changes he made to his defensive and offensive staffs the past two seasons, spoke to his gift for adapting. Fans still call for his ouster every time the Ravens blow a lead or mismanage the game clock, but that's part of the gig. Harbaugh just keeps winning; the Ravens made the AFC championship game in his first season, won the Super Bowl in his fifth, earned their conference's top seed in his 12th, and finished with the league's best record in this, his 16th.

This year's team bears only modest resemblance to the 2019 edition and little at all to Harbaugh's world champions from 2012. But he endures, wedded to bedrock principles he learned from his father, Jack, and from Bo Schembechler, the great Michigan coach of his youth, but never so wedded that he won't adopt new systems suited to new generations of talent.

“They are one of the more flexible teams,” Foxworth said. “To be able to go from a [Joe] Flacco-led offense to the original Lamar offense to the new Lamar offense — I do think when the league is constantly changing, having the ability to change along with it is like a Belichick characteristic that Harbaugh has also.”

Harbaugh laughed and nodded recently when it was suggested that his Ravens’ defining trait might be having no defining trait.

“You’ve got to be really versatile as an NFL coach,” he said. “Because circumstances are ever-changing.”

The coordinators he chose — Todd Monken on offense and Mike Macdonald on defense — are shape-shifters, more interested in tailoring their plans to the talent on hand than imposing rigid visions.

Harbaugh saw a future head coach in Macdonald, who’s a candidate for at least five NFL openings, when he was still a fresh-faced staffer, learning the ropes in a cramped office he shared with Chris Horton, who’s now the Ravens’ special teams coordinator.

He did not know Monken well before he hired him away from the University of Georgia, but he liked the way the veteran coach had run everything from the pass-happy “Air Raid” at Oklahoma State to a more balanced attack for the back-to-back national champion Bulldogs.

Harbaugh has football principles — “When you come here, you know you’re going to have good, hard practices, and every situation’s going to be detailed,” Ricard said — that he expects his top assistants to reinforce, but otherwise, he gives them wide tactical latitude while he focuses on the Ravens’ big picture.

“Consistency,” Monken said when asked what he’s learned to appreciate about his boss. “His day-to-day approach, his positive energy, his connection with the team, whether we’ve won or whether we’ve lost — I’ve never been around anybody like that. I think that allows you, when you have a season as long as we do, to sustain for the long haul.”

Whatever serenity Harbaugh felt before Jackson decided to return, he’s still a practical man. He knew the Ravens’ prospects for 2023 soared with their franchise player back in the fold.

“It was like, ‘And now we can launch,’” he recalled.

As soon as the Ravens got to work in the summer, he sensed he was dealing with an unusually mature team, one for which living in the moment was not an empty cliché but a driving belief. These guys liked one another and knew how good the team could become. Jackson was at the forefront, again a lively presence in the locker room and a leading proponent for maintaining moment-to-moment focus.

“I think this is maybe the most connected team, the most tied-together that I’ve seen here,” Harbaugh said. “They’re very evolved that way. You know it when you see it, and I’ve seen it all year. ... You’re not having too many awkward conversations with guys, where you’re scratching your head, wondering what a player or a coach might be thinking. Because they’re thinking the right way.”

The Ravens added veterans such as Beckham and Jadeveon Clowney in part because they thought it would be fun to play for Harbaugh, who has developed a reputation for encouraging individual expression within the team’s greater mission.

“I believe guys like that want to run through a wall for him,” Jackson said.

Thirteen wins later, the Ravens have their best chance to reach the Super Bowl since they won it 11 years ago, led by the likes of Flacco, Ray Lewis and Ed Reed.

Two nights after they finished their regular season, Harbaugh beamed as confetti rained around him, marking the national championship his younger brother, Jim, had just won for the Michigan program they both grew up worshiping. He listened to his father bellow out the family catchphrase — “Who has it better than us?” — to an eager crowd clad in maize and blue.

And for a moment, Harbaugh violated his credo. He thought ahead, to a Sunday evening in February when the championship confetti might rain again, on him and this Ravens team he has come to appreciate so deeply.

“It sinks in, ‘Like man, I really want to experience this for our team. I want our team to experience this,’” he said. “That’s the big picture, the ultimate goal for the season. And then with that, back to one day at a time, one play at a time.”

Suddenly One Of The NFL's Senior Coaches, John Harbaugh Is Still In His Prime

BALTIMORE BANNER | JANUARY 11, 2024 | KYLE GOON

A murmur spread Wednesday afternoon, roiling the humdrum of another Ravens bye week.

As John Harbaugh outlined the broad strokes of Baltimore's preparation for its divisional playoff game in another week and a half, phones were lighting up with NFL news: Pete Carroll was out in Seattle. A reporter shared the news with Harbaugh as he walked away from the podium, and the Ravens coach admitted he was "stunned."

There was about to be a lot more news in the coaching world, shifting the ground beneath our feet.

Within 24 hours, Nick Saban — who had a forgettable NFL tenure but was an unmatched winner in college football — had retired, and Bill Belichick — the all-time leader in Super Bowl wins, all the while wearing an immutable scowl and an iconic hoodie — was out in New England.

The thing about climbing the ladder is you never know how many rungs are ahead of you. Even as an NFL coach, Harbaugh has been steadily gaining experience and esteem, fielding consistent winners with a championship to boot.

Suddenly, he's at the top. There are no more rungs left.

On Wednesday morning, there were four NFL coaches who had been with their teams at least 14 seasons. A day later, Carroll and Belichick were gone, leaving just Pittsburgh's Mike Tomlin (who was hired in 2007) and Harbaugh (hired a year later). The next closest is Andy Reid, who has been in Kansas City since 2013. Reid, of course, spent 14 seasons with the Philadelphia Eagles before that and was at one point Harbaugh's boss.

Then there's a three-way tie for coaches hired in 2017, illustrating just how tenuous a head coach's job security is.

Looping in Saban, who has coached a number of great players who have passed through Baltimore, some of the most venerated coaches on the sport's Mount Rushmore crumbled in a single day.

Harbaugh still has the energy of the 45-year-old Baltimore once hired, but he's far along enough in his career to acknowledge that his 61 years are creeping up on him. Last week, as the Ravens prepared for a low-stakes game against Pittsburgh, a reporter gracefully asked Harbaugh how on-field pregame conversations with Tomlin have evolved "from the beginning as you were both young coaches."

A grin quickly spread across Harbaugh's face. "I appreciate the 'both young coaches!'"

Harbaugh technically may not remain one of the NFL's elder statesmen for long. Belichick and Carroll, both in their 70s, might look for other opportunities. But what's most remarkable about Harbaugh now right at the top: He's still in his prime.

It may be his roots as a special teams coordinator, coming to Baltimore with the reputation of neither an offensive wunderkind nor a defensive mastermind, but Harbaugh has rarely seemed to get the credit for a team that has gone 160-99 in his tenure. He has won Associated Press Coach of the Year only once, in the electric 2019 season when Lamar Jackson won MVP. After a 13-4 season in which his Ravens demolished the Lions, 49ers and Dolphins among others, Harbaugh is receiving little buzz again — in spite of the fact that he's replaced both coordinators since 2019, leaving him as the common coaching denominator.

Since Harbaugh was hired 16 years ago, nine other NFL coaches who have won coach of the year have been fired by (or, ahem, parted ways with) the teams they won with: Belichick, Mike Smith, Marvin Lewis, Jim Harbaugh, Bruce Arians, Ron Rivera, Jason Garrett, Matt Nagy and Mike Vrabel.

Harbaugh keeps doing his thing. He's had a top-10 scoring offense seven times. He's had a top-five scoring defense nine times. He's had a losing regular season record only twice, and the Ravens only truly bottomed out once (2015). He's coached all-time players, including Ray Lewis and Ed Reed and probably Jackson whenever his career is over, but Harbaugh's career cannot be defined by one player in the way that Belichick, for all his greatness, will be forever linked with Tom Brady.

It helps, of course, when your front office drafts two good quarterbacks for you, and Harbaugh benefited from Joe Flacco and Jackson falling into Baltimore's lap. The previous two years of injuries soured seasons at the end, and perhaps the Ravens hung on too long with Greg Roman, who limited the scope of the offense with "medieval" football.

But especially in light of the end of Belichick's tenure, marked by clinging to familiar names such as Bill O'Brien and Joe Judge while steadily declining, Harbaugh's willingness to evolve stands apart. He made two hires in the past two seasons that have fundamentally shifted the Ravens' identity on both sides of the ball.

Mike Macdonald's deceptive schemes are much less aggressive than Wink Martindale's "damn the torpedoes and blitz" philosophy. Todd Monken has kept some of Roman's running concepts but spread the offense out much more and thrown more often, unlocking a version of Jackson that many people believed was lying just underneath the surface. Both are now head coaching candidates, hunted by forlorn franchises that would like to chip off a piece of Baltimore's magic.

Harbaugh never came in with a reputation for an offensive or defensive genius, and that's turned out to be a strength. He is consistent in how he approaches and runs the Ravens on the field, but he can't be pinned down to a single schematic style — an inherent reason he's been able to change with the times. He is fluid, molding and adapting to his roster and the league, which is why the Ravens still feel at the cutting edge of the NFL despite having one of the league's longest-tenured coaches.

Macdonald thinks Harbaugh "has a lot of superpowers," but two key ones are his adaptability and a keen insight for how certain systems help or hurt.

"He can see systematically how things are wired and if it makes sense," Macdonald said. "And so he's really good at holding us accountable to how things are ruled out and where we're going and making sure it makes sense and [that] it has enough. And he balances that."

Added Macdonald: "And then I'd say he's relentless. And I feel I share that quality, too. We're constantly in pursuit of trying to help our guys out and trying to put our guys in situations where they can be successful. And, to me, if you're not doing that, what are you doing?"

It's always difficult to say how much credit a head coach deserves relative to his players and staff, but some telling endorsements come from the players themselves. On Brady's podcast, Jackson said his relationship with Harbaugh has grown over the years and "we're in sync with everything we do." Odell Beckham Jr. said this season he texted Harbaugh to compliment him on how well run the organization is, and then after a win over Miami confessed to the locker room: "This is the best team I've ever been on, from the top to the bottom."

If the bottom line falls to the head coach when things fail, a sizable portion of the credit should go to him when the team succeeds. And Harbaugh has succeeded more than most, enduring in a league where the coaching carousel always seems to be spinning. That's thanks in part to owner Steve Bisciotti's commitment to continuity but also to Harbaugh for making the decision easy.

Now that Harbaugh's at the top of the ladder, the NFL's young coaches are climbing to catch him. At this rate, it could take them a while to catch up.

Cover Story: Why 'Locked In' Lamar Jackson Is Ready To Take The Ravens Farther

Lamar Jackson has been given more freedom in the Ravens offense, and he's running with it.

[BALTIMORERAVENS.COM](https://www.baltimoreravens.com) | **JANUARY 15, 2024** | RYAN MINK

The Ravens had beaten the Seattle Seahawks, 37-3. Baltimore's offense piled up 515 yards while the defense surrendered 151. By any definition, the game was a butt kicking.

Naturally, everyone in the Ravens locker room was feeling satisfied – everyone except Lamar Jackson.

Jackson went to some teammates and re-hashed drives when they didn't score and plays when they could have gained more yards.

"Lamar was still in go-mode," tight end Isaiah Likely recalled. "You're like, 'Dang, he's still not happy. He wants to put up 60.' He was like, 'This is what it takes to get to the Super Bowl.'"

"Locked in" have been the words everyone around the Ravens is using to describe Jackson's mentality. There's no doubt that he's different. Explaining exactly how is the challenge.

"He's always seemed locked in, but this feels different," said fullback Patrick Ricard, who has been with Jackson his entire career. "Maybe it's the experience he's had or the maturity. But he's always been a mature guy. I don't know, it's hard to pinpoint what it is. It just seems like he's more focused."

Whatever it is, it's working.

The Ravens are the AFC's top seed. They've already beaten nearly half the teams in the playoff field and clobbered two of the best, the 49ers and Dolphins, in back-to-back weeks to cap a six-game winning streak down the stretch.

Four years ago, however, they were in this same position and came up short. As the Ravens prepare for their playoff opener, Jackson is determined not to have the same outcome.

"Lamar tells us all the time, he was on that 2019 team and it left a bitter taste in his mouth," Likely said. "It's him reminding us to stay locked in. He's been here before and he understands that this isn't enough. The ultimate goal is for us to win the Super Bowl."

But it's not just a desire, not just talk. Jackson has been building all year for this.

"CHAMPIONSHIP QUARTERBACK"

Everyone has their own version of when they noticed something was different about Jackson this season. For Quarterbacks Coach Tee Martin, it was as soon as Jackson showed up for organized team activities in late May, about three weeks after inking his record-setting deal.

That contract was 27 months in the making, and when everyone could finally exhale, Jackson was ready to get to work. It was even evident as he recorded a selfie video from his car announcing the deal to the masses.

"You mature quicker when you go through scrutiny for almost two years," Martin said. "He was already a man – a father and all that stuff. But when you're out there representing yourself, that's tough. That's some heavy-duty work."

Martin was the Ravens' wide receivers coach the last two seasons, so he had watched from "afar" how Jackson handled his business. This year, it was going to take a renewed focus. Under a new offensive coordinator, in a new scheme, Jackson was thrown into the deep end.

Todd Monken took Jackson's wristband away, essentially yanking the lifejacket when it came to the offensive verbiage. In some ways, Jackson was starting fresh.

"The mentality that he took towards work was very unique," Martin said. "Everything that we asked him to do, he did it. Things that were different or may not have made sense to him, he tried and he worked at it. From the moment he came in, he wanted to go to work and get better."

"That's something I give him a lot of respect for. Having already been a league MVP and signing a major contract, you come in hungrier than you ever have. That speaks to the man he is and his character."

An Aug. 5 training camp practice served as a turning point. The defense got nine interceptions that day as the offense worked on third-and-long situations. All the picks weren't against Jackson, and the deck was situationally stacked against the offense, but it ticked him off.

"We came back and went the rest of training camp with maybe like one interception the rest of training camp," Martin said. "Lamar is so competitive, and he doesn't like to be wrong. He doesn't like to have it all look like it was him. And so, he took it upon himself to just continue to study more and learn the concepts inside-out."

Before the Ravens' Week 2 game in Cincinnati, Martin said Jackson was especially dialed in. It was a key early-season divisional game against the team that beat the Ravens in the playoffs last year, as an injured Jackson had to watch from his couch.

During the bus ride to the game, Martin texted Jackson asking if he wanted to get out on the field early to warm up. All his career, Jackson had typically been one of the last people on the field before the game. It was just his way of doing things. This time, Jackson replied, "Let's go."

"When we hit the field for warmups, he had this look. I was like, 'Oh shoot, this is different,'" Martin said. "He was hitting everything and then it just translated to the field."

Immediately after games, Martin leaves an advance scouting report on the next team in Jackson's locker – by request. It's something that Martin wanted when he was a quarterback at the University of Tennessee, where he won a national championship in 1998. Jackson badly wants to win a championship, and he has a champion coaching him.

Since the beginning of the year, Martin has done a series in the classroom called "Championship Quarterback." They talk about the traits and characteristics that winning quarterbacks have – mentality, body maintenance, how to lead on and off the field, etc. It's how they start each week's preparation. When Martin talks about what it takes to be a championship quarterback, he said Jackson is "super locked in."

"He knows what he wants and he knows it's going to come with work. And you have to be locked in all the way to the end," Martin said.

"There's no time to relax. There's no time to recognize accolades. To win a championship, you don't exhale until the confetti falls. That rhythm, that focus, that mindset – you can't lose it. That's how I approached it through my championship season, and he has that type of focus and mentality."

"AN AGGRESSIVE FREEDOM"

Before Jackson had signed his new contract or even met Monken, the new offensive coordinator empowered his quarterback. Monken texted Jackson when he was still down in Florida.

"He was telling me, 'I'm going to give you the keys to the offense. It's up to you to make certain decisions at the line. If you don't like it, put us in a better situation, but if you mess up, it's going to be on you.'" Jackson said.

"I'm cool with that, because I'm seeing the field, and I'm out there. I'm the one that has to make things happen – my teammates and [me]."

Jackson spent the past four seasons with Greg Roman in a run-heavy offense tailored around Jackson's unique running abilities. Jackson had a lot of success in that system, but the Ravens knew there was more to be unlocked.

Jackson has long had the arm talent to do so, and he's become an even better and more accurate passer over the years. Now it was time for him to take the reins of a robust passing attack.

Head Coach John Harbaugh said what has stood out to him most about Jackson this season is his ability to assimilate into the new offense. The Ravens paid Jackson not just for what he had already been as one of the NFL's most electric players, but for what they believed he could become as a more well-rounded quarterback. And he's delivering.

When Jackson comes to the line of scrimmage, he can change the play to a certain run play or alter the route concept if he sees the coverage is different than he wants. He can communicate that with signals or verbally to the wide receivers.

It's not like it's happening every play, but Jackson has a newfound level of command in Baltimore's offense. Monken said Jackson's smarts are what have enabled him to thrive with the keys in his hands.

"First off, he's highly intelligent. He understands what you're asking him to do and what you're allowing him to do and when the situation presents that," Monken said. "And he's embraced wanting to do that. Not every quarterback wants that on their plate and be empowered to change a play at the line of scrimmage or to put themselves out there."

"It starts with him. He's diligent. He's intelligent. He's certainly more than capable of seeing things – what the defense is presenting to him – and how he can get us into a premium play."

Martin described Jackson as an interactive learner. He's not a huge note taker, preferring to see plays and pictures on his iPad. But when he's in the meeting room, he's "processing it in his mind."

"It's already being put to life," Martin said. "For Lamar, there's not this separation between classroom and the field. The meeting room is a rep. The walkthrough is a rep. The practice is a rep. I think that's what allows him to play the game so fast from a mental standpoint."

"He may not have 10 pages of notes, but if you ask him, he's spot on. When you test him, it's very, very rare that he's not correct."

Jackson's 75-yard touchdown pass to Zay Flowers against the Dolphins got a lot of buzz because of Jackson's left-handed drop. That twist was Jackson's suggestion, and the fact that the ball went to Flowers was Jackson's vision. Flowers' role on that play is to serve as the clear-out guy. It just so happened that the Dolphins had a coverage bust, and Jackson instantly recognized it.

"He didn't think twice. He let it rip," Martin said. "He's out there playing ball and it's free. It's like this aggressive freedom."

"I WANT THAT SUPER BOWL"

The last championship Jackson won was as a member of the 11U Northwest Broward Raiders in the South Florida FYFL Super Bowl.

Jackson's Raiders beat the Fort Lauderdale Hurricanes, who were back-to-back champions and riding a 40-something game winning streak. Jackson threw two touchdowns in the 14-6 win – and kicked the extra points, too.

Coach Ed "Bubba" Jones gave the kids a choice between going to Disney World or getting championship rings. They chose the rings. The rings cost about \$200 each and Jackson and his teammates wore them like they were worth a million bucks.

Since then, Jackson has won a slew of individual awards, most notably his Heisman Trophy in 2016 and unanimous 2019 MVP. Both stay in a closet, in bubble wrap, in a box. If/when he wins his second MVP this year, it will likely go in the same place.

If he wins the Super Bowl, however, Jackson has a spot picked out in his house to display the Lombardi Trophy.

"I want that Super Bowl," Jackson told Tom Brady last week. "That's the accolade that I really want – so bad. I've been chasing that for a long time."

Jackson's high school career ended with a 49-6 loss to powerhouse Miami Central, which was going for its fourth state title in five years.

In college, Jackson and Louisville suffered a sour loss to LSU in the Citrus Bowl to cap his Heisman sophomore year. His final game was a 31-27 loss to Mississippi State in the TaxSlayer Bowl.

After falling short of titles in high school and college, winning the Super Bowl has been an obsession for Jackson since he first came into the league. Everybody remembers his draft night vow that he would deliver a Super Bowl to Baltimore, and he hasn't forgotten either.

Teammates say he never stops talking about it.

"We'll be in the showers, and he'll randomly be like, 'Man, we've got to win the Bowl,'" running back Gus Edwards said with a laugh.

Jackson's regular-season record is 58-19. His playoff record is 1-3. It's the one blemish on his sparkling NFL resume. In four playoff games, Jackson has a 55.8 completion percentage and 68.3 quarterback rating, with three touchdowns to five interceptions.

After losing to the Titans in 2019, Jackson and the Ravens got some vengeance in the wild-card round the following year, beating the Titans after Jackson's 48-yard touchdown run flipped the game. The following week, however, in extremely windy conditions in Buffalo, he threw a game-changing pick-six and didn't finish the game because of a concussion. That was the last time Jackson was in the postseason.

The past two years, Jackson has been injured down the stretch. The Ravens fell out of contention because of it in 2021, and a knee sprain left him watching from the couch last year when the Ravens were knocked out of the playoffs in Cincinnati on a freakish 98-yard fumble return for a touchdown.

The pain of the 2019 early exit has been compounded. Add in the naysayers, and Jackson is itching to rewrite his playoff narrative.

"I definitely do have that chip on my shoulder," Jackson said. "I haven't accomplished what I wanted to yet, so that's why that chip is still on my shoulder."

Even before the team's four-game run beating the Rams, Jaguars, 49ers, and Dolphins, Jackson talked about how this year's team had a Super Bowl opportunity that can't be taken for granted.

The past month has only hammered that home more. Some of the defense's top players such as Justin Madubuike and Patrick Queen are set to become free agents. Odell Beckham Jr., who finished second on the team in receiving, is playing on a one-year deal.

Monken, Defensive Coordinator Mike Macdonald and Defensive Line Coach Anthony Weaver have teams lining up to interview them for head coach openings.

Jackson is under contract through the 2027 season, but he's going to lose some of the pieces around him.

"I'm preaching. I feel like I'm preaching to the choir, but we gotta take advantage of what we have," Jackson said. "Because we might not see it again."

For now, however, the Ravens and Jackson aren't focused on the future. It's about right now. Jackson has been more vocal this year, like after that Seahawks game, or at halftime telling his teammates to stay focused and keep their foot on the gas.

Jackson finished the regular season about as well as possible, throwing more touchdowns (five) than he had incompletions (three) in a 56-19 demolition of the Dolphins.

"He's always had a single-minded focus, but I don't think I've ever seen it quite like this," Harbaugh said. "[He's been] one day at a time, locked in. That's kind of how he's approached it. It's been reflected in how he's practiced and how he's played.

"Our best players are also our hardest workers, they are our most responsible guys, and that's what drives the whole thing."

So how does Jackson explain his change?

"Just how things went before [in 2019] and me seeing different things now, that's what has me so locked in," he said. "I believe we're going to be better this year this time around."

Inside The Ravens' Quarterback Room: How Lamar Jackson Has Emerged As A More Evolved And Vocal Leader

BALTIMORE SUN | NOVEMBER 21, 2023 | BRIAN WACKER

At the Ravens' sprawling headquarters and practice facility in Owings Mills — 200,000 total square feet, with its indoor field and weight room accounting for about half of it — Lamar Jackson takes a seat at a long table inside one of the first-floor meeting rooms inside "The Castle," as the massive complex is affectionally known. At the head of the table is first-year quarterbacks coach Tee Martin. Jackson sits to his immediate left, backup Tyler Huntley next to Jackson and No. 3 quarterback Josh Johnson to Martin's right, while assistant quarterbacks coach Kerry Dixon mans the computer further down the table.

While the stadium is where the magic happens for Jackson and the 8-3 Ravens, this is where much of the work takes place for the quarterback.

"Lamar's like any other student," says Martin, who spent the previous two seasons as Baltimore's wide receivers coach and 25 years ago was the quarterback for national champion Tennessee. "He comes in with his bookbag, takes out his notepad, takes out his pen or pencil and just about every word that comes out of my mouth he's taking it in.

"If there's something that hits his brain a certain way, he'll ask a question. He's very good about being clear to make sure there's clarity to whatever it is that you're saying. He's not shy about asking questions. He doesn't play around in meetings. He's a creative thinker. He's meticulous about things. When you put a play in, he has this blank stare, because he's playing the play in his mind. A lot of guys can't do that."

Most in the NFL also haven't done what Jackson has this season.

His 69.5% complete rate is the fifth-highest mark in the NFL, his 2,441 yards passing are 10th and his 8.1 yards per attempt ranks fourth. Jackson's 535 rushing yards, meanwhile, lead the league and are nearly 150 more than the next closest quarterback, the Vikings' Josh Dobbs, and his five rushing touchdowns are the third-highest total in the league.

But the evolution of Jackson, who was the NFL's unanimous Most Valuable Player in 2019, has reached another level this season beyond just statistics.

Thursday night against the Bengals, the Ravens were facing third-and-7 from Cincinnati's 11-yard line with 28 seconds remaining in the first half. Baltimore had its receivers stacked in a two-by-two formation against man coverage. At the snap, Jackson looked to his right, where wide receiver Zay Flowers, tight end Isaiah Likely and running back Justice Hill were all well covered. So he looked left, where he had Nelson Agholor breaking over the middle and Rashod Bateman working on the outside against Cameron Taylor-Britt. Agholor was open but going away from Jackson as he broke the pocket to his left. Jackson's movement to the left also forced cornerback Mike Hilton to make a choice: play Jackson one-on-one, or the passing lane. He chose the former, moving toward the quarterback and in doing so opened a window in the end zone for Bateman, who cut in, with Jackson flinging a dart for a touchdown.

The score put the Ravens up 21-10 at the half and helped bury the Joe Burrow-less Bengals in a hole they couldn't get out of.

There were other plays where Jackson's progressions stood out, too. Earlier on the drive, he found Odell Beckham Jr. on a corner-stop route for 15 yards after his eyes moved Cincinnati corner Chide Awuzie back toward the middle of the field. And earlier in the second, he connected with what appeared to be his third option in Beckham for 29 yards to set up the Ravens' second touchdown.

Of course, it helps to have playmakers around him.

Flowers is second among rookie receivers in catches (53) and fourth in yards (588). Beckham has started to show signs of his old self the past few weeks. Bateman is healthy and has made some crucial catches. There was also ever-dependable tight end Mark Andrews, until he suffered what is likely a season-ending ankle injury in the first quarter Thursday night (though coach John Harbaugh offered a glimmer of hope Monday).

Then there is the new scheme under offensive coordinator Todd Monken, who has empowered Jackson to have more input and control and opened the playbook up more the more comfortable the quarterback has become.

It took some time and is still a work in progress, but the Ravens have found an identity and rhythm over the past month, scoring 34, 31, 37, 31 and 38 points in their past five games.

"He was a very quick study," Martin said of Jackson. "He's a quick learner. He doesn't need a lot of reps to learn things and he sees the game a certain way. Coming in, the terminology, once we got over that bridge of what we used to call it to what we call it now, things that are different, things that are new, introducing him to those concepts and ideas, it all became his own from that point on.

"We talked about empowering the quarterback as far as protections, as far as being able to change routes. He loved it."

There's been a noticeable growth within the walls of the quarterback room as well.

"I'm more vocal than I was before," Jackson said. "Early on [in my career], I was just wanting to learn the ins and outs of defenses in the NFL. But now, [with] me just seeing them each and every week — different defenses every week — I've got a lot more questions. I see certain things, and then I want to just tell Coach Monken, 'We should try to put this in the game plan' [and] stuff like that."

The other quarterbacks can see a difference, too.

Huntley, whose locker is next to Jackson's and who signed as an undrafted free agent with the Ravens two years after Baltimore drafted Jackson in 2018, says the former Heisman Trophy winner has taken command in meetings and in the huddle.

"He's just coming into himself, on and off the field, doing what he needs to do to make himself better, putting in the work," Huntley said.

Johnson, who has played for an NFL-record 14 teams and is in his third stint with the Ravens, sees Jackson for the dynamic playmaker he is but also as someone whose football IQ is high.

"He's who he's advertised to be," Johnson said. "He's been dominant since he's gotten in to the league. To me, the proof is in his play. If you question who he is as a player, I question how much you know about football. I don't know what the public thinks of [Jackson]; I know what I think of [Jackson]. I respect him to the highest."

Still, Jackson has endured more than a few hiccups this season.

He has fumbled 10 times, losing six of them. He has also thrown five interceptions. And he has been sacked 27 times, which is on pace for the most of any season in his career, after, in many cases, holding onto the ball too long.

But he has also shown his toughness. This season, he has taken a handful of notable hits, including a few earlier this month against the Browns. Then against the Bengals on Thursday, he injured his ankle at the end of the first quarter and was examined in the team's medical tent.

It was momentarily frightening for a franchise that had already lost Andrews and seen Jackson suffer leg injuries each of the past two seasons. But he emerged with a thumbs-up and didn't miss a play.

"We all know who he is," Beckham said of Jackson. "He's the leader of this team, and everybody feeds off him. So, when we see him come back out, it makes you ... whatever you have going on, you feel like you're hurting, he's out there, [so] we've all got to be out there. It was a big leadership moment by him."

And perhaps will ultimately lead to his biggest season yet.

Ravens' Tyler Linderbaum Is As Competitive As They Come: 'He Just Won't Allow Himself To Fail'

THE ATHLETIC | **DECEMBER 29, 2023** | JEFF ZREBIEC

The team stretch was over and the Solon High School football squad started to break into its position groups. For young Tyler Linderbaum, that meant one thing: It was time to loosen up his right arm.

Linderbaum's earliest years on the football field were spent as a quarterback. That's the position he envisioned playing at the high school level, and dozens of coaches over the years have learned that telling Linderbaum he couldn't do something didn't often generate a positive response. Linderbaum's older brother, Logan, was an offensive lineman. Linderbaum was a quarterback, or so he thought.

The only problem was that kids who looked like Linderbaum didn't play quarterback. He had that thick, sturdy neck, that short and squatty build, those wide shoulders. He had that Iowa farm boy strength, too, even though he didn't grow up working in the corn fields.

So when Solon football coach Kevin Miller saw Linderbaum jogging over to the quarterback group at the start of one of his first high school practices, the first thing Miller did was chuckle. The second thing he did was walk over to Linderbaum and ask him what exactly he was doing.

"I kind of joked with him. I said, 'I don't know where you think you are going to be,'" said Miller. "But put your hard hat on and go over there with the big uglies."

Linderbaum wasn't the only one who didn't initially view himself as a center. He was recruited to nearby Iowa as a defensive tackle and played two games at that position as a freshman. Even after Linderbaum switched to the offensive line and eventually established himself as the best center in college football, there were NFL organizations that questioned whether he was big enough or his arms were long enough to thrive at the next level.

With their second first-round pick in the 2022 NFL Draft, the Baltimore Ravens took that bet and are reaping the rewards. In just his second season, Linderbaum is already regarded as one of the top centers in football. He's been one of the keys to the Ravens' top-ranked run game, and heading into Sunday's highly anticipated matchup with the Miami Dolphins where a win would give Baltimore the AFC's top seed, Linderbaum has allowed zero sacks and three quarterback hits in 13 games this season.

Ravens coach John Harbaugh believes that with Linderbaum, Baltimore has the best center in football. Offensive coordinator Todd Monken says Linderbaum is playing at an "elite level." Veteran right tackle Morgan Moses called Linderbaum "special" and predicted that the 23-year-old would become a "foundational piece" in Baltimore for years to come.

Just about everyone you talk to in the Ravens' locker room brings up Linderbaum's competitiveness, toughness and physicality. As a rookie, he played through a significant foot injury. This year, he barely missed any time with a high ankle sprain.

Stories about his traits are still being told in Solon, a city in Eastern Iowa, where Linderbaum was a multi-sport standout for the Spartans and a one-time winner of the "Solon Beef Days" hay bale toss; and in Iowa City, where he became yet another star offensive lineman produced by Kirk Ferentz and the Hawkeyes program.

"You can't measure someone's toughness and competitive spirit," Miller said. "He just has some of these elements that separate himself from these guys he competes against."

The clip was shown before, during and after the 2022 NFL Draft almost as often as highlights of Linderbaum sprinting downfield and knocking down Big Ten defenders like bowling pins. There was Linderbaum, in his white, orange and black Solon High wrestling singlet, executing an overtime takedown of rival and future Iowa teammate and NFL first-round pick Tristan Wirfs in 2017 to win a key match.

Linderbaum rose from the mat, his mouth agape, and stomped around like a conquering hero. Wirfs was a state champion wrestler who had dominated Linderbaum in previous matchups. He also was significantly bigger than Linderbaum. Yet, the result showed the persistence, competitiveness and toughness that Linderbaum possessed, and it foreshadowed how he'd become one of the league's best centers despite being considered undersized at 6-foot-2, 305 pounds with a below-average 31 1/8-inch arm size.

"When I first started wrestling, I was not good," Linderbaum said. "I only wrestled for three years in high school. My sophomore year, I got my butt whooped."

How bad did it get?

"I probably went 30-20," Linderbaum said. "But most of those 30 wins were against fat puds, kids that probably shouldn't have been wrestling, and I'm sure half of those were forfeits. The other 15 of those were against kids I should have beaten just because of my athleticism. But I started to learn how to wrestle, and then my junior and senior year, I did better."

Linderbaum initially played basketball, but he opted to turn to wrestling because Solon needed a heavyweight to replace his brother. He struggled so much early that he quit on multiple occasions, but only temporarily. Getting thrown around wasn't something he ever wanted to get used to. One such occasion came when Logan, who wrestled at Minnesota State Mankato, returned to Solon to practice with the high school team. Logan dominated his younger brother so thoroughly that Linderbaum left the gym in frustration.

"I'd be like, 'I'm done,' and I'd go take a five-minute walk and then come back in," Linderbaum said. "I wouldn't actually quit."

By the time he graduated, Linderbaum had won 122 matches in just three years and registered fifth- and third-place finishes in the state. The lessons he learned, though, about leverage, balance and one-on-one competition served him well in the sport that he planned to play in college.

"In a competitive setting, you don't want to lose," Linderbaum said. "I feel like I'm a sore loser, so any time we're in a competitive game or something like that, I want to give it my best, and the competitive spirit comes out."

Iowa was preparing for the Outback Bowl in early 2019 when Ferentz decided to make the move. While Linderbaum had ability as a defensive tackle, the program didn't have an intriguing center prospect in the pipeline. Iowa knew when recruiting him that he was a high-level center and there was no time to waste.

"He immediately started taking reps with the twos," recalled then-Iowa quarterback Spencer Petras. "He couldn't snap yet. Every snap was going between my legs or over my head, but he had this ability to pick things up fast and to win reps when his body was in a compromised position. You'd see Tyler contorted and bent and he finds a way to have really impressive power."

By the following year, Linderbaum was the starting center for a program that breeds quality NFL offensive linemen. The year after that, he was already garnering attention for being one of the top centers in the country. He wasn't physically imposing, but he was uber-athletic for an offensive lineman. His fundamentals were sound and he was relentless, working through the whistle on every play. He took a defensive lineman's approach to the center position. He wanted to attack the player in front of him, rather than always sitting back and trying to hold his ground.

Tyler Linderbaum was the 2021 Rimington Trophy winner, awarded to college football's best center. (Jeffrey Becker / USA Today) Ferentz, a former offensive line coach in Baltimore, once described Linderbaum as being "too good to be true." Still, early on in his college career, his teammates didn't have a good read on him. Linderbaum is always aware of his surroundings and isn't prone to chitchat unless he knows his company.

Petras and Iowa teammates Nico Ragaini and Riley Moss were playing the video game Call of Duty when Linderbaum came strolling through their dorm room. Wanting to test the young lineman, Moss invited him to take a game.

"He didn't say much and we had no idea how he was as a Call of Duty player. No warmup at all and he went up and had 50 kills and one death in his first game," Petras said. "It wasn't like he was sitting on his Xbox all day. He was a four-sport athlete in high school. This dude had things to do, and he does 50 kills and one death. I've never sniffed that."

Petras would later learn something else about Linderbaum. If you made him angry, you better be prepared to deal with the consequences. The two Iowa teammates were partying in the offseason outside of a friend's house. Some button pushing started and Petras reached back from the truck they were in and struck Linderbaum in the head with a stick of deer jerky. All hell broke loose.

"Next thing I know, he climbed over in the middle seat, held both of my arms in one of his and he was on top of me and whaling on me with his other arm," Petras said. "It was like, 'Woah, OK, you win.' When he flips the switch, it's nothing to mess with. It's just part of his competitive nature. He's got that bite to him. When it's time to go, he's ready to go."

Petras says without hesitation that Linderbaum is the most competitive person he's ever been around. That even applies to Linderbaum's annual hometown hay bale toss. The challenge is to toss a hay bale, which weighs approximately 60 pounds, over a bar that is elevated above. Linderbaum won it one year by clearing 14 feet.

Miller recently saw the competitive side of him, too. Miller and his son, Cam, were locked in a tight best-ball golf match with Linderbaum and his father, Todd, who is a good athlete in his own right.

"All of a sudden, Tyler found another gear," Miller said. "It was like, 'All right, we're not losing.' He just has that 'it' factor. He just won't allow himself to fail. He wants to be the very best at what he does. That's his M.O."

Former Ravens standout guard Marshal Yanda, who has gotten to know Linderbaum through their shared Iowa and Baltimore ties, used to say that NFL rookies should be seen and not heard. That would have been just fine for the reserved Linderbaum, except his very position mandates that he is vocal.

As the center, Linderbaum has to make line calls and make sure everyone is on the same page. It's a leadership position, and that complicated Linderbaum's transition to the NFL, particularly as he was surrounded by a former league MVP quarterback and a veteran offensive line.

The fact that Linderbaum was selected with the draft pick the Ravens received from trading wide receiver Marquise Brown to the Arizona Cardinals only added to the pressure. Teams don't regularly take centers in the first round of the draft. The ones who are selected are essentially expected to become Pro Bowl-caliber players early in their careers. Linderbaum, who dismissed the concerns about his arm length, calling it "genetics, I guess," is on that path.

"The only thing changed is he's been in the league another year, but Tyler has been the same," said Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson. "The knowledge is there. He's vocal. He's being a leader. Even though he's young, he's been a leader, just stepping up. He's very smart."

Linderbaum doesn't believe anything has changed with his demeanor from his rookie year to now, but he is certainly showing more personality and more playfulness around the media. During a practice last week, he chided veteran left tackle Ronnie Stanley for being the last offensive lineman out on the field. He and his locker mate and closest friend on the team, reserve offensive lineman Patrick Mekari, are constantly tweaking each other, much to the amusement of onlookers. Linderbaum recently stood behind a throng of television cameras and playfully called for Jackson to end his media availability, because it was the second-year center's turn at the microphones.

"It comes from him being comfortable, and he also understands he has to find his space before he can confidently be able to voice his opinions," Moses said. "But he's taken the road of being a staple in this offense and a leader."

Much of that goes on behind the scenes. Teammates see how locked in he is during meetings, how hard he works every day in the weight room. They know how many nagging injuries he's already played through. If it were up to Linderbaum, he wouldn't have missed any time with the high ankle sprain earlier this season. The team, though, held him back for two games.

"He's tough as nails," Moses said.

What drives Linderbaum, though, is he still feels there are so many areas where he can get better.

"I'm certainly not where I want to be, but I've definitely made steps from Year 1 to Year 2," he said. "Trying to be more consistent has been a big focus point for me. There's so many things that I can still get better at that I'm excited about."

How Mike Macdonald's 'Somewhat Complicated' Defense Revved Up Baltimore Ravens

USA TODAY | NOVEMBER 16, 2023 | CHRIS BUMBACA

The comparisons to the Baltimore Ravens' 2000 defense, one of the greatest in league history, were premature. But the 2023 version of Baltimore's defense, through the first 10 games, is worthy of its own praise.

Having a second season in defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald's system has been an obvious – yet important – difference, players say.

"He's got a somewhat complicated scheme," safety Kyle Hamilton told USA TODAY Sports. "But he's done a great job drilling it down and making it simple for us."

Hamilton, himself more accustomed as a second-year player, was the poster player of the Ravens' transition from longtime defensive coordinator Don "Wink" Martindale – now with the New York Giants – to Macdonald, who was a first-time NFL coordinator in 2022. In Week 2 of that season, it was Hamilton being beat deep by the Miami Dolphins that was the visual representation of their late-game collapse.

Fast forward to Week 10 of this season against the Cleveland Browns, and it was Hamilton who crept up to the line of scrimmage, blitzed and tipped a Deshaun Watson pass straight up into the air to come down with it and score on the second play of the game.

Having defenders know how to do multiple things and play in different spots – especially for a 6-foot-4 safety like Hamilton – are all parts of Macdonald's philosophy.

"I think it always keeps the offense on their toes, and I think allows us to make plays in different areas and show our versatility," Hamilton said.

Players have to keep up with the wrinkles Macdonald and his staff devise each week, edge rusher Odafe Oweh said.

"I also think guys are just getting more comfortable with the scheme and the defense," Oweh said. "Mike had all this stuff last year, too. Guys are just learning plays and being more skillful in certain positions."

In 2023, the Ravens enter a "Thursday Night Football" matchup with the Cincinnati Bengals allowing the fewest yards per play (4.2) of any team. Despite giving up 27 points – the offense was responsible for a pick-six that was followed by a missed extra point – in a 33-31 loss to the Cleveland Browns on Sunday, Baltimore still has the top scoring defense in the NFL (15.7 points per game). The unit is third in sack rate (9.51%) with a league-best 39, and the 17.3 first downs the group allows per contest also ranks third.

Macdonald's defense found its groove in the second half of 2022. After a Week 9 trade with the Chicago Bears for inside linebacker Roquan Smith, the Ravens allowed 14.9 points per game, the second-best mark in the league. Baltimore finished third in rushing defense (92.1 yards per game).

During the offseason, Macdonald said the defensive coaches talked about "having a clear vision of what we wanted to get to."

"So, it crystallized a little bit in how we were coaching it and our methods and how to do it," Macdonald said. "I think it was clear, and the staff has been awesome on how we've worked together on how we want to do it and how you go about executing it. So, the logistics of everything is just a lot smoother the second time around."

Of course, players need to buy into what the coaches are teaching. Thirteen players have registered sacks – an overrated metric in Macdonald's mind, because there are more accurate ways to calculate the effectiveness of a pass rush. Veterans Kyle Van Noy (16 quarterback pressures) and Jadeveon Clowney (five sacks) have contributed despite not being with the team for most of the offseason. Safety Geno Stone, not a starter at the outset of the season, leads the league in interceptions with six.

Macdonald, who rose up the coaching ladder from coaching intern to linebackers and defensive backs coach with the Ravens – the only NFL team he's worked for – from 2014-2020, commended the defensive assistants for communicating specific roles and shouting out efforts that don't show up on the stat sheet.

"That's something we talk about as a unit all the time. 'Hey, look at this guy doing a great job that set up this guy. So, this guy made a great play, but he was able to make a play because these three guys are doing a great job setting this guy up for success,'" said Macdonald, who worked for head coach John Harbaugh's brother Jim at Michigan as a first-time defensive coordinator in 2021, when he helped the Wolverines reach their first College Football Playoff.

"Every time someone makes a play, there's so many great examples that you can show, so that's definitely something that we've stressed, but credit to the guys. In buying in, I think they see different guys making plays, and that's building their confidence."

Macdonald, now 36 years old, was 34 when Harbaugh brought him back to Baltimore as defensive coordinator, which made him and Shane Bowen of the Tennessee Titans tied as the youngest coaches to hold defensive coordinator titles in the NFL. (Nick Rallis, 30, with the Arizona Cardinals is now the youngest defensive coordinator in the league.)

In Macdonald's second season back, linebacker Patrick Queen said, the attention to detail has the defense causing more confusion for opposing offenses.

"It's hard for offenses to pick up on the stuff that we're doing," Queen said. "If they do pick up on it, it's still hard to complete passes, because we're on everything."

Macdonald said he watches film through the lens of how an offense might attack his unit.

"I think that just goes back to how you build it from the get-go and how you practice it in the offseason, so when you do see different offenses throughout the year, you feel like you're well equipped to do things that the guys know how to do and can tailor it to that team," he said.

Macdonald also thinks about "interchangeable parts" – "rotational pieces," as Stone put it – a lot, putting creativity to the test during the offseason. Recently, Macdonald has the luxury of having safety Marcus Williams back in the lineup alongside Stone and Hamilton, who can play all over the field.

"As you get into this season, having consistency from a week-to-week basis so guys are used to playing next to one another, is important," Macdonald said. "So, you don't want to move it too much, but having the ability to do that, especially when guys go down or different matchups and things like that, absolutely."

No unit is perfect, however. Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson completed all 14 of his pass attempts in the second half of Sunday's game, helping erase a 15-point second-half deficit. After the game, Watson said the Browns were able to adjust to how the Ravens disguised their coverage shells. Rather than having the offense second-guessing, the Ravens played into the Browns' hands.

From being around Macdonald in meeting rooms and the practice field, Stone said it's obvious he wants to come up with a plan to defend every route on each play.

"There's always weaknesses in defenses, he knows that," Stone told USA TODAY Sports, "but at the same time, it just shows how he always wants to get everyone in the perfect spot, get everything covered."

"Caring" is one way to describe Macdonald, Queen said.

"Great guy, great coach. He actually cares about his players – cares about how we play, cares about how we perform," Queen said. "Just an all-around good guy."

The feeling is mutual for Macdonald toward his players.

"I think we have a tight unit, and it's exciting to see people be excited for other people's success," Macdonald said. "It's not easy to get to this point. Hopefully we build on it, but definitely proud of where we're at, for sure."

Ravens' Justin Madubuike Broke Out, Now He's About To Break The Bank: 'He's The Guy Now'

THE ATHLETIC | JANUARY 18, 2024 | DAN POMPEI

Midway through the fourth quarter of a December game against the Jacksonville Jaguars, Justin Madubuike has yet to register a sack.

By bringing down the quarterback, the Baltimore Ravens defensive tackle can tie an NFL record with sacks in 11 straight games. The Ravens call for a blitz, but Madubuike's assignment is to set a pick, drawing the guard and tackle, while Roquan Smith and Patrick Queen attack from their linebacker spots and defensive end Kyle Van Noy loops inside to get to Jacksonville quarterback Trevor Lawrence.

The plan works. Madubuike gives himself up, but as Van Noy runs unimpeded toward Lawrence, he is bumped by Smith and falls to the ground. Queen manages to get an arm on Lawrence, who spins out of the attempt and moves up in the pocket — straight into the arms of Madubuike, who makes the sack, tying the record and forcing a fumble.

"He was supposed to be the sacrificial lamb," Ravens defensive line coach Anthony Weaver says. "It was almost like God wanted him to have that sack."

Madubuike finished the season with 13 sacks, most in the NFL among defensive tackles and 7 1/2 more than in his previous best season. The season, like the record-tying sack of Lawrence, could be considered perplexing.

Where did it come from?

After the third game of his senior year at McKinney North High School in suburban Dallas, Madubuike felt a deep pain in his right glute. He thought it was a cramp. The next morning, his rear end was swollen and hot. Eventually, he felt numbness and pain running down to his knee. The diagnosis was a hematoma on his sciatic nerve.

Madubuike, a four-star recruit and honor roll student, could barely walk the rest of the year, let alone play football. He lost 60 pounds.

"I felt helpless and weak," he says. "My face got skinny and my eyes looked like they were set back in my head."

He had committed to Texas A&M before the injury and went there the following year, but healing took much longer than expected, and he had to sit out his first year.

"I had a feeling I would maybe play again but wouldn't ever feel the same again," he says. "After something like that, you really appreciate playing the game."

His father, Festus, says the episode made Justin hungry. "I think he saw it as God giving him a second chance," he says.

Madubuike would end up playing in all 13 games of his redshirt freshman year at College Station in 2017, then combined for 11 sacks and 22 tackles for loss in his sophomore and junior seasons before declaring for the NFL Draft.

At the 2020 NFL combine, Madubuike ran a 4.83 40-yard dash at 293 pounds, in the 96th percentile among defensive tackles over a 21-year span. His 7.37 three-cone drill time was the fastest by a defensive tackle in two years. His 80 1/2-inch wingspan was second widest among defensive tackles at the combine. And he bench-pressed 225 pounds 31 times.

But here is what NFL scouting reports said about Madubuike: He's immature. He's lazy. He's angry. He doesn't trust easily. He didn't get along with some of his teammates, his position coach or his strength coach.

At A&M, Madubuike was recruited by Kevin Sumlin, but Sumlin was fired after Madubuike's freshman season and replaced by Jimbo Fisher. The new staff had no allegiance to Madubuike, and in his view, Sumlin recruits were not dealt with like Fisher recruits.

"There was preferential treatment and the players began to form cliques," Festus says. "There was a lot of politics, and many players were affected by it."

Justin believes he was labeled unfairly. He acknowledges that sometimes he didn't want to do things the way the new staff wanted, but he also thought he was singled out.

"These people don't really care about you," he says. "They're here for a year then going to go to Michigan State next year, so you have to do what you have to do as an individual to reach your goals and get to the next level. I didn't believe that they had my best interest in mind."

Before the draft, one college scouting director said Madubuike was a first-round talent. Some teams downgraded him because of "character" concerns. The Texans took him off the board entirely.

The Ravens drew their conclusions from their own experiences with him. In predraft interviews, they connected with him and recognized a genality. Southwest area scout Kevin Weidl tried to view Madubuike without prejudice and believed strongly he was a special talent who would thrive in the right environment.

Ravens general manager Eric DeCosta phoned Madubuike during the third round of the 2020 draft with word that he would be a Raven. The conversation was mostly one-sided. Madubuike really couldn't say much. When the selection was announced on television, he put his head on his mother Maureen's shoulder, embraced her and sobbed.

The emotion had been building for a while. And Madubuike was intent on rewarding people who believed in him.

Baltimore head coach John Harbaugh stresses cohesiveness, provides exceptional leadership and has a history of player development. Defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald's game plans have resulted in the Ravens leading the league in sacks and turnovers, as well as interest from other teams about a promotion to head coach. Weaver, also the team's associate head coach, is a former Raven defensive end who understands the organizational culture and is considered a potential head coach partly because of his people skills.

The Ravens were perfect for Madubuike.

"I knew the right team was going to pick me up and believe in me," Madubuike says. "That's what the Ravens did. And since then, I've developed as a person, player and professional on the Ravens team. I'm around a lot of people who care for me and believe in me. I'm thankful to them."

And here's what the Ravens say about Madubuike: He's accountable. He works hard. He smiles a lot. He's coachable. He is one of the most popular people in the building.

In Madubuike's first three years, he learned about relentlessness from veteran Calais Campbell. Justin Houston taught him the importance of knowing tendencies and gave him tips on setting up moves. Jason Pierre-Paul was an example of consistency in approach.

"I always asked questions and tried to remember the things they taught me," Madubuike says.

The Ravens didn't want Campbell to go last offseason, but he chose to sign with the Falcons in free agency, and they didn't bring back Houston or Pierre-Paul. That meant different expectations for Madubuike. He played 98 more snaps in 2023 than in 2022, but the biggest change came in his place in the defensive hierarchy.

"It's not a knock to Calais or anybody that was an older guy, but I think now (Madubuike is) at a place to where no one is telling him to do this or do that," Ravens defensive lineman Broderick Washington says. "He's the guy now, and he can just be free and be Madubuike. I think that's the biggest difference."

For several years, former Falcons standout Chuck Smith was considered the premier independent pass rush coach in the country. Madubuike worked with him in the offseason before the 2022 season and developed a bond, and last year, the Ravens hired Smith to coach outside linebackers.

In past years, Madubuike was asked to do more dirty work and was often responsible for the middle push or taking on double teams so those veterans could make plays. Most of Madubuike's 5 1/2 sacks in 2022 were more about persistence than athleticism. This season, coaches have schemed to create more one-on-ones for Madubuike.

The Ravens have moved him around the line to try to take advantage of matchups against specific blockers, using him a little like the Chiefs use Chris Jones, Weaver says. According to TruMedia, Madubuike has lined up as an interior player on just 60 percent of his snaps. Most of his impact plays — 60 percent of his sacks and 60 percent of his pressures — have come at end or linebacker.

Weaver says Madubuike's ability to bend, play with leverage and "twitch" is rare for someone his size.

"Some of the things he's able to do as a defensive tackle are crazy to me," Washington says. "He's way stronger than you think and he is fast and can bend the corner like a defensive end."

In the fourth quarter of an October game in Arizona, Madubuike tried something he never had before. Instead of engaging with the offensive lineman trying to block him and filling the gap it appeared he would be filling, he used a spin move. The protection slid the other way and Madubuike had a clear path to Cardinals quarterback Josh Dobbs for a sack.

Madubuike had never seen another defensive tackle land the move, and he liked the play so much that he asked NFL Network for a TV copy. The spin was one of a few moves Madubuike added to his repertoire this season. He's also doing a new cross-chop and a stutter ghost move in which he ducks under a blocker and rips.

He credits offseason work in Atlanta with Dez Walker, a disciple of Chuck Smith's who also tutors Cam Heyward, Montez Sweat, Leonard Floyd and several other NFL pass rushers. Walker says he emphasized Madubuike's vision, get-off and hips and studied the history of pass rushing with him, watching tape of some of the greats. They worked on moving Madubuike around the line so he would be comfortable anywhere.

"Now he can play positionless football in the front, and that's what everybody is looking for," Walker says. "If you play chess, it's like he's the queen. He can do everything on the chessboard."

Some of Madubuike's game now is finesse. And the finesse works because of his power moves, which remain his "fastball," according to Weaver. "If there's one thing an offensive lineman doesn't want to do, it's get trucked," Weaver says. "And because he has the ability to do that, it makes all these other lateral quickness things so effective."

Over time, Madubuike has tried to maximize his abilities by paying attention to diet and hydration, sleeping well, sitting in the hot and cold tubs, and undergoing massage and muscle work. He also spends considerable time in the weight room, where he is more of a rep guy than a heavy lifter.

"I didn't want to be one of those D-tackles with a big old gut," he says. "I want to be chiseled and cut."

His body fat is around 13 percent.

"Have you ever seen the guy with his shirt off?" Roquan Smith told Ravens.com. "The guy looks like a wild animal."

When he was about 5, Madubuike was ushered out of a church service because he caused a ruckus while playing with other kids. The line was drawn when he bit a friend's ear. The same energy is evident when Madubuike jumps on a teammate's back as he walks down the hallway.

In the Ravens locker room, Madubuike and fellow defensive tackle Travis Jones are prone to horseplay, and horseplay often turns into wrestling.

"Out of nowhere you'll see (Madubuike) flip a switch, turn on the super strength and start driving Travis," Washington says. "It shocks you a little bit."

Why? Jones outweighs Madubuike by about 45 pounds.

Madubuike doesn't ingest caffeine. He gets his boost from freshly squeezed orange juice. Weaver says Madubuike practices with the same energy daily, making him a rarity.

"Some guys have their days when they take plays off," Weaver says. "He doesn't."

On Fridays before Sunday games, the Ravens have a half-speed practice emphasizing alignment, communication and technique — and not getting hurt. During a recent Friday practice, Madubuike intercepted a pass. As he was running with the ball, he fumbled. Then he went all out, diving on the ball and knocking the wind out of himself.

"That's who he is," Weaver says, chuckling. And who he is rubs off on others.

"Being around 'Beeks' makes you have to elevate your game because he plays with so much energy and passion," Washington says. "It's just his presence — he's got a dominating presence about himself that being his teammate makes you want to dominate with him and for him. You feel like you don't want to let him down, so you have to get on his same level day in and day out."

About a year and a half ago, Houston gave Madubuike a book of daily scripture readings for men, and the book helped him take his understanding to another level.

"I got really deep into my faith in the offseason, being very thankful for where I am in life," Madubuike says. "That was big for me. It helped to lift my spirits on days I didn't feel like I was my best self. And now it's helping me stay humble, spread love and lift other people's spirits up."

Spending time in prayer is part of an emphasis on "me time," in Madubuike's words. He's leaving time to be alone, to make playlists, watch movies and play video games. "It allows me to stay in tune with myself and how I'm feeling and understand if I'm not feeling right, why I'm not feeling right," he says.

His father says Madubuike has been good about turning off noise. "I think his success this year is about focus," Festus says.

Last summer Madubuike was shopping for a shag rug to cover a wood floor in his home. He found one he liked at HomeGoods but didn't like the price — about \$600. He proceeded to negotiate.

"Hey, there's a little stain there," he told an associate. "Can you take a couple hundred dollars off?"

Madubuike got his discount, but a couple of hundred dollars is not likely to matter much. His four-year, \$4.8 million rookie contract is up this offseason, and a lucrative payday north of \$20 million a year is coming. He says he hasn't thought much about life-changing money. Unlike some teammates, Madubuike doesn't have a family that depends on him for financial assistance.

"What motivates me," he says, "is never having to say, 'I wish I would have ...'"

He turned down a contract extension from the Ravens in training camp. They have made other attempts to sign him since, he says, but he wanted to wait to commit until his value could be better defined. If the Ravens can't get him to sign an extension before the start of free agency, they will almost assuredly use the franchise tag. And whether he is playing next season on a five-year deal with a massive signing bonus or on a one-year franchise tag contract, he will be content.

"I'm not going to lie, I thought I could have this kind of year," Madubuike says. "I just knew the work I put in was going to pay off if I stayed grounded in my discipline, stayed consistent and stayed faithful."

So if you know Justin Madubuike, it's not difficult to understand his breakout season.

How Justin Madubuike Finally Became The NFL Player He Wanted To Be

There's no one change that led to Madubuike's breakout season, those close to him say. The process to get here just took longer than expected.

BALTIMORE BANNER | JANUARY 10, 2024 | GIANA HAN

When Justin Madubuike broke from the traditional set position, the power he exerted on the starting blocks resonated — “like an earthquake,” McKinney North High School track coach Melvin Crosby said.

Why does he know this about his former shot put and discus thrower? Because one day Madubuike, then a defensive lineman for the North Texas high school's football team, got it in his head that he wanted to run.

“Everyone was running, and I wanted to run, too,” Madubuike said. “I'm like, ‘I want to run. I'm not fat. I'm strong. That's why I'm throwing shot put. But I'm fast. I want to run.’”

Crosby agreed to put him in a JV race, so Madubuike bought the correct shoes and started working on the blocks. In his very first race, he blew the competition away.

To this day, Crosby regrets that there are no recordings of the race — or the reactions of all the opposing coaches as this lineman flew by all the much skinnier, smaller actual runners.

“It's like ... being out on the ocean and maybe seeing a blue whale, just something like, ‘No one that big should be moving that fast,’” Crosby said.

Football head coach Mike Fecci was in attendance, and said Madubuike thought he was a “world-class sprinter” after that. That is, until he ran a few more races and didn't place first.

“I was killing them! I was determined,” Madubuike, now a Pro Bowl tackle with the AFC North champion Ravens, said with a laugh recently. “But then I got cocky. I didn't want to practice. I ran again, and then I got embarrassed.”

His sprinting career was short-lived, but athleticism has been a hallmark of his career. He's always had a tantalizing combination of speed and power, but this year he's finally put it together to reach the Pro Bowl in a season those close to him say has been a long time coming.

Madubuike recorded a sub-five-second 40-yard sprint at the NFL scouting combine. He outpaced several of the much lighter quarterbacks. His 4.83 coming out of Texas A&M impressed NFL coaches and scouts — as well as the other players in attendance.

“He's got a great mix of strength, density, as well as quickness and track speed,” said Ravens right guard Kevin Zeitler, who has had to compete against him at practice. “The fact that it can all be put in that package makes it really difficult.”

But, as Zeitler pointed out, it's one thing to do it in practice. It's another to do it when it counts, under the lights of an NFL stadium. And for the first two years of his pro career, Madubuike couldn't put it together consistently. In his third year, he showed a hint of his potential.

Then he showed up for his fourth training camp.

“He's always been a handful, but this year, all of training camp, you could tell he was doing it on another level, driving us crazy,” Zeitler said.

He's been driving opposing quarterbacks crazy, as well. Using that shot put strength and sprinter speed, he's bypassed milestones and tied a league record for recording at least half a sack in 11 consecutive games.

To understand how he made the leap in Year 4 — with a season that should make him one of the most sought-after free agents of the offseason — it helps to look at the path that brought him here.

Getting noticed

When Crosby picked Madubuike up for his first high school football workout, the freshman asked whether college scouts would be able to find and recruit him at McKinney North, where he had just transferred. Crosby took one look at him said, “They'll find you.”

Even then, Madubuike was an intimidating figure. And that was when he still might have been sneaking some pizza rolls and Pop-Tarts into his diet, Crosby said.

Madubuike found success on high school football fields across Texas immediately. Crosby has a vivid memory of Madubuike reaching through two linemen and a running back to sack a quarterback with one arm. He swears Madubuike intimidated the opponent so much, it was enough to pull off an upset.

It's funny to think he ever worried about being recruited, Crosby said. The offers, all 26 of them, poured in. And once he went to Texas A&M, his power and speed again led to quick success. He appeared in every game his redshirt freshman year and won the team's defensive Most Valuable Player award by his sophomore year, followed by another his junior year. When he decided to declare early, several mock drafts projected him to go in the first round, but he fell to the third. The Ravens were the lucky ones to scoop him up at pick No. 71.

Once Madubuike hit the NFL, he learned that talent and size aren't enough — all the small details have to be taken care of, too, Fecci said. But Madubuike has always been on a quest for new ways to keep his body at peak performance level.

This season, he decided to stop eating after 8:30 p.m. because it leaves him feeling bloated the next day when he goes to work. He's increased his hydration, although he gets bored of water sometimes, so he's had to come up with healthy alternatives like mixing in electrolyte powders or juices that aren't too sugary. He's also emphasized sleep. He laughed a little as he admitted to having a 10:30 p.m. bedtime.

"Going to bed on time is huge," Madubuike said. "Super, super underrated. Nobody wants to hear it."

The result? A body that impresses in a locker room full of athletes competing at the highest level.

"He's shredded," inside linebacker Roquan Smith said. "Have you ever seen the guy with his shirt off? The guy looks like a wild animal. I wish I looked like that."

It makes sense why he's so dominant on the field, Smith said. But brawn is only a small part of Madubuike's success story.

Questioning everything

Fecci always preached to his team that there were no dumb questions.

"If you have one, ask," Fecci told the locker room. "And boy, did he."

Madubuike's questions have become a defining characteristic of who he is as a person. In meetings and out of them, he's constantly inquiring about the world.

"I'm interested in people and why things are the way" that they are, Madubuike said. "I question everything. I'm kind of like a conspiracy theorist a little bit. I just question things. Because the world's very interesting. People are interesting. People come from all walks of life, different perspectives. And that's interesting to me."

Without pride or fear holding him back, Madubuike is always prepared mentally. You know he is, because if he isn't, he'll ask. Sometimes people laugh at him, he said, but he doesn't mind because he gets his answer in the end.

Madubuike pairs his curiosity with observational skills and a good memory. Former Ravens defensive lineman Calais Campbell, a mentor of his, was astounded by his repository of knowledge when the team would do a "Jeopardy!"-style game to prepare. The coaches would throw in random nonfootball-related questions, and somehow, Madubuike knew the answers to the hardest ones.

That constant desire to understand and to gain knowledge to better himself is really the root of Madubuike's success. It might be in a very physical field, but it all goes back to his mind, he said.

"You get physically better by going through mental breakthroughs or [setting] mental goals for yourself," Madubuike said.

But even with the size and strength to match his inquisitive mind, something was missing for Madubuike in the early part of his NFL career. He started three games as a rookie and 11 the next year, but registered only three sacks total and was inconsistent at best.

He — and those who had helped him get to that point — knew he could be better.

Passing the test, finally

With a few exceptions, most rookies "suck," Campbell said. But with defensive linemen, it's usually Year 3 where you truly see if they're going to make it.

In 2022, Madubuike had 5.5 sacks, 42 tackles and nine quarterback hits in 17 games. You had an idea he could dominate, Campbell said, but he was still just part of the rotation.

One year later, he has more than doubled his sack total and almost quadrupled his quarterback hits. He's surpassed his tackle total by 14. And he's also affecting the games in other ways, ranking 23rd among qualifying interior defensive linemen in pass-rush win rate (14%), according to Pro Football focus, and sixth in total pressures (64).

Those around him at the Ravens facility each day said nothing's changed this year, it was only a matter of time with the way he approaches every day — he never has a bad day, and has always been interested in every method or move that can improve his game, defensive line coach Anthony Weaver said.

But to take off like this, something had to have changed. And one of the biggest differences has been the absence of Campbell, something Campbell himself knows makes a huge difference. It's the first time Madubuike gets the chance to be "The Guy," Campbell said.

Madubuike saw the hole left by Campbell ahead of the season and knew he was the "right man to fill the void." With the realization, he said he started taking more accountability. From giving it all on every practice repetition to holding himself accountable to his early bedtime, he said that's been the biggest difference that no one else can necessarily see.

He also started training his body to carry more snaps by incorporating "more running, more gassers," Madubuike said at Ravens training camp. And he took a greater interest in learning skill moves, according to Ravens outside linebackers coach Chuck Smith, who used to privately train pass rushers, including Madubuike. Before games, he works on each move, from the spin to the cross-chop to the chop-drive.

For the past three years, Madubuike keeps a journal with him, where he tries to keep track of his goals. But he struggled to set them this year because every time he wrote something down, he thought “it’s not high enough, it’s not high enough.” He did not reveal what he settled on, but he was probably right.

Since he returned to Baltimore this season, there’s “nothing about him that isn’t an A-plus,” coach John Harbaugh said.

Prior to his breakout season, Madubuike was selected to be inducted into his high school’s Hall of Fame, a ceremony that will happen this month. School officials will have a lot more to add to his write-up, which currently mentions his high school and college stats and that he was drafted by the Ravens.

Looking back, Fecci and Crosby agreed they knew he had a chance to make the NFL but said they’d be lying if they thought he’d break 10 sacks in a season. Yet they’re not exactly surprised.

“He may not have been a great football player, but he was going to be great at something,” Crosby said. “He was going to do something special.”

What’s next?

Madubuike said he plays for the love of the game. Campbell is the same way — “but the money is nice.”

Ahead of this season, Madubuike took a gamble. The Ravens wanted to sign him to a contract extension, according to ESPN, but Madubuike decided he wanted to play out his contract and revisit the conversation as a free agent.

Since then, every sack he’s recorded has added millions to what to what he could be worth. For some people, that makes it easier to push harder, when every rep works toward more money, Campbell said. But thinking that way doesn’t work for Madubuike.

At training camp, Madubuike said that after his decision was made, he put his contract out of his mind and focused on himself.

“I feel like the more you think about it, the more it becomes a distraction,” he said in August. “If you put your head down and work, I feel like everything will work itself out in the end.”

Whether he’s thinking about it or not, his gamble has paid off. Madubuike’s current contract, his rookie deal, has an average annual value of \$1.2 million. Spotrac estimates he could make \$20.3 million a year as a free agent. PFF’s estimate is even higher, at \$23 million. The Ravens could choose to use the franchise tag on him, which would give him a one-year deal of close to \$20 million, according to Over The Cap’s projections.

It’s exciting for those back home, like Fecci and Crosby, to see him go off in his contract year. Crosby said it doesn’t always work out for players that their best seasons come the year before they negotiate a contract — but at the same time, he doesn’t think there’s any price that would change the way Madubuike has played.

“He deserves whatever he’s going to hopefully get,” Fecci said. “I don’t think that’s what motivates him to the level it does others. I think what motivates him is just being great at what he does. All that stuff that comes from it is just icing on the cake.”

Crosby said it’s been wonderful to see how the city of Baltimore has embraced Madubuike, and Fecci said he’s a very loyal person. The Ravens would certainly like to keep him, but they have difficult decisions to make.

Madubuike isn’t the only Raven who has stepped up in his contract year. Inside linebacker Patrick Queen had a Pro Bowl season. Safety Geno Stone has outperformed expectations. PFF lists four other Ravens among their top-100 free agent rankings. If every player receives what PFF estimates to be their average annual value, the Ravens would have to pay the seven of them \$79 million a year.

With all the contracted players returning next year, the Ravens have about \$18 million in cap space, based on Russell Street Report’s calculations (which, as of this writing, do not yet include defensive lineman Michael Pierce’s extension).

Madubuike is the most expensive of their pending free agents but also potentially the most important. One could argue that pass rushers are the second-most important position in football. As offenses rely more on the pass, defenses need to rely more on those who can disrupt the pass.

And Madubuike has proven that he can be incredibly disruptive. In addition to his 13 sacks, he has 33 hurries, according to PFF. He’s also effective at taking on blockers, which creates room for the team’s dynamic inside linebackers. It’s up to Ravens general manager Eric DeCosta to decide whether Madubuike or Queen is more important — if he can find a way to keep either of them.

Either way, Madubuike has big things coming to him, and he deserves them all, his teammates say. But for now, they’ll enjoy him while they have him as they look for a Super Bowl run.

“We’re all elated,” Pierce said about Madubuike’s success. “He’s been working hard since he’s been in the league. And for him to be able to realize his dreams, and I’m sure he probably surpassed some things he may have thought he could do, but for us, he’s been huge. He’s a driver for our defense, especially our pass rush up front. ... I can see it happening, the work he’s put in.”

Tee Martin Knows The Pain Of Having A Dream Denied. The Ravens QB Coach Is Finally Getting His Chance To Change Perceptions.

BALTIMORE BANNER | DECEMBER 14, 2023 | GIANA HAN

Tee Martin drove his agent crazy.

Focused on growing where his feet were planted, the NFL-player-turned coach preferred to do his work, stay in the moment and trust it would lead him where he wanted to go. Push for another job? He'd rather handle the one he has.

But, after USC fired him from his offensive coordinator role in late 2018, he went to watch Lamar Jackson play the Atlanta Falcons and took a moment to dream.

Watching Jackson, then a rookie, pass for 125 yards and rush for 75 to lead the Ravens to a 26-16 win, Martin thought to himself, "Wow. This is pretty cool." Martin, who'd heard all the stereotypes about Black QBs as he played the position, imagined what it would be like to coach a player like Jackson.

He wanted to make it back to the NFL as a quarterbacks coach but knew — again — that Black men traditionally had not been given those roles.

Indeed, his next two positions — at his alma mater, Tennessee, and with the Ravens — would put him in charge of wide receivers.

So, when John Harbaugh called him to his office after last season, Martin braced for the worst. Offensive coordinator Greg Roman had just left the team. The organization was talking about taking the offense in a different direction.

"I thought I was getting let go," Martin said. "I was actually thinking, 'I need to go and find a job.' And then ... John told me to prepare for an interview the next day."

Although Martin had imagined, throughout his time as a wide receivers coach, what he would do to help every quarterback he worked with, he hadn't expressed his desire for the job to the Ravens. Yet here Harbaugh was asking him to interview. So, after recovering from the shock, Martin went home and stayed up until 3 a.m. putting together a plan.

Four years, two months and 20 days after he sat in the stands watching Jackson, Martin was named Jackson's quarterbacks coach. He's helping coach Jackson into the MVP conversation all while making history leading the league's first all-Black quarterback corps.

Fits and starts

When Martin started playing football as a child, he was not impressed with the sport. His coaches had him playing wide receiver, and it was boring.

"When you're 6 or 7, the wideouts don't get the ball," Martin said. "You're just out there blocking."

So Martin quit.

His retirement lasted only two years, though. He was idly watching a team practice at Navco Park in Mobile, Alabama, one day when a ball rolled over to him. He launched it back, maybe 40 yards or so.

After seeing him throw, coach Henry Pugh asked Martin to wait around for the end of practice. Then he drove him home to talk to his mom. He told her that, if she let him play for the Navco Vikings, they would take care of the costs. And so Martin's quarterbacking career began.

The position spoke to Martin's sense of responsibility and leadership as the oldest of three children. In addition to an arm, he had the ability to think the game. Those close to him saw as much and nurtured his desire to learn the most cerebral position in sports.

But, when Martin attended camps at Alabama and Auburn, he didn't receive the same support. He would start out with the quarterbacks because they let the kids do drills for the position they wanted to play, but he would inevitably end up at wide receiver.

"I remember, at an Auburn camp, I had got MVP at quarterback already," Martin said. "And then I went and caught like six touchdown passes at receiver. And it was like this discussion of, 'What is he?' And I just didn't like how that felt."

Martin went through much of the recruiting process alone, and he found himself drifting toward the people he felt were being honest about his chances to play quarterback. Ultimately, it was Tennessee's track record of allowing Black men to play quarterback that sold him.

Randy Sanders would eventually become Tennessee's quarterbacks coach at the end of Martin's tenure, but at the time of his recruitment he was coaching the running backs. Even so, as he got to know Martin, it was clear to him he had what it took to be a quarterback.

Sanders had heard through the grapevine that Martin was athletic and had a good arm. But he learned Martin was much more than that. He was a "scientist, a deep thinker." He also had "a lot of natural leadership to him."

Martin also impressed Sanders by being willing to go somewhere he wouldn't start immediately; instead, he signed up to bide his time and learn from Peyton Manning. It paid off when Martin took the reins and led the school to the 1998 national title.

Yet, once again, that wasn't enough to impress scouts at the next level. To his and his coaches' surprise, he lasted until the fifth round of the draft, perhaps because he had been so unselfish and hadn't padded his statistics, Sanders mused.

For years, Martin had fought to prove he belonged in the pocket, a place where not many Black men had stood before him. Dropping in the draft made him fear the dream would be denied — and shifted his thinking to ways he could change perceptions if he didn't get a chance to do so on the field.

"Because, having had the college career I had and then to go fifth round, I questioned if I even wanted to play in the league," Martin said. "How can someone who had the amount of success I had in college fall that far in the draft if it weren't for something that had anything other than to do with football? Because you just can't explain that."

Called to coaching

Long before Martin ever dreamed of putting on an NFL jersey, he dreamed of being a coach.

Growing up in Mobile, Martin saw a struggling community. He spent plenty of time "in the lines" waiting for food and watched those around him succumb to drug abuse and the violence that accompanied the drug trade.

A series of youth and high school coaches kept him from the streets and delivered him to Tennessee, where his leadership potential became clear. In the summer of 1999, with the Vols getting set to defend their national title, Martin took it upon himself to make sure players at every position gathered for summer sessions.

Later, as Martin struggled to find his place in the NFL — he appeared in only three games, completing six of 16 passes — he started training quarterbacks in the offseason. And, each time he returned to training camp, he couldn't help but wonder if he should give up the grind and begin his coaching career.

However, many coaches climb the ranks right out of college, knowing they don't have the chance to play in the NFL. Martin, who was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers, had already built a family and couldn't afford to work his way up from a graduate assistant's salary.

So he locked himself in a room for two days. And, when he came out, he presented his wife with the plan for Playmaker Sports, a company that now specializes in sports event planning, quarterback training and skills development.

To get it there, he drove around the Atlanta area to 10 high schools a day, leaving his business card on windows. He also rode with Sanders on recruiting trips, observing. In his first year, he drew 1,500 participants to his programs. That caught the eye of Nike, which had only 700 participants.

Martin began coaching quarterbacks as a trainer and at Morehouse College and different high schools. His son, Amari Rodgers, remembers early mornings when his dad would wake him up and drag him to school.

"I remember going in there and nobody else was in there — maybe a janitor," Rodgers said. "And he's just in there watching film."

Martin's hard work and production eventually drew attention at the college level, and he received two offers at the same time, one from Oregon and one from the University of New Mexico — from current Maryland coach Michael Locksley. He turned down the more prestigious Pac-12 offer because it required him to coach wide receivers, and he still wanted to be true to himself.

Then, one year later, Sanders called. When Martin heard the offer, his first reaction was exasperation: "Duuuuude, wide receivers?" But Martin trusted Sanders, so he took the risk and accepted.

At night, he would put on cleats and run routes, trying to teach himself what it's like to be a receiver. He would try drills on his son — then 11 years old — because he didn't want anyone to know how inexperienced he was. Throughout his career, Rodgers has hit up his father for drills or to go over film, and he never realized his dad was aiming to get back to coaching another position.

"I recently asked him if he liked coaching quarterbacks or wide receivers better, and he said quarterbacks without a doubt," Rodgers said. "It definitely made sense when he said that, but I thought he liked coaching receivers because he did it for so long. ... He was such a good receivers coach, it kind of became a norm."

Nonetheless, players flocked to Martin, Sanders said, because they could sense his desire to help them. He caught on quickly and soon had knowledge to pair with his impressive communications skills. As he progressed in his career, he started to catch the eye of NFL front offices through the players, including Juju Smith-Schuster and Randall Cobb, he developed and sent to the league. Rodgers played with three of his dad's wide receivers — Cobb, Michael Pittman Jr. and Robert Woods — and they all told him Martin was the best coach they'd ever had.

As stubborn as he felt about wanting to coach quarterbacks, Martin found himself unwilling to express his desire out of respect and loyalty to his colleagues, he said. But that didn't stop him from analyzing how he'd coach each quarterback he encountered.

Yet he went 13 years without coaching the position. He tries not to linger on the ways his dream was deferred, opting to take lessons instead.

"It's actually a pretty cool deal because, [for] a receiver communicating to Lamar, I was able to talk to them about, 'This is what the quarterback is looking at,'" Martin said. "And, with Lamar at times, certain things that he's wanting or thinking ... wideouts might not see it that way, and to kind of sit in the middle of it, it's sometimes good to referee those conversations because I can understand both sides."

"I'm actually grateful and thankful that I've had a chance to coach something else before I came back to what I knew, because I wouldn't necessarily have that viewpoint if I only did quarterbacks."

An early, lasting influence

Martin's mother was young when she had him, so he spent a lot of time with his great-grandmother as his mom finished schooling. Mary Posely has since died, but every time Martin speaks to quarterbacks Jackson, Tyler Huntley and Josh Johnson or anyone else on the team, they encounter her influence.

"That's who I am in terms of my spiritual being and what I stand for," Martin said.

Martin described Posely as a "short" Native American woman who never drove and never had an ideal job. But she was also a tough woman who always found a way through the "struggle, struggle, struggle" and didn't let anyone step over her or her beliefs.

Despite her toughness and strength, she had a soft touch. She was gentle in her corrections, never wanting to scare Martin or his siblings out of creativity or the courage to explore. She was who Martin wanted to be, and her influence lives on.

"The way that I coach is through that way," Martin said. "I feel like, if I have to scream and yell at a player, I'm out of control, then I'm the issue. I take pride in being able to communicate and get players to be on track and do the things we ask them to do without being demeaning to them or talking down to them or losing my cool."

Huntley said that's something unique about Martin. As Ravens Executive Vice President Ozzie Newsome watches games and practices, he sees Martin communicating with Jackson between series, and it's obvious how comfortable and calm they are.

Jackson said he appreciates Martin's approach to coaching.

Martin wants players to be perfect, and he's going to be harder on them "than probably anyone else will," Jackson said, but he appreciates that.

"And every morning he's got something [about] championship quarterbacking, and 'I want you to be a championship quarterback,' Jackson said. "I'm cool with that, because I'm hard on myself, and I know I want to be great, and so does he."

Rodgers said his dad has loved working with Jackson. He loves his competitive drive. The two spend hours poring over film. And Martin said he drops a packet of information on the next opponent in Jackson's locker at the end of each game. It's a level of preparation he learned from working with Manning and Sanders at Tennessee. And it's clear Jackson trusts Martin, because he's responding with his best passing season.

Woody McCorvey, who coached Martin at Tennessee and is now the assistant athletic director of Clemson, was the first Black offensive coordinator in the Southeastern Conference. As he has with so many Black QBs, he's watched Jackson evolve since college. Under Martin's tutelage, he's seen Jackson become a polished passer in the pocket, something that's critical as Jackson ages.

Watching Jackson's success and seeing Martin surrounded by young Black quarterbacks who have all fended off position changes is especially fulfilling for McCorvey.

"I'm overjoyed because of the era that I came from. It was a no-no," said McCorvey, who arrived at Alabama State when there were no Black players at Auburn or Alabama (which would add two Black players in 1971 and, in 1974, Newsome.) "It was a no-no. You were never going to see that."

They're blessed to be making history, Huntley said, and it's extra special to be led by a man who helped show that it was OK for Black players to push against the stereotypes that they couldn't be quarterbacks. Rodgers said his dad is passionate about Black history and raising up all Black athletes.

"I know it means so much to him," Rodgers said.

Martin's success at 45 years old comes as no shock to Sanders, who has known him since he was a high schooler.

"The biggest surprise to me is that he hasn't gotten a call and hasn't become a head coach somewhere," Sanders said.

Martin said he can't fathom thinking about the next stop when he's focused on helping Jackson and the Ravens be the best they can be.

That's OK, though, because those around him, from his mentors — Sanders, McCorvey and, more recently, Newsome — to his mentees such as Huntley, are dreaming big for him. This league only has three Black head coaches and six minority head coaches, and Black offensive coordinators are outnumbered nine to one, but they feel it's only a matter of time before Martin moves on to bigger and better.

"His future is very bright as far as football," Newsome said. "And I think that's good because we need young men like Tee to stay in the game and have the impact that they have on the young kids coming up."

Cover Story: The Evolution Of Todd Monken

BALTIMORERAVENS.COM | **SEPTEMBER 9, 2023** | RYAN MINK

Todd Monken was 4 years old when he started watching football film.

His father, Bob, was the head coach at Lake Park High School in Illinois for 30 years. After Saturday night games, Todd rode with his dad the next morning to pick up the tape. Then they'd retire to the basement.

"He sat in my lap and watched it with me," Bob said. "He was connected to football from the time he was born."

Bob had four brothers. They were all high school football head coaches. Those five brothers had seven sons. Except Todd, they all coached or still coach high school football.

The lineage continues. Todd's son, Travis, is a senior at Oklahoma State and is entering his fourth season as a student football assistant. That's three generations and 13 football coaches in the Monken family. It's the family business.

There are five Monkens in the Illinois high school football coaches hall of fame, but Todd isn't one of them. He launched his career in college and has climbed the highest of anyone in his family. Thirty-four years and 13 moves later, Monken is in Baltimore – back in the NFL and in position to have his greatest success yet.

Since Monken was introduced as the Ravens' new offensive coordinator on Feb. 21, quarterback Lamar Jackson signed a long-term extension and Baltimore assembled its most talented wide receiver room in franchise history, signing superstar Odell Beckham Jr. and veteran Nelson Agholor, and drafting Zay Flowers in the first round. The Ravens still have one of the game's top tight ends, a strong returning offensive line, and a deep and dynamic running back corps.

The pieces are in place, and Monken is at the controls. If his offense is a hit, the Ravens have a legitimate chance to reach the Super Bowl that has eluded them over the first five years of the Jackson era. With Monken coming off back-to-back college football championships at Georgia, the hope is that he can also help deliver a trophy to Baltimore.

When Monken kicks off his first season as the Ravens' offensive play-caller Sunday, sitting in a booth high above the turf at M&T Bank Stadium so his emotions don't get the best of him, he'll sit on a mountain of experiences and influences that have led him to this opportunity.

Monken doesn't come from a coaching tree. He comes from a coaching forest, anchored by his family's football roots. And the 2023 version of Monken's offense will be unlike anything anyone has seen before.

"I'm very excited – very, very excited," tight end Mark Andrews said. "I have a lot of faith and trust in Coach Monken and the way that he sees the game. He's very good at what he does."

'Your Heroes Were Your Dad's Players'

Todd started routinely going to his dad's high school football practices when he was in early elementary school – too early to remember it clearly.

"I was trying not to piss off dad, probably dicking around somewhere behind the stands or something," he said.

His father's recollection is a little different. Bob remembers Todd finding a helmet and shoulder pads to slap on and hitting the tackling dummies, trying to do whatever the players did.

"He was just part of us," Bill said. "I didn't have to worry about him during practice. He was right there with the players. He was always there."

One of Todd's fondest memories is summers when his dad took his team to Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisc., for a week and all the coaches, their kids, and the players stayed in the dorms. They took field trips to Green Bay to the Packers Hall of Fame and watched the players ride bicycles to training camp practice.

Todd's identity was as a Lake Park Lancer. He had a scrapbook with pictures of his dad's players.

"Your heroes were your dad's players," Todd said. "After being a little kid when my mom would make my Halloween costumes, I bet I went as a football player for freakin' eight years in a row or something."

Monken family holidays were a football convention. They convened for either Thanksgiving or Christmas with 18 grandchildren, including 11 boys, crammed into three nearby houses. They played football every day, came back with black eyes and ice bags on their heads, and held boxing matches in the basement at night.

One of the cousins Todd was closest with is Jeff Monken, who is in his 10th season as the head football coach at Army. Asked what Todd was like as a kid, Jeff answered with no hesitation.

"Funny," he said. "That guy loves life. He always has. He's a fierce competitor, but personally kind of laid back. He likes to joke, likes to laugh. He's still the same way."

One of Jeff's favorite childhood stories is a time when the boys were running through the hallways the morning after a sleepover probably full of combat. Todd's little brother, Ted, ran straight at Jeff, said "You wanna fight?!" and punched him square in the nose. Jeff gushed blood. Todd looked at him and wise cracked something like, "Well, you're no boxer."

"I couldn't help but laugh, blood running down my teeth," Jeff said.

Of course, there was plenty of football talk during the holidays among the adults, with it soaking into the kids via osmosis when they weren't trying to kill each other. It wasn't arguments, just talking about the game. Jeff's father, Mike, coached at Joilet East and Joilet Central High in Illinois for more than 30 years. He and Bob are both in the Illinois hall of fame.

"Our dads were so influential in their communities," Jeff said. "They coached their players just like they fathered us. They were very caring, very loving, but they were all disciplinarians. It wasn't just activity time. They wanted to build teams and build young men."

"When you're around people like that that love what they do and are respected because of the way they treat people, it makes you want to be a part of that. I think it attracted all of us to want to go into that profession ourselves."

For Todd, the love of coaching is also just an extension of his childhood. He just loved being around the guys and the game.

"I think when you've been part of a team since 5 years old, there's something about being part of the team. It's being part of something greater than yourself, helping others succeed," he said. "Then there's the strategic part of it. My whole family is in teaching, so there's a teaching element to it. How do you maximize someone's measurable skillset?"

As he got older, Todd drew up offensive plays for his father. They ran one in a scrimmage, Bob said, but never in a real game. It was in high school when Todd first thought he might want to follow in the family business and someday become a coach. Then he could call his own plays.

He knew the first step would be to play, and he was good at that too. A quarterback at Knox College in Illinois, Monken led the nation in passing attempts, completions and completion percentage in 1988. He finished with eight different Knox College records.

But Todd always viewed playing in college as his appetizer to coaching, and he got his start at Grand Valley State under Tom Beck as a graduate assistant in 1989. Todd was paid \$5,000 to basically be the running backs coach, and his parents helped him make ends meet.

"Once I decided I wanted to coach, I wanted to do it at the highest level," Todd said. "I had no thought that I would ever get to the Baltimore Ravens. I just thought, 'Man, if I could coach in college.' That was a pipe dream. Your dad is a high school coach and you're not connected that way. How are you ever going to get to that?"

"But I figured if I'm going to do it, let's go ahead and do it. If I didn't do that, I probably would have been a shop teacher at Washington High School, having a \$7,000 stipend and getting pissed off at some kid that doesn't know how to build a countertop the right way."

That's Monken's modesty (and sense of humor) coming through.

"He's really, really smart. I envy that as a coach. I envy the knowledge he has for the game and the way he sees things, recognizes things, adjusts in-game while things are going on," Jeff said. "He's a smart guy, a tremendous leader, and he has a great personality. He could have done a lot of things, but he's doing exactly what God engineered him to do."

'It's a Big-Ass Coaching Tree'

Todd and his wife, Terri Monken, met at a funeral. Todd jokes that he was the original funeral crasher.

She was struck by his blue eyes and the vulnerability of a tough football guy to show his emotions. How soon did she find out he was very into football?

"Oh, probably within the first few minutes of talking to him," Terri said. "It's in his DNA. You just always know there's three people in the room: you, him, and football."

After dating for six years, the two were married in 1991, 32 years ago. They've moved 13 times since.

"You get used to the smell of cardboard," Terri said with a laugh. "I don't think Todd's got 'settle' in his bones. He loves to chase the opportunity. And every step, for the most part, has been a phenomenal move."

When they got hitched, Todd was in his second graduate assistant coaching job, this time at Notre Dame, where Beck had become the offensive coordinator under legendary Lou Holtz. From there, it was on to Eastern Michigan (1993-1999), where Monken worked his way up to offensive coordinator and called plays for the first time in 1999. In his first game, they had seven straight three-and-outs.

"I mean, holy (crap)," Monken said. "You talk about wanting to quit calling plays. I mean, my goodness. So, that was awful. I mean, I was like, 'I thought this was going to be fun; this is terrible.' There's nowhere to go. You can't complain about the play-caller. You're that guy."

After that, Monken went to Louisiana Tech (2000-2001), Oklahoma State (2002-2004), and LSU (2005-2006), mostly coaching wide receivers. In 2007, Jack Del Rio gave Monken his first job in the NFL with the Jacksonville Jaguars as the wide receivers coach. For four years, he worked under offensive coordinator Dirk Koetter, who became one of the biggest coaching influencers of his career.

In 2011, Monken left the Jaguars to take a job under Mike Gundy as the offensive coordinator at Oklahoma State. That's where he broke out of his wide receivers coaching track and got his first gig as an offensive coordinator at a big-time program.

In Todd's first season as the play-caller, the Cowboys averaged a mind-blowing 48.7 points per game with Brandon Weeden at quarterback, Justin Blackmon at wide receiver, and an Air Raid offense at their fingertips. This time, calling plays went a lot better.

In 2013, Monken took his first and only head coaching job at Southern Mississippi, where he inherited an 0-12 program and turned them around into a bowl game participant in three seasons. But he didn't like all the extra non-football headaches that came with it, so he resigned to go back to the NFL.

In 2016, Monken reunited with Koetter, then the head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, as his offensive coordinator. Their offense was pretty good the first two years (18th in yards, then ninth the year following). When Koetter handed off play-calling duties to Monken in 2018, it took off.

In the first game that season, the Bucs traveled to New Orleans to face the rival Saints. Ryan Fitzpatrick, a 35-year-old journeyman, threw for 417 yards and four touchdowns in a 48-40 Week 1 win.

"That's a very tough place to win," Koetter said. "It was bombs away that day. Monk lit them up."

In Fitzpatrick's next two games, he threw for 402 and 411 yards. It was the revival of "Fitzmagic" and birth of Monken's NFL notoriety.

The NFL landscape was floored by the Bucs' offensive explosion. The Ringer's Robert Mays broke down how Monken had "unleashed" Bucs receivers Mike Evans, DeSean Jackson and Chris Godwin, and built trust with his quarterback by creating clear windows that Fitzpatrick had no hesitation ripping passes into even well before there was separation.

Fitzpatrick's gunslinger style and Monken's aggressive play-calling were a hit. Tampa Bay led the NFL in passing and finished third in total offense, setting single-season club records in each category.

"He was obviously ready for the moment," Fitzpatrick said. "A lot of his background is in that Air Raid offense and throwing the ball all over. It's the absence of fear – the absence of fear as a play-caller and having the absence of fear at quarterback. It's not being afraid to give guys chances."

"I think the biggest thing I enjoyed about him was the empowerment that he gives the quarterback and the confidence. As a quarterback that had been in the league for a few years – that was Year 13 or 14 for me – you can tell if the play-caller has confidence in you when the plays are coming in. That was a big thing for me. I always knew that Todd trusted me, that he believed in me, and that came across through the headset."

Despite the Bucs' prolific 2018 offense, their defense struggled mightily and they finished 5-11. Koetter was fired following the last game, and incoming Bucs coach Bruce Arians didn't retain Monken.

So in 2019, Monken went to the Cleveland Browns to be their offensive coordinator under first-year head coach Freddie Kitchens. However, Kitchens retained play-calling duties, and he didn't give it up, even as the offense sputtered.

After a 6-10 finish, Kitchens was fired after just one year and Todd was again a free agent, unsure of whether he would get another shot in the NFL. It's the only one-year stop on Monken's extensive resume. The regret from the Cleveland experience stuck with Monken, but he learned from it just like he did from years of success at other places.

Beckham was with Monken that year in Cleveland, and he saw the toll it took on him.

"Cleveland may not have went the way he expected, but he went to Georgia and had a lot of success," Beckham said. "I feel like it's a 'Stella Got Her Groove Back' kind of thing. That gave him a lot of confidence to be the coach he is today. Now he's perfect for this opportunity. I think he knows what he has and what he's capable of doing."

At Georgia, Monken knew Head Coach Kirby Smart had a loaded defense, and if he could lift the offense, the school could break its 41-year championship drought. Sure enough, they won the national title in Monken's second year with an offense that ranked in the top 10 in points per game (38.6). Then they won it again last season, this time with an offense that scored the most points and piled up the most net yards in the country.

Georgia's offense looked very different from the "Air Raid" Todd ran at Oklahoma State and Tampa Bay. Georgia ran the ball more than it threw it, and the tight ends were heavily featured in play-action attacks. No player topped 1,000 receiving yards. He continued to evolve, showing his ability to marry his scheme with the strengths of his players.

Monken views his coaching career to this point as a tapestry. He took a little from here, there, and everywhere and wove it all together.

"It's a big-ass coaching tree," Monken said. "I wouldn't be where I'm at without a lot of people. It started with my father and my family, and the foundation of your belief system. And that grows. Then you're the subject of who you get around.

"Every step, you learn, even when it doesn't go the way you hope. There are things you can do better and things you'll never do again when you get a second opportunity. I'm better today than I was yesterday. I'm certainly better than I was three or four years ago, in a lot of ways."

'I'm Using the F-Word a Little Too Much'

Labor Day weekend is the final break for NFL players and coaches, one last hurrah with the family after the grind of training camp and before the start of the regular season.

On Saturday, Monken gave himself a little break. On a typical day, he's out the door by 6:05 a.m. On a day off, he left for the Under Armour Performance Center at 6:30.

"Work is always there," Terri said. "He's always looking at film, drawing up plays, writing up notes on what to do better. He's always trying to come up with sayings or words to reach the players. I don't want to say obsessed, but he's all-in. If there's 24 hours in the day, we're going to try to squeeze out 24 hours and five minutes."

Todd carries a notebook around with him, just in case inspiration strikes. If his son Travis is in town from college and they go out to dinner, someone walks away with a play scribbled on a napkin.

"It's crazy how much time he puts into it, just to make sure he's getting the best product to the players so he can put them in the best opportunity to win," said Travis, who was at Ravens OTAs and minicamp, helping out wherever he could, learning, and getting some time with dad.

"He's kept his juice. He loves it out there. He's always out there yelling and screaming, trying to get everyone involved."

As is the case for a lot of NFL coaches, family time – especially in the season – is extremely limited. The routine when Travis was a kid was for he and dad to watch "The Simpsons" on Wednesday nights together. Other than sometimes watching TV in bed, Todd has no hobbies, Terri said.

"When normal families come home and talk about their days, we just talk about football," Travis said. "That's really what our days are. It's how to beat Cover-3, what are we doing here, what happens when this guy does that. It's always talking ball, trying to get better."

That's how Monken stays ahead of the game. He's constantly thinking, researching, talking. It's an endless search for more wrinkles to add to his offense because if you don't, the opponent can catch up quickly.

In 2019, Greg Roman and the Ravens took the league by storm with a revolutionary run-heavy scheme centered around Jackson's extraordinary running talent. Behind the league's highest-scoring offense, the Ravens went 14-2 and broke numerous rushing records. Jackson was named the unanimous MVP and Roman was the AP Assistant Coach of the Year. That was only four years ago.

Now Roman is gone and Monken has ushered in a very different scheme. The revolution came and went. Now it's an offensive evolution in Baltimore.

"One thing we believe here is you have to keep things moving. The fundamentals don't ever really change, but the methods, the schemes, the Xs and Os, they've always got to be evolving because you're competing," Head Coach John Harbaugh said. "One thing I appreciate about Todd is he brings that philosophy to the table. He's not locked into a system. I like the fact that he's always looking for the next play."

One offensive mind that Harbaugh and Monken both admire is Kansas City Chiefs Head Coach Andy Reid. Reid is known for getting plays from anywhere, even attending high school games to find new wrinkles. He recently told a story about getting a touchdown play from a janitor.

"What parts of the business do you enjoy?" Monken said. "If you really enjoy creativity and watching film, you're not pigeonholed into one system. To me, that keeps it fresh. If you have lots of things you like outside of football, well, there's only 24 hours in the day. So what do you do with your free time? Do you watch film?"

"I see things on social media and I'm like, 'Why aren't we running that? That's good [crap].' The moment you think, 'This is our system, this is the one way to do it,' I think you're susceptible."

Todd Monken

During training camp, Jackson saw some routes on social media that he liked and sent it to Quarterbacks Coach Tee Martin, who relayed the message to Monken. Monken put them into practice.

"It made me feel good. Coach listens to me," Jackson said. "Coach is basically just giving us the keys to the offense. I'm loving it."

Fitzpatrick said the empowerment that Monken gives his players shows itself in the classroom and on gameday. It's not talking about one thing and doing another.

"It's not being conservative," Fitzpatrick said. "It's following through on some of those things you talk about during the week, whether it's taking a shot on first or second down. Or it's using the input that a quarterback gives you and throwing that into a play-call. Even though it's a tiny thing, for a quarterback to feel some ownership into the things they're doing, I think it makes it work that much better and makes you want to be that much more successful."

That outlook is something Monken learned from Koetter, who empowered him years ago as a first-time NFL coach, and then again as a first-time NFL offensive coordinator.

"It seems pretty normal that the guy in charge has a big say in what we do and how we do it. His career is on the line and how we have success is on the line," Monken said. "I think the more you empower people – it's not just the quarterback – the more you empower people, your coaches, your staff, people that work for you, the more you empower them to me, you're going to get more out of them."

But while listening to your players is an important part of the job, Monken knows what he likes and what he doesn't. And he's not afraid to let his players know. There's a reason why Monken's voice always sounds hoarse.

"He's not a guy that's going to tell you what you want to hear," Koetter said. "He's a straight shooter. Players want to be coached, but they also want to be told the truth."

"He pushes guys. He's demanding," Jeff Monken said. "But he still makes people very comfortable around him. Even though he's trying to get more out of you or tell you he's not happy with the performance, he tells you in a way that makes you want to do better, and do better for him because you like him."

Ravens players echo that sentiment. Given their time together in Cleveland, Beckham knows the way Monken ticks.

"He doesn't sugarcoat things," Beckham said. "I've had private conversations with him like, 'Hey, anything that needs to be said, let's say it.' Because I can respect a man telling me what it is. I have a lot of respect for Coach."

During practices this summer, Monken was often the loudest and most demonstrative person on the field. One day, reporters were stunned watching him stomp out the exact depth he wanted from a receiver's route after he ran it wrong. It's a major departure from Roman's more reserved demeanor.

"He's going to get on us," Jackson said. "Coach wants us to be great. He's trying to figure out the players, figure out our mindset, how we think and stuff like that. He wants the best for us and he wants to win."

Jackson chuckled talking about how loud Monken is in the meeting room, even first thing in the morning.

"I'm like, 'It's early.' He has his blood flowing," Jackson said. "In the meeting rooms, he's going to have you laughing, but he's dead serious about what he's saying. It means a lot just for him to have that going on in our offense. Everybody has to be dialed in, know what coach is thinking."

But just like his schemes and playbook continue to evolve, so does the way Monken interacts with players.

"I wouldn't say that I always handled it the right way at other stops," Monken said, a reference to Cleveland. "I promised myself that if I ever got another chance in the NFL, I would do it differently."

As he has with the other coaching influences in his life, Monken is learning from Harbaugh, a master at managing relationships who brings a boundless energy to the job, attacking it with "an enthusiasm unknown to mankind," a phrase instilled in Harbaugh from his father. They're both coach's kids, both products of their upbringing.

Monken has been around more abrasive coaching styles, which fit his no-nonsense approach. Though he has equally high standards, Harbaugh goes about it differently.

"I've gotten a lot better at it," Monken said. "I think it helps when you work for a guy like Coach. How he approaches them makes it easy for you to approach it that way. The head coach is fired up. If he's crazed, you're going to be a little more crazed."

Harbaugh has been impressed by his hire. Asked what has stood out most about Monken since his arrival, Harbaugh said his energy and coaching the details.

"He's very detail-oriented in all the little things and expects the guys to execute at a high level," Harbaugh said. "To me, that's what great coaches do."

'He's Going to Go For It'

So what's Monken's offense going to look like this season?

Like his "Air Raid" days at Oklahoma State and Tampa Bay, it's going to utilize more 11 personnel with three-wide receiver sets featuring Beckham, Rashod Bateman and Flowers.

Monken's Ravens offense is also going to pound the rock with J.K. Dobbins and Gus Edwards, just like his outfits did in Cleveland and at Georgia. It's going to get mismatches for Andrews and the tight ends. It's going to have a faster pace. It's going to take more shots down the field. It's going to have fewer scripted quarterback runs (but still some).

Monken doesn't like the perception that it's "his" offense. It's the Ravens' offense, with his flavor. It will be a blend of what Baltimore has done before, with input from the Ravens' coaches and players, and infused with Monken's spices that he's collected from all his stops.

But there's no doubt that it will look and feel different from what fans have seen the past several years, and perhaps ever, in Baltimore.

"He's going to go for it," Jeff Monken said. "He's very aggressive with the way he coaches, but he's not reckless. He's going to take calculated chances at things that he believes in."

Monken feels fortunate to be working with a quarterback as talented as Jackson, happy to have been delivered so many "fun little toys," as he described Flowers this summer, and blessed to be part of the Ravens' well-run organization.

"I wasn't leaving Georgia just for any job. This is an elite place," he said. "We have everything we need to be successful, from top to bottom, including the players. I said that to them today. That makes you come to work and say, 'What did I do to deserve this?'"

Monken's offense was lights out in Tampa Bay, but the defense was one of the worst in the league. In Cleveland, he didn't get to call the plays. At Georgia, when he had the offensive reins, talented players, and an elite defense, two national championships ensued. Monken now has the same in Baltimore.

Monken doesn't feel pressure. He's been too many places, coached too long for that. But he knows the job description.

"We're in the entertainment business. The moment we're not entertaining, you stop getting paid," he said. "That's just the way this works. I try not to take that for granted. The moment you do, to me, you're not on the cutting edge. You're not trying to do it better than they do it."

Monken is passionate about winning. Anybody that's seen the videos of him in the Georgia coaches' booth knows that.

"Any emotions come from moments that are important," Monken said. "When you don't really care, those emotions don't come out. It's just a hobby. But when it's a passion, when it's everything you put into it, it comes out."

There will be a lot of attention on the Ravens' offense this season. There will be plenty of dissection and opinions about Monken's scheme and play-calling after every game. That's just the way it works.

"Inevitably, installing a new offense with some new receivers being brought in, there's going to be some growing pains," predicted Fitzpatrick, who will be in the analyst booth for Amazon Prime Video when the Ravens play the Bengals on "Thursday Night Football" in Week 11.

"The Ravens have a good defense and the ultimate get-out-of-jail-free card, which is when things break down, Lamar's going to be able to get them out of trouble. Whether it's scrambling around and throwing the ball downfield, or scrambling around and making great runs, those things are going to buy a little bit of patience and they'll be able to still have success as this team is learning and growing in this new offense. But when you look at their offense and adding Odell and adding Zay Flowers and getting healthier, this is a very scary offense."

Monken's family will be watching, and they'll have their input, too.

"I keep waiting for the headset," Terri said. "Poor guy, I'll get him after a game and I'm always going to ask, 'Why not here? Why didn't you do this play? Why up the middle again?' He's like, 'Can't you just say I'm great and great win, and not dissect it?' I'm like, 'Well you do, so what do you think I'm used to?'"

"They're going to love playing for him," Jeff said. "The city of Baltimore and Ravens fans are going to love the offense. It will be fun to watch, entertaining to watch, but it's also going to be very productive."

Most importantly, Ravens players feel confident.

"I love him," Dobbins said. "I think it's going to be a very good year with him. You'll see."

"We have a great coach," added Jackson. "I like him a lot. He's fun to be around, a smart guy – very smart. We just have to execute for him."

Ravens Linebacker Patrick Queen Is ‘Ready To Be Unleashed’ After Offseason Of Angst

THE ATHLETIC | **SEPTEMBER 4, 2023** | JEFF ZREBIEC

It wasn't the Baltimore Ravens declining to pick up the fifth-year option on his rookie contract, making him eligible for free agency next year, that initially set Patrick Queen off. The Ravens using a third-round pick on his potential replacement, Clemson's Trenton Simpson, didn't push Queen closer to the breaking point, either.

The damage had already been done earlier in the offseason when talks with Queen about a potential contract extension broke off amid a difference of opinion on how much it should cost.

"There were talks and then some stuff fell through," Queen said recently. "Obviously, you get upset. I'm probably going to be gone. That's, at least, what I was thinking in my head. I'm thinking that I'm gone. Everybody reacts out of emotion to certain things."

Queen conceded to some of his teammates that his days as a Raven were likely over. He was already preparing for that reality. It felt inevitable, so why hide from it?

He then began to distance himself from the team by doing what some of today's professional athletes do when they're disenchanting with their employer. He scrubbed his social media accounts of any evidence that he even plays for the Ravens.

"You scrub it, just one, for the comments," Queen said. "And then you scrub it because you're probably going to be gone."

Queen speaks almost matter-of-factly now about his offseason of uncertainty and discontent. If there are any lingering hard feelings about the breakdown in contract talks, declining his fifth-year option and drafting Simpson, he's doing a really good job of disguising them. He's been all smiles since he reported to team headquarters in July.

Throughout training camp, there was a calmness about Queen after his initial emotional storm earlier in the offseason. There was also a palpable feeling of satisfaction, not only with where he is but also with what he believes he can do when the regular season starts Sunday for the Ravens against the Houston Texans at M&T Bank Stadium.

The 24-year-old is coming off the best training camp of his young career. He played with urgency, physicality and joy. He added more polish to the rapport he shares with his middle linebacker running mate, Roquan Smith. Even though this wasn't his intention, he sent a clear message to his teammates and coaches that he's all-in on this season, even if his future in Baltimore is very much murky.

"I think we've seen in the NFL now — a lot of teams are dealing with it — these players that are holding in, or they're not showing up, or they're holding out, or they're unhappy, or they're spouting off publicly," Ravens general manager Eric DeCosta said last week. "Patrick's just a guy that shows up to work every single day. He's a very, very talented player. Very, very selfless, beloved by his teammates. He's a leader, and we expect him to have a great season."

If you asked different Ravens to identify some players who stood out this summer, it wasn't long before Queen's name came up. DeCosta called Queen a "gem." Ravens coach John Harbaugh described the fourth-year inside linebacker as "locked in." Inside linebacker coach Zachary Orr said he's never seen Queen so focused.

"He's ready to be unleashed," Orr said.

Smith wasn't acquired by Baltimore until last Halloween and didn't have a relationship with Queen before he arrived. Yet, he has noticed a drastic change in the roughly 11 months they've known each other.

"He has a tremendous mindset," Smith said. "For the guy to just turn 24 years old and to see how mature he's become even since I met him last year, I've been truly impressed. I think he's handling it like a pro. At the end of the day, and I've told him this many times, you can't worry about things outside your control. Just focus on the things that you can control and that's what you do on the field, what you do in the classroom and how you are around your teammates. He has the mindset of whatever he wants for himself, he can achieve it."

When he played his first professional game in 2020 as a first-round pick, Queen had just turned 21 years old a few weeks earlier. He's the seventh-youngest player to ever debut in the NFL. He acknowledged that patience and maturity are the two qualities he's gained most over his first three years in the league.

Both served him well, as did the counsel of close family and friends as he navigated a difficult offseason.

"I'm just comfortable," he said. "I'm taking it day by day, just enjoying life. It's a blessing to be here. It's a blessing to be able to play this game. I'm going out there with the guys every day and just getting better and trying to be great. I'm trying to be someone who they can lean on. I'm just trying to be the best person I can be, honestly."

Selected with the No. 28 pick in 2020, Queen has started all 50 of his regular-season games for Baltimore. He's been extremely durable and productive, amassing 321 tackles, 10 sacks, three interceptions, four forced fumbles, five fumble recoveries and a defensive touchdown. He's one of only three NFL players to have at least 300 tackles, three interceptions and 10 sacks since 2020. Smith and Bobby Wagner are the other two.

Yet, he remains one of the Ravens' most polarizing players. Some of that is beyond his control. Inside linebacker, the old home of Ray Lewis, is a glamour position in Baltimore. Expectations for those who play it, particularly if you're a first-round pick who starred on a national champion at LSU, are immense.

Not only was Queen one of the league's youngest players when he broke in, but he was also green from a football standpoint. He started only 16 games in three college seasons and didn't become a full-time starter until his final year in Baton Rouge. He also didn't play much of the Mike linebacker position at LSU, but that's initially what he was asked to do as a rookie starter on a veteran Baltimore defense.

"I still wasn't mature enough with the position I was in," he said. "Thankfully, the Ravens drafted me and I was able to learn from the Ravens. I've been surrounded by a lot of good people, and I just learned and became more patient. It was definitely hard to learn, especially with the situation I went through at college. Just having so much quick success with the (2019) season and getting drafted in the first round and immediately becoming a starter.

"You want to make every play. You want to make everybody proud and just be the guy. But I had to learn you just can't make every play. Sometimes, you have to just do your job and plays are going to come. Sometimes, by doing your job, it helps other people make plays."

What Queen has been able to control is his consistency, and that's the area that has drawn the most scrutiny. For every splash play, like a sack or tackle for loss, there are instances where he gets caught up in the wash, overruns a play or misses a tackle. His issues in coverage have been well-documented, too.

To his credit, Queen isn't in denial about some of the challenges he's faced as a young player. He's sparred plenty with critics on social media and seems to enjoy the give-and-take, but there have been times when Queen has "liked" a tweet critical of him. That's his way of conceding that the criticism is fair and even accurate.

He knows when he's messed up, and the feeling of letting down his teammates and coaches stings and motivates far more than the words of an often anonymous social media poster anyway. He's still driven by a missed assignment in Week 8 of his rookie season that contributed to a home loss against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

The Steelers were in the red zone and ran tight end crossing routes. Queen followed a guy on a vertical route up the seam, leaving Pittsburgh's Eric Ebron all alone crossing the field. Ebron waltzed in untouched for an 18-yard touchdown. The Ravens blew a 10-point second-half lead and lost 28-24.

"It cost us the game and then it affects your playoff spot," Queen said.

It also fueled Queen's passion to improve his pass coverage. Last season, Pro Football Focus credited Queen for allowing a career-high 64 receptions. But he also posted career lows in passer rating against (92.2) and yards per reception (9.6), and career highs in interceptions (two) and pass breakups (three). His missed tackle percentage (13.5) also was a career low and helped him avoid giving up a litany of big plays.

"I think understanding split coverage, that's been the biggest thing," he said. "A lot of times I was so keyed in on knowing where (the slotback) was, and not truly knowing if we were playing backside, or how the nickel was playing it or how the corner was playing it. Just only knowing certain pieces. That's why last year, you could see when I was playing Mike, the ball wasn't being thrown on the hash or in the middle or on my side. I was putting a stop to that stuff."

Last year's arrival of Smith helped fuel some of the best football of Queen's young career. It also may have accelerated his exit out of Baltimore. The former is probably harder to explain than the latter.

Queen had started to turn his season around before Smith arrived in time to play a Week 9 game against the New Orleans Saints. With Smith lining up alongside him, things were seemingly simplified for Queen. He didn't have to worry about covering as much ground or being in on every play. It also helped to be able to watch how Smith, one of the league's most cerebral players, studies, prepares and communicates.

"I think the difference in bringing Roquan in was instead of having one backer who can really fly, you have two," Queen said. "When you get a guy who has 120, 130, 140 tackles a year, you get a playmaker, an All-Pro guy. It makes you want to raise your game. It makes you want to be great. It makes you want to be better than him, and I say that on a really respectful level. Just to be able to work alongside him, and see how he approaches his game, see how he studies the game, it's just truly special."

Queen and Smith are considered one of the better inside linebacker duos in the league. They talked all offseason, and there's an understanding that the goal is not to be "one of the better duos." It's to be the undisputed best.

"Every time I see him post something on social media, I'm like, 'Bro, we've got to let people know exactly who we are and leave no doubt on exactly how good we are,'" Smith said. "'We've got to prove that week in and week out, and it can't just be a one-game wonder, two games, three games. We've got to do that for 17 consecutive weeks, and then when the postseason comes, do it each and every week in the postseason as well.'"

Said Queen: "If I bring my game to the next level, I think we'll solidify that."

In January, the Ravens rewarded Smith with a five-year, \$100 million extension, making him the highest-paid player in the league at his position. The deal didn't preclude them from paying Queen, but it would make it extremely difficult. Inside linebacker is not considered a premium position, and paying two guys at or near the top of the market would be extremely prohibitive, particularly with quarterback Lamar Jackson now on the books for years to come.

That doesn't mean the Ravens have ruled out paying Queen. They've made it clear to him that they haven't. But if he's looking to be paid as a top-five inside linebacker, which comes with a starting price point in the neighborhood of \$17 million, that deal probably won't be available in Baltimore. Paying two inside linebackers an excess of \$35 million annually would limit the team elsewhere, even with the salary cap expected to rise significantly in coming years.

That reality rankled Queen earlier this offseason, but he's seemingly come to grips with it now. Teammates noticed a change in his tone when talking about his situation as the offseason progressed. The turning point was in late May when Queen decided to show up at the team's Under Armour Performance Center to participate in the voluntary organized team activities.

"I got to the point where I was like, 'Look at who is on your team. Look at how they're treating you. They're not about to trade you.' There were never trade talks or anything," Queen said, crediting family members and friends for helping him keep things in perspective. "It was always, 'We believe in you, you're our guy.' It just fuels you and it makes you want to play well. Looking at everybody on the team, you have the chance to do something special here. Why not?"

Harbaugh acknowledged that a player in his contract year has the potential to be edgy or distracted. He's seen the opposite this summer from Queen.

"My expectations for Patrick are to have a stellar season, and it's only been affirmed by the way he's practiced, the way he's carried himself," Harbaugh said. "He has not been distracted at all. He is locked in on the mission ahead."

Smith described Queen as "putting more into his actions" and "taking control of his career." Each training camp practice, Smith and Queen came sprinting out of the building to the part of the field where the inside linebackers were gathering.

"It just shows his maturity," Orr said. "Obviously, the business side is something we don't shy away from. I know it. We know it as coaches, and we want these guys to do what's best for them and their career. But he understands ... to get what he wants and to get where he wants to be, he has to come out here and perform, and the best way to do that is to be locked in every single day. He's done that. He's taken the right approach about it."

Queen's approach is treating playing in a contract year as an opportunity, not a crutch.

"I'm definitely having a ton of fun," he said. "You know what the whole situation is. Everything is up in the air right now. I'm just trying to cherish the moment while I'm here."

Kyle Goon: Ravens Fullback Patrick Ricard Is More Versatile Than You Think

BALTIMORE BANNER | SEPTEMBER 14, 2023 | KYLE GOON

If Patrick Ricard hangs around the NFL long enough, there's no telling what position he might play.

Defensive line? That's where he started. Fullback? Four straight Pro Bowls as a stalwart in the backfield. Offensive line? That might be next — though probably not this season.

But make no mistake: It's hard to find a Raven who thinks Ricard can't play whatever role he sets out to play.

"He can move, he can block, but also he can run some fly routes, stick routes, and he does it well," tight end Mark Andrews said. "So a guy like that, weighing three-whatever and being able to move the way he does, he's a freak of nature."

In the modern NFL, fullbacks are rare, 6-foot-3, 311-pound fullbacks even more so. So there was something appropriate about Ricard's presence in the Ravens' offense the last few years in Greg Roman's heavy personnel schemes. Ricard's blocking, which drew him the moniker "Pancake Pat," was a perfect role in a throwback, gladiatorial run game.

In Todd Monken's spread scheme — with a stated goal to unlock the passing game more — it might have seemed like Ricard's fullback role would go the way of the dinosaur. So few other NFL teams have fullbacks to begin with.

But the 29-year-old hasn't gone anywhere. He played 28 snaps (44% of downs) in Week 1's win over the Texans, including a pile-driving block into two Houston linebackers to free Justice Hill for a touchdown.

For Ricard, 28 snaps were actually a lot. He hadn't played that many in camp or in the preseason after coming back from hip surgery, and his conditioning was tested Sunday. But, if Monken had asked him to play every snap, he would have.

He sees a chance to show that he's not a "system" fullback. His key trait isn't that he can block in a "medieval" offense; it's that he'll do anything he's asked to do.

"A lot of people pigeonhole me that I can only play in a Greg Roman offense," he said. "It's my seventh year. I've had four straight Pro Bowls. I know what I'm doing. It's a great feeling to know that [Monken] values me, that the team values me."

There's good reason to value Ricard, who played a huge role in a rushing offense that was top five in yards and yards per attempt in each of the previous four seasons. Last season, he played a career-high 64% of the Ravens' snaps. He's seemingly helped Lamar Jackson succeed. When both are on the field, the Ravens average 5.8 yards per play and a 45.7% success rate, bumped from 5.4 ypp and 41.5% with Jackson alone.

It's a role that might not be well understood outside of Baltimore. Ricard's bulky frame has sometimes become meme material, like when a video of heavyset comedian Druski was used as a point of comparison. Although Ricard said he understood the joke, he doesn't appreciate his role being reduced to a punchline.

"It almost diminishes what I can do — like a big, fat, unathletic guy trying to do things, while I'm a big, lean, athletic guy," he said. "A lot of guys my size can't move the way I do. I can do a lot of things at my size that a lot of guys can't."

The Ravens agree. For a while this offseason, they explored if they could keep his contributions but at another position.

Ricard and his agent came up with the idea that he could play offensive line, and coach John Harbaugh allowed Ricard to join the offensive line room for the early part of camp. Guard Morgan Moses didn't see him as out of place there, either: "Working some guard, studying some guard tells you about the physicality he brings to the offense."

The Ravens shelved the idea after deciding Ricard wouldn't be able to make the shift after his offseason surgery, even though he had gained a significant amount of weight to give it a shot. But it could still happen next season — or in an emergency this season, given that the Ravens are already down two injured offensive linemen.

Offensive coordinators change, but Harbaugh clearly is happy to make room for Ricard. He doesn't have a guaranteed snap count every week, and he knows some of it is matchup dependent, but Ricard feels the strength of Harbaugh's backing.

"I think I'm the kind of guy that John Harbaugh loves: physical, will do anything for the team, play multiple spots," he said. "And I think that our relationship is really good to where I think that he wants me here and makes sure the OC figures out a role for me with us and what it is."

While new offensive coordinators are often painted as someone coming in as a polar opposite of the previous regime, the reality is not as simple as the narrative. Although Monken's system is very different than Roman's, he's pledged to find ways to keep the running threat that Roman's offenses were so good at creating.

Ricard's role is a kind of connective tissue between the old and the new. While the Ravens are sure to keep evolving their packages and plays with Monken's guidance, he's sprinkling in a lot of familiar looks as well.

"I think Coach Monken's doing a good job at trying to install things that we did in the past that worked, as well as adding his stuff on that," running back Gus Edwards said. "That's gonna make us better."

The Ravens are still the Ravens. They still want to be physical and win the battle of wills in the trenches. And no player on offense might represent that mentality more than Ricard, who is ready to run you over no matter his position.

"I think, at the end of the day, you look at our offense and the mentality that we bring in the running game, he's a needed asset for us," Moses said. "Just having him on the field regardless brings a different spark. His mobility to be able to run block and attack guys on the edges is obviously a big part of this offense and what he does great in this scheme."

Ravens' Roquan Smith Eliciting Ray Lewis Comparisons

ESPN | NOVEMBER 16, 2023 | JAMISON HENSLEY

Roquan Smith ran the linebacker drill to perfection, but he was asked to do it again.

It was eight years ago at a football camp in Bradenton, Florida, and Smith was a sophomore at the University of Georgia. He read how the center, guard and running back moved and took the correct angle to make the tackle. That's when Baltimore Ravens Hall of Famer, and camp instructor, Ray Lewis told him to repeat it.

"This is how you do it," Lewis told the other players, urging them to watch Smith's patience, feet and vision.

That was the first time Lewis crossed paths with Smith, but Lewis' impact on the young linebacker began long before that encounter.

When the Ravens (7-3) host the Cincinnati Bengals (5-4) on Thursday night (8:15 p.m. ET, Prime Video), Lewis' influence will be on display. One of the main reasons Baltimore has been in first place in the AFC North all season is because Smith has become the team's best middle linebacker and leader since Lewis retired in 2012.

"He has a personality that is similar to my personality on how you engage other people to get them to play outside of who they are," Lewis told ESPN.

Smith has modeled his game after Lewis since high school. He watched film of Lewis and studied his motivational talks to try to equal his intensity.

Smith even bought a deck of playing cards after hearing Lewis tell a childhood story about how he bulked up by flipping over cards. If it was a six, Lewis did six pushups. If the next card was an ace, he did 25 pushups. Lewis continued these series of reps until there were no cards remaining. Smith tried to do the same as a teenager until he gassed out.

Now Smith is an All-Pro middle linebacker, and he's producing flashbacks of Lewis by running sideline to sideline and commanding a defense that, like when Lewis played, is allowing the fewest points in the NFL. And like Lewis, Smith is delivering passionate speeches in the final pregame huddle on the field.

"Honestly, man, some words sound like something Ray would say," Smith said.

During Lewis' 17 seasons with Baltimore, he raised the level of those around him. Players talked about how they didn't want to make a mistake because they didn't want to look Lewis in the eye afterward. The Ravens led the NFL in scoring defense (17.3) from 1999 to 2012.

It's become that same mindset in Baltimore in the 13 months since the Ravens acquired Smith from the Chicago Bears for a package that included a 2023 second-round draft pick. Teammates say they don't want to be the player who isn't matching Smith's energy. With Smith as the centerpiece of the defense, defensive tackle Justin Madubuike, safety Geno Stone and linebacker Patrick Queen are all having career years.

The best way to measure Smith's impact is by what the team calls "the Ro effect." In the eight games before acquiring Smith, the Ravens ranked 24th in yards allowed (364.3) and 20th in points given up (22.9). In the 19 games since acquiring Smith, the Ravens lead the NFL in fewest yards (280.8) and points (15.2).

"When you look around the league, there's only a handful of leaders that can actually lead a team to a championship," said Lewis, who led the Ravens to Super Bowl titles in 2000 and 2012. "I think Roquan is one of them."

A DAY AFTER being traded to the Ravens on October 31, 2022, Smith asked to stand up and speak at his first defensive meeting.

"Hey, I know the culture that Baltimore has built," Smith told his new teammates, "and I want to be able to add to it."

Smith respects Lewis, but he insists he wants to be himself and become the best linebacker he can be.

In doing so, Smith has lived up to Lewis' dominance. He became the first player since Lewis to record at least 100 tackles, two sacks and an interception in each of his first five seasons. Smith and Lewis are the only linebackers to total more than 300 tackles with 30 or more for a loss over a two-year period.

It was at last year's Pro Bowl where Lewis told Smith how he could continue to improve. Lewis was a coach, and he made sure to sit with Smith on the bus rides from the hotel to the practice fields. He told Smith he was extremely agitated by what he saw on film, because none of the Ravens defensive players talked to each other.

"The great ones are remembered by how they get everybody else playing beside them," Lewis said. "So you got to get everybody seeing what you see."

Smith is known as the most talkative guy in the meeting rooms and in the locker room. If you come in tired, he'll wake you up. But Smith hadn't taken that communication to the field before his conversations with Lewis. In this year's season opener, Smith told his teammates on the sideline: "When I get one of y'all the call, make sure you echo it to each other. Some of y'all are just looking at me sometimes. So help me out. I promise you, it'll make everything go smoothly."

UNLIKE LEWIS, SMITH doesn't have an extravagant dance during player introductions at M&T Bank Stadium. Smith's signature entrance is more low-key at practice.

Since the start of training camp, Smith heads onto the practice field by sprinting out of the team facility and running across two football fields to where the linebackers hold their drills.

"It's just my approach to the day," Smith said. "[I'm] just happy to be out there and excited and let the guys know every single day, I'm ready to attack the day by any means necessary."

Smith is just as tireless in his pursuit during games. His 14 hustle stops (covering 20-plus yards of distance from snap to tackle) are the second-most this season, according to NFL Next Gen Stats.

Smith's never-give-up attitude was crystallized in a 24-16 win over the Tennessee Titans on Oct. 15 in London. In chasing down a screen pass to running back Tyjae Spears, Smith got pushed to the ground by an offensive lineman at the Ravens' 35-yard line. He immediately got back to his feet and chased down Spears from behind, bringing him down at the Baltimore 6-yard line to save a touchdown. The Titans settled for a field goal.

Baltimore defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald sought out Smith on the sideline to tell him, "That's one of the best plays I've seen in my life."

Smith said with a smile, "When I got put on my ass?"

McDonald responded: "And you went and tackled the guy."

BY TRADING A second-round pick to Chicago for Smith, Baltimore faced a long wait on Day 2 of this year's draft.

"We don't have a second-round pick. Do I hate that? Yes," DeCosta said during a news conference. "But our second-round pick is Roquan. And I gotta say, I don't think you can get a better second-round pick.

"So I'm thrilled that we don't have a second-round pick. I look at that and I say, 'Man, we really lucked out.' ... Roquan is a force multiplier. He lifts everybody else up."

The Bears drafted Smith with the eighth overall selection in 2018. His team-high 122 tackles as a rookie helped lead the Bears to the NFC North title. His 139 tackles in 2020 were the sixth-most in the NFL and helped the Bears earn a wild-card berth, their last playoff appearance.

After failing to come to an agreement on a contract extension during the 2022 offseason, Smith, who did not have an agent and represented himself, publicly demanded a trade on Aug. 9. He had started training camp on the physically-unable-to-perform (PUP) list, and he didn't participate in practices as a hold-in until Aug. 20.

At the time of the trade, he was leading the NFL in tackles with 83.

Smith's leadership isn't just reflected by his stats. Ray Lewis said Smith's personality and way he connects to his teammates reminds Lewis of his style during his playing days. AP Photo/Ian Walton
Since Smith left, the Bears have lost 16 of 19 games.

Meanwhile, the Ravens defense has held teams to one or no touchdowns in 13 of 19 games with Smith.

"In 10 years, no linebacker I've ever played with has been better than him," outside linebacker Jadeveon Clowney said. "They don't have the attitude or intensity they play with like Roquan Smith.

"He's bringing the best out of a lot of guys around him. When you have a leader like that, that's going to put it all out there not just on Sundays, but on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, the whole week ... it rubs off on people. It's contagious."

Smith grew up in Montezuma, Georgia, a town with no stop lights, and that laid the foundation of a close-knit community for him.

Smith knew the names of everyone at the Ravens facility in a matter of weeks, from the cafeteria workers to the equipment staff. When Clowney signed with the Ravens this summer, Smith was the first player to greet him.

Putting his own personal touch to the locker room, Smith brought in Connect 4, his favorite game that he got quite good at during the pandemic. Soon, several players were challenging each other, and a tournament was scheduled.

But Smith isn't afraid to call someone out. In his first month with the team, Smith attended a charity event that cornerback Marlon Humphrey missed.

Smith later talked to Humphrey, saying, "Man, you don't ever come to the things you're supposed to."

"I would say that he doesn't have any fear about how he's perceived," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "He understands what he thinks is important and what he believes in -- his way of doing it. And as a leader, he's not afraid to say, 'Hey, this is what I expect for myself,' and by extension for everybody else. That's a big deal."

If that sounds like Harbaugh is describing another former middle linebacker who helped define the Ravens' identity as a defensive juggernaut, it's no accident.

"He's like a Ray Lewis for us," Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson said.

Ravens Star Roquan Smith Has Always Been Special — But He Had To Learn How To Harness His Ability And Intellect

BALTIMORE BANNER | NOVEMBER 1, 2023 | GIANA HAN

A year ago today, the Ravens defense gathered for a standard weekly meeting. As it kicked off, things took a twist. The fresh face in the room stood up, calling everyone's attention to him.

Though he hardly needed to — he was already a household name for NFL fans — he introduced himself as Roquan Smith and said he planned to raise the standard in Baltimore. That bold proclamation in a town where Ray Lewis once played linebacker could have rubbed his teammates the wrong way.

But Smith was so open and clear-eyed about his vision, those who were there say, that it worked.

The next day, he sprinted at full speed onto the practice field — and it all made sense.

Smith has sprinted onto the field for every practice he's attended since the Ravens traded second- and fifth-round pick to the Chicago Bears to acquire him at last year's trade deadline. He's accumulated 168 tackles in the 17 games he's suited up in purple and black — a span during which the Ravens' defense is first in yards per game allowed and points per game allowed.

Smith's impact, though, goes far beyond his amped-up, cerebral play on the field. His entire presence led to a change. He's worn the green dot, making him the coaching staff's designated representative on the defense. He's filled the locker room with chatter. He's led pregame speeches. He's dropped wildly creative quotes in press conferences.

"He came in and brought a different type of energy, a different type of leadership," safety Geno Stone said. "I feel like he set the tone there [in the meeting], and it shows when he plays."

After just one year in Baltimore, he's being likened to legends.

Lamar Jackson called him the team's Ray Lewis. Marlon Humphrey compared him to Terrell Suggs.

When asked how Smith set the tone during one of the Ravens' dominant defensive performances, coach John Harbaugh laughed and asked if that was a rhetorical question. Because Smith's impact has been that powerful, even for those who work closely with him every day.

"It's one of the all-time great trades that we've made," Harbaugh reflected. "Maybe it was a win-win [situation], but it was definitely a win for us."

Smith is now the centerpiece of one of the league's best defenses, a star player at a position that isn't nearly as valued as it once was. Nevertheless, he has found a way to elevate those around him.

He wasn't always on this path, though. There was a time when he thought his athleticism and smarts would let him get away with anything — until a coach yanked him from his team and changed everything.

A chance encounter

Even as a sophomore, word of Smith's potential spread. It reached former Macon County High School football player Ryan McKenzie, then playing for Division III Trinity in Texas. Macon County coach Larry Harold swore to him Smith would be one of the greatest players to come out of the small Georgia town.

So McKenzie was pretty confused when he went home to Montezuma, Georgia, for a game and saw Smith toting a camera rather than wearing a uniform.

Harold, who arrived the year before and convinced Smith not to give up on football, had realized Smith wasn't focusing enough. Harold wanted to empower young men, former quarterback K'Hari Lane said, but he also didn't put up with egos. So when some of the players started showing up late to class and their grades started slipping, he knew he had to get their attention — most especially the attention of the star they all followed. So he took the game away from Smith, as well as several others, in the middle of the season with a two-game suspension.

McKenzie stopped Smith as he was about to climb a tower in the end zone to film the game.

"Yo, what are you doing?" McKenzie asked. Smith replied that he had gotten in some trouble.

"I said, 'Man, you know, great athletes are not just ones that can run around on the field. Greatness is the one who can be a leader inside and out. And this can never happen [again],' " McKenzie recalled.

Smith came back for the last game of the season and made two interceptions, one he returned for a touchdown, to help send the team to the playoffs for the first time in seven seasons. Harold later asked Smith why he had acted the way he did since he was overall a good kid. Smith replied that the other players told him he'd never get in trouble because he was a star.

"Coach Harold let him know, look, you're a little bit different than everybody else here," Lane said. "Your talent supersedes a lot of the players, but I need your character to do so as well."

Smith quickly changed his ways. He became an honor roll student at Macon County, followed by a dean's list student at the University of Georgia. While Smith was still a jokester, he learned there was a time and place, Lane said. He kept things light on the field but also spoke up when necessary.

"It was just me also realizing I didn't want to be a Macon County legend, a guy who was good at this, good at that, but never really left and never really made much of himself in life," Smith said. "That was kind of the main thing for me, realizing there's so much more out there."

McKenzie eventually joined the Macon County coaching staff Smith's junior year, after Smith's recruitment had taken off. He was gaining much-deserved attention, but some of the other players couldn't understand why they weren't garnering the same. It hurt Smith to be at odds with any teammates, leading to a heart-to-heart with McKenzie.

Sitting in McKenzie's truck outside the field house, McKenzie told Smith he had to decide what type of leader he wanted to be, using LeBron James and Kobe Bryant as examples of different styles. James is known for being likable. Bryant is known for holding players accountable.

Now a head coach, McKenzie looks back at that moment and where Smith is now with the Ravens. Yes, Smith has some qualities like Bryant and some like James, but he's developed his own style. And it's Smith who McKenzie now uses as an example when he talks to his high schoolers about leadership.

Focused on others

Ravens linebacker Patrick Queen has looked up to Smith since he was an opposing linebacker for LSU. He would watch his tape, and strove to emulate him. But when Smith became a Raven, Queen was impressed by something more than his skills.

"He probably learned everybody's name in like three or four days — it took me a whole year just to learn everybody's name," Queen said.

Stone, who's been with the Ravens for three years, said Smith often knows the names and details about people in the building Stone has never even met.

It's a mindset cultivated by the small Southern town Smith grew up in. Lane said you have to know everyone's name because you never know who knows your aunt or your best friend's mom.

In a place where Southern hospitality was common, the uniqueness of Smith's heart showed in the way he always made sure to lift up his teammates around him. McKenzie recalls attending a camp at Tennessee where Smith respectfully declined to work out, saying he had actually come to give the teammates who accompanied him the opportunity to get in front of scouts. Harold said Smith would always take coaches and scouts who came to see him around to check out his teammates.

"He made my job easier," Harold said. "And it blew me away because he really wanted everybody else, not just himself, to be successful."

At the University of Georgia, Smith's approach made a huge difference. Despite being older and in a mentorship role as a defensive graduate assistant who came in during Smith's sophomore year, Wendel Davis felt the care coming from the younger man in the way Smith always called him by name and checked in on his life.

"It's great and huge for any organization, any culture," said Davis, who now works as defensive quality control coach for the Green Bay Packers. "He understands in order for him to be the best that those around him have to be at their best as well. ... So he'll use his voice to help those around him be at their best."

Smith left after his junior year for the NFL and was once again one of the youngest and least experienced on the Bears' team. It took him a while to find his voice as a leader, but even so, his innate ability to draw people together showed through.

"All his antics and stuff, that's just his way of showing he cares," said DeAndre Houston-Carson, a former Chicago safety who was signed off the Ravens' practice squad by the Texans this week. "He's always cracking jokes, but me, personally, he's always shown confidence in me as a player. When your top dog shows confidence in all the guys out there, it helps."

While he became more and more of a leader during his time in Chicago, something about Baltimore unlocked him — Smith described it as the "perfect bond" with an organization that accepts him for exactly who he is. When center Sam Mustipher, who joined Baltimore from Chicago this past offseason, saw Smith in a Ravens uniform, the difference was evident.

"I can't say night and day because he was a leader there in a different way, but you really feel his presence now," Mustipher said.

Smith is now part of the welcoming committee. Jadeveon Clowney said Smith was the first person who welcomed him in and made him feel like a part of things. Stone said Smith remembers little details about him and his family. Queen said he constantly brightens people's days and has become a big brother to many.

Part of it goes back to Smith wanting to bring that small-town feel to his new home. But the little details he gathers helps him unlock his "band of brothers" on game days as well.

"A lot of guys play for a lot of different reasons," Smith said. "Knowing what's their why and their reason for playing the game the way they play it, I feel like if you can do that, and actually be able to dissect that into every single individual, I believe that's what makes a great leader."

Making sure there's no quiet

Smith's presence isn't just felt. It's very much heard.

"He really never shuts up," Stone said with a laugh.

Whether he's chirping opponents or guiding his teammates, Smith's mouth runs from locker room to field to sidelines. The constant noise is an effective tactic against opponents, said Mustipher, who has played against him in college and on NFL practice squads.

"It puts stress on the offensive side of the ball when there's no quiet," Mustipher said.

The way Smith plays is enough to lift up everyone around him. He plays with a violence, an intensity and a passion that guys want to match. His consistency also allows them to do their jobs without having to worry about anything else.

But why lead through actions or through words when you can lead with both?

In Smith's second season, he took on the responsibilities of the green dot. While usually straightforward, that job can become challenging when opponents move into a hurry-up offense.

Smith not only rolls smoothly through challenges, he's also elevated what it means to direct the defense, pulling off plays that take perfect communication. It's hard to run screens against "that guy," Mustipher said, because he has an "uncanny ability" to recognize formations, motions and shifts.

"And normally when he predicts stuff, he's normally right," Mustipher said.

One of the best representations of his elite communication was in Week 3 against the Indianapolis Colts, when Smith coordinated a switch with Queen where Smith picked up the tight end for him, leading to a pass breakup.

"We always can work off each other, but in that moment, in the heat of the battle, it's just so special to do," Queen said.

Queen's own game has improved significantly since Smith arrived, and he's attributed a lot of it to the new teammate patrolling the field by his side. And he's not the only one. Since Smith arrived in Baltimore, the Ravens defense ranks first in yards per play allowed (4.5); yards per game allowed (283); points per game allowed (14.9); points per drive allowed (1.3); and defensive expected points added per play (0.13), according to TruMedia.

"Actually playing with him and seeing how he prepares, how he treats the game and how he treats practice and just taking my game up a notch, trying to match his vibe if not beat the vibe," Queen said, "it's really crazy, honestly, to play with someone like that."

Filling Ray's role

The pregame speech means more in Baltimore, where Lewis made an art of it.

That duty falls to Smith now, and his approach is simple: When he gets to the middle of the circle, he clears his mind and lets his heart take the stage. He does some prep work, asking teammates what they feel should be addressed, but mostly he works from feel.

"I take that in, and then I just come from the heart, whatever I'm feeling," Smith said. "I feel like it goes over well, and the guys understand real, authentic."

Smith feels authenticity is lacking these days, he says, and strives to be only his true self. His slogan: "Sun sets, no regrets."

He touches on that theme often in his speeches, but the exact content of those stay between him and the team. It's easy to see why he has the duty, though, based on his eloquence at the podium and in media scrums. With cameras and mics in his face, he stands calm and collected as he drops colorful quotes filled with brutal honesty that reporters and teammates both appreciate. Whether he's promising to take over the Dawg Pound and send the Cleveland Browns home with their tails between their legs or telling security "to lock the Bank" until they're ready to let the Detroit Lions out to play, his teammates know he's just being "Ro."

Lane, who heard plenty of Smith's speeches in his time, is in awe of how far Smith has come since he was preaching in the Macon County huddle; back then, it was mostly repeated clichés.

"One of his famous speeches was, 'They put their pants on one leg at a time just like we do, so go out there and play, fear no man,' " Lane said. "He said that almost every game."

Both his high school coaches give the University of Georgia a lot of credit for developing Smith as a public speaker. They trained him and gave him many opportunities to address the team, the community and the media.

But every player receives some sort of media training. Why did Smith take to it so well?

For one, he's extremely intelligent, said Davis, who had a front seat to Smith's career as a Bulldog. Smith also understands he has a platform to share his thoughts, and he is someone who has things he wants to say.

"He wants to make sure he gets his point across," Davis said.

Lane met up with Smith again in Arizona, where Lane was playing for Arizona and Smith was training for the draft. By then, Smith was an experienced public speaker. One day, he gave a speech at a contact football camp about how he had met patients at a hospital who would give anything to play football. He told the players around him not to take their gifts for granted.

"Now he goes to the hospital and things of that nature and helps those kids," Lane said. "To see that he's in that role now where he can visit those kids and be the highlight of the day and the highlight of their lives and share his success with them and their admiration for him, to be able to be in their presence and give them a dream ... that's just a testament to who he is and who he's grown to be."

How Brandon Stephens Went From A Running Back To A Top-Notch Starting Cornerback

[BALTIMORERAVENS.COM](https://www.baltimoreravens.com) | NOVEMBER 3, 2023 | RYAN MINK

The Ravens finished practice and most players were in the locker room showering and getting changed. A few others spoke with reporters at weekly press conferences in the indoor practice field.

In the background, there was a whirring noise. It was Brandon Stephens, getting in some extra conditioning on a stationary bike.

Thanks to a relentless work ethic and focus on steady improvement, Stephens' Year 3 emergence has been an under-the-radar integral part of Baltimore's defensive dominance this season.

He'll be in the spotlight this Sunday against the Seattle Seahawks, who boast one of the game's best deep ball attacks with quarterback Geno Smith and a dangerous wide receiver trio.

The last time the Ravens faced the Seahawks, in 2019, Marcus Peters announced his arrival with a pick-six in his first game as a Raven. After Peters' departure this offseason, there were questions about who would step into the starting spot opposite Marlon Humphrey, even from Humphrey himself.

"I didn't know who the corner would be or what route the team would go," Humphrey said. "I felt like, even depth wise, we needed another piece. Lo and behold, the guy that was going to start was here all along."

The Ravens didn't see it coming either. In May, Head Coach John Harbaugh said Stephens would focus on playing safety. The team added Rock Ya-Sin this offseason and had a couple up-and-coming cornerbacks in Jalyn Armour-Davis and Pepe Williams. Baltimore signed Ronald Darby in mid-August, one day after Humphrey underwent foot surgery.

Partly out of necessity, Stephens was plugged in at cornerback. Eight weeks into the season, he hasn't left and there are no signs that he will.

Stephens has played every single defensive snap this season except for when many starters were pulled near the end of the Lions blowout game. Meanwhile, Ya-Sin and Darby didn't see any defensive snaps last week in Arizona.

Stephens ranks No. 36 among all NFL cornerbacks (minimum 50 snaps), according to Pro Football Focus grades. He's given up just 10.5 yards per reception (94 cornerbacks have surrendered more). He's surrendered a catch just 62.5% of the time when targeted (108 cornerbacks yielding more).

Despite this, offensive coordinators and quarterbacks keep coming at Stephens. They aren't believers yet either. No cornerback in the league has been targeted more than Stephens (64 times), yet he hasn't given up a single touchdown yet.

Being doubted is nothing new for Stephens. He started his college career as a running back at UCLA, and was pretty good at it, but couldn't break out of a backup role in three seasons. So Stephens decided to bet on himself.

Stephens wanted to try cornerback, a position he had long believed he could play. He always loved the physicality of the sport and grew up in Texas a fan of the Ravens' defense. Deep down, he felt like a defender.

Pretty much everybody told him it was a mistake. Why would he give up a scholarship at a premier program such as UCLA for essentially a tryout somewhere else? And who goes from running back to cornerback?

"They were like, 'No way, no chance,'" Stephens said on "The Lounge" podcast. "It took a little convincing."

Stephens made his own videos showing him doing basic cornerback drills, such as backpedaling, and sent them to schools. Stephens' coach at Plano Senior High School, just a little north of Dallas, put him in touch with the defensive backs coach at nearby SMU, Kevin Curtis. Stephens essentially asked for a tryout, and if he proved himself, they could put him on scholarship. He had already graduated from UCLA in three years.

"I just want the opportunity to showcase my skills," Stephens told Curtis.

More than a dozen schools were interested in the transfer, but they only wanted him as a running back. SMU was the only school to offer him a spot as a cornerback.

Stephens quickly became a starter in his first year and was soon their best defensive player. After two standout seasons and a combined 22 passes defended, the Ravens drafted Stephens in the third round in 2021.

"I definitely knew that I could play at this level," Stephens said. "It was just a matter of what team am I going to do it on. This was my dream."

As soon as the pick was announced, NFL Network's Daniel Jeremiah questioned whether Stephens could play cornerback in the league, saying he expected him to ultimately land at safety. To be fair, the Ravens didn't know for sure either.

Stephens started 11 games at safety as a rookie, stepping in for injured DeShon Elliott. He started four games last season at cornerback, filling in well when Peters went down until an acute illness sent Stephens to the hospital at the end of the year.

Stephens' calling card entering his third season was still as a jack-of-all-trades defensive back, and with other cornerbacks coming up the Ravens' system, Harbaugh thought Stephens would focus on safety this year.

Stephens' offseason trainer, Clay Mack from Clay Mack Skills Academy in Dallas, encouraged Stephens to continue training as a cornerback. Those skills would still translate to safety, he said. Mack and another trainer, "Flight," have been in Stephens' corner and part of his transition from the beginning. They also train other prominent NFL players, including Seahawks safety Jamal Adams.

In one training session, Adams took particular notice of Stephens, asking Mack who Stephens was and saying, "Man, I like him."

Physically, Stephens has always had the traits. Ravens running back Justice Hill, who was a five-star defensive back in high school, said it comes down to one thing in particular.

"If you've got sweet feet, you can make the transition," Hill said. "It takes a little time, but if you've got good footwork and you work at it, you can make it happen."

Stephens' work ethic and steady improvement is what coaches and teammates point to for his breakout season. While not many people believed he could play cornerback, Stephens kept working at it. He's still relatively young to the position, but he's becoming one of the best.

"He's learned a lot, but he's just a talented guy," Harbaugh said. "He's really diligent about technique, tries to do all the details and the little things right. It's really showing up in the way he's playing."

Humphrey recently said that Stephens is playing at a Pro Bowl level.

"It's continued patience, continued work," Humphrey said. "If you continue to work at something, you'll eventually improve and get better, and that's what he's done."

Had Geno Stone not stolen a second interception away from Stephens in Sunday's win in Arizona, the buzz around Stephens would have been much louder. Stephens' reaction to missing out on his third interception of the season?

"I gotta go attack," Stephens said on the sideline.

"I like 'B Steve' a lot," linebacker Roquan Smith said. "I never see the guy waiver or complain or anything like that, and I just respect the way he comes out each and every day and just wants to get better, and that's all he focuses on. [The] attention to detail is so crucial to him, and I have a lot of respect for him and love playing with him, and the best is still yet to come for him."

Defensive Coordinator Mike Macdonald credited Stephens for his attitude about being moved between safety and cornerback in the Ravens defense. Ask Stephens to this day what he prefers to play, and he'll still say he just wants to be on the field (though it's apparent that he loves corner).

"I'm really excited for 'B-Steve'" Macdonald said. "He's put in a lot of work, and he's been moved around a lot, and it's great to find him a home, where he can feel like he can dedicate his craft and his skills. He has an awesome skillset; we've always known that about him. But it's not easy moving around. Going from the beginning of his football career, and then all of a sudden you're in the NFL, and then you're asked to play defensive back; there is a lot of stuff going on back there, and he's handled it tremendously."

Does Stephens have a forever home at cornerback?

"You know me; it's hard for me to jump in headfirst on that way one," Macdonald said. "But there's a pretty good chance he's going to stay there."

Ravens' Geno Stone, The NFL's Interceptions Leader, Always Makes His Opportunities Count

THE ATHLETIC | OCTOBER 27, 2023 | JEFF ZREBIEC

University of Iowa defensive coordinator and secondary coach Phil Parker saw what he needed to see. It wasn't on the football field, but New Castle High School basketball coach Ralph Blundo did his best to show off Geno Stone. Blundo conducted an up-tempo, intense practice that featured the Hurricanes' full-court press. At the back of the press was Stone, ranging across the court and getting his hand on balls as if he was an NFL free safety.

Stone's quickness and intensity made an impression on Parker, but there was still something bothering the longtime assistant coach. There was still a question that he needed answered. There just had to be a reason no other Power 5 football program had offered Stone a scholarship. Parker wondered what exactly he was missing.

"He said, 'Tell me what's wrong with him? Why isn't everybody on him?'" Blundo recalled Parker saying. "And I told him, 'Because they're not as smart as you.'"

The pattern started early. An all-state high school performer in football-rich Western Pennsylvania, Stone had 17 career interceptions and a hand in over 40 touchdowns. Yet, he couldn't get a scholarship offer from a major conference program until just days before national signing day, and only after Iowa had two defensive backs withdraw their commitments.

A two-year starter at Iowa and a second-team All-Big Ten selection with six career interceptions and four forced fumbles, Stone believed he'd be taken by the end of the third round of the 2020 NFL Draft. Instead, he wasn't drafted until the Baltimore Ravens selected him in the seventh round with the 219th overall pick.

He was waived twice as a rookie by the Ravens and then not tendered a contract by the rebuilding Houston Texans, although that was done at his and his agent's request. Even after playing well for Baltimore during the 2022 season, Stone wasn't given a restricted free-agent tender in March. He re-signed with the Ravens on a lesser deal.

Seven months later, Stone, 24, is the surprise NFL leader with four interceptions and one of the key breakout performers on the NFL's second-ranked defense.

"To lead the league, I don't know that was on anyone's Bingo card, but any time he's come into games, he's always made big plays," said Ravens cornerback Marlon Humphrey, one of Stone's closest friends on the team. "I think you saw that a lot every preseason. It doesn't really surprise me. The more reps he's gotten, the more and more he's improved."

Stone, who is expected to make his fifth start of the season for an injured Marcus Williams Sunday against the Arizona Cardinals, is a major reason Baltimore is 5-2 and in first place in the AFC North.

In a Week 2 victory in Cincinnati, it was Stone's third-quarter interception of Joe Burrow just outside of the end zone with the Bengals driving for the go-ahead score that was probably the biggest play of the game. In a Week 6 matchup with the Tennessee Titans in London, the Ravens had given up 10 consecutive points to cut their lead to five and the Titans were in Baltimore territory when Stone picked off Ryan Tannehill.

"Him making plays in an NFL game, it's great to watch. But we always joke about it around here, because we saw him do it in Pop Warner, we saw him do it in junior high, we saw him do it in high school and we saw him do it at Iowa. Now, he's doing it for the Ravens," said Joe Cowart, Stone's former football coach at New Castle High. "Every time he's been on the field, he's made plays."

Or as Blundo put it, "If you're looking for Geno, just find the football."

As a reporter approached Stone at his locker late Wednesday afternoon, Ravens right tackle Morgan Moses interceded. A playful Moses wanted the reporter to know that there would be no free runs at the NFL interceptions leader. Stone, one of the more popular Ravens in the locker room, laughed. His teammates seem to be enjoying the safety's star turn even more than Stone himself.

"From the first day he came in, all he did was put his head down and work," said inside linebacker Patrick Queen, who, like Stone, was part of the Ravens' 2020 draft class. "He didn't complain about anything. He just goes out there and does what he does at a high level. That's what we appreciate about him."

Former Ravens wide receiver Torrey Smith, who still spends time around the team, recently wrote: "If you are a young player that wants to know what it means to take advantage of your opportunities when your number is called, just watch Geno Stone."

As a rookie in 2020, Stone made the Ravens' 53-man roster but was released about a month later because of a roster crunch. Stone cleared waivers, signed to the Ravens' practice squad and was later elevated for consecutive games to play special teams. He again was signed to the active roster in November, only to be waived about five weeks later. The Texans claimed him, but he didn't actually play in a game for Houston. Following the season, Stone asked to be let go by the Texans because he was unsure of their direction. Citing "unfinished business," he re-signed in Baltimore and has been a roster fixture since.

"He's a good example of someone that takes care of the details on a day-to-day basis, comes to work every day, does his best, doesn't complain, doesn't get all caught up in things (like), 'Why is this not happening for me,' or 'That's not happening for me.' Then, when his opportunity comes, he's prepared and he makes the most of it," said Ravens coach John Harbaugh. "That's something that it's just great to see, and it's a good lesson for young people. If they're going to watch that (and say), 'I want to be great at something' or 'I want to be a pro football player,' watch Geno Stone and what he's been doing."

Following the lead and example of mentors such as Anthony Levine Sr. and Chuck Clark, Stone earned himself a role by excelling on special teams. When the Ravens have had injuries at safety, he's stepped in and played well. Stone started seven games last season in place of an injured Williams. Even before Williams went down this year, Stone was playing in three-safety looks.

"It's not a good situation, because guys go down, but at the end of the day, it's a 'next man up' mentality, and I always try to take that with me," Stone said recently. "I've been like that since college, since high school, whatever it was. Whatever obstacle I had in front of me, I wanted to make sure I (made) the best of my opportunity."

Stone wrote down a list of goals for himself in late April. One of them was to get three interceptions. He crossed that one off by Week 6.

Things have never come easy for Stone. His birth father hasn't been a regular presence in his life. Erin Stone, who had Geno when she was 19, did all she could to protect and provide for her son. But there was only so much she could do to shield him from heartbreak.

Erin's fiancé, Bobby Lepore, who became a father figure to Stone, was killed in a car accident when Stone was just 9 years old. Years later, Stone was on his way to a summer league basketball game when he learned that his birth father had been arrested.

"There was a lot to deal with growing up and even just the past few years," Stone said Wednesday. "My grandmom was a person who helped raise me and she passed away. It was two years ago Monday. Another mentor of mine, he died seven or eight months ago. Growing up, I'd lean on my family a lot. I tried to be the man of the house, but I always had people helping me out and trying to support me as I chased my dreams."

Stone essentially grew up on football fields, baseball diamonds and basketball courts. His uncle, Sam Flora, was the athletic director at New Castle, which gave Stone access to all the high school's fields and its teams. As a youngster, Stone would run onto the field during Hurricanes football games to retrieve the tee after kickoffs. It wasn't too long before he'd be starring on those same fields.

Malik Hooker, a seven-year NFL veteran who starts at safety for the Dallas Cowboys, was a few years ahead of Stone at New Castle High. College recruiters flocked to the school to woo Hooker, who wound up going to Ohio State and eventually was taken by the Indianapolis Colts with the No. 15 pick in the 2017 NFL Draft.

"Malik opened up some eyes in our town. It was like, 'OK, this is possible,'" Cowart said. "It's like catching a shooting star. Geno had the belief and disposition to do it."

Stone may not have had the freakish athleticism and natural ability that Hooker possessed, but he was plenty athletic and his instincts were off the charts. All he did was make big plays, both offensively and defensively, and help New Castle win games. He was a multi-sport star, an honor roll student and the homecoming king to boot. Yet, no top colleges initially came calling.

It was Stone's dream to play college football at Penn State. He visited State College, Pa., nine different times in some capacity. Yet, the Nittany Lions never extended him a scholarship offer. Michigan State expressed interest at one point and set up a campus visit for him. However, it canceled the visit a few days before his arrival and informed him that it didn't have a scholarship available.

"I was infuriated," Cowart said. "Everybody in the country was recruiting Malik, and Geno was a very similar prospect. I was banging doors down, saying this kid is going to be a multiyear starter at a Power 5 school."

Stone ultimately committed to play at Kent State, located in Ohio and a little over an hour away from New Castle. He'd have an opportunity to get on the field right away and be close enough to his mom and mentors. But a bigger opportunity and difficult decision loomed.

An assistant football coach from the University of Kentucky was at New Castle to watch Marcus Hooker, Malik's younger brother and a teammate of Stone's, play basketball when Cowart asked him for a favor. He wanted the coach to review Stone's football film and report back. The coach agreed with Cowart's assessment that Stone was a legitimate Power 5 conference player. Kentucky, though, didn't have a scholarship to offer.

The same coach, however, happened to be on a recruiting trip shortly thereafter when he crossed paths with Iowa's Parker while at a school in Detroit. Parker, who had recently learned that two defensive backs had backed out of their commitments to Iowa, asked in jest whether there were any defensive backs in the United States of America who he could bring to Iowa. The Kentucky coach brought up the name of an under-the-radar player at New Castle High School. By day's end, Parker, who was up against national signing day, had made contact with Cowart and was planning his visit to Western Pennsylvania. A scholarship offer came next.

The only problem, though, was Stone was barely interested. He was tired of the recruiting process, and the only thing he knew about Iowa was that it was far from home and his mom, who is his best friend.

"I didn't want to go," Stone said.

Erin, however, was persistent. She at least wanted her son to visit the Iowa City campus and see what it was all about. He had worked far too hard and accomplished far too much to not explore all his options. Skittish about flying, Stone balked. "That's OK," Erin said. They'd just make the nearly 10-hour trip by car. They drove into the teeth of a snowstorm for part of the ride.

"Taking my chance to go out there and visit kind of opened my eyes to how much of the world I hadn't seen yet," Stone said. "I didn't want to miss out on an opportunity that I thought would never happen. It turned out to be the best opportunity of my life."

A challenging and frustrating process produced a happy and rewarding ending. It foreshadowed another life lesson that repeated itself more than three years later. Stone, who declared for the draft after his junior year, was devastated in falling to the seventh round. Nursing a leg injury, he didn't run very well at the NFL Scouting Combine — and that probably hurt his stock.

There were also the same questions about his size and athleticism that he heard from college programs. His NFL Draft scouting report cited his "stubby build with short arms" and "below-average explosion." It also said that "he lacks juice and length to make enough plays."

"At the end of the day, I was a productive player. I showed that with my instincts," Stone said. "They tried to knock my speed, but at the same time, my game speed is faster than most people's regular speed. Are you going to pick someone who is going to get the job done, or are you going to pick somebody by how they look?"

By now, Stone knows the unfortunate reality for players who may not fit the size/speed prototype. His career is also a testament to the fact that for many players, there is more than meets the eye.

"Sometimes I think that maybe professional teams, when the measurables don't add up and the analysts say something different, they don't like to roll the dice. Geno just needed a shot," Blundo said. "Keep doubting him if you want. You're not going to get in his way."

Connect Four, Cornhole And Winning: How The Ravens Find Locker Room Harmony With Big Personalities

BALTIMORE SUN | DECEMBER 2, 2023 | BRIAN WACKER

The Ravens locker room has housed its share of big personalities over the years — Ray Lewis, Ed Reed and Terrell Suggs, to name a few. This year isn't much different when looking down the roster and to all corners of the expansive and mostly rectangular space inside the team's sprawling practice facility in Owings Mills.

Tucked away in the back right corner of the room is wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr.'s locker, next to that of eager and talented rookie receiver Zay Flowers. Quarterback Lamar Jackson, meanwhile, gets dressed amid a small bank of a half dozen lockers that juts out from the right about halfway into the room, with backup Tyler Huntley and offensive linemen Morgan Moses and Ronnie Stanley next to him. On the wall to their left are inside linebackers Roquan Smith and Patrick Queen and safeties Kyle Hamilton and Geno Stone. Just around the corner from Jackson is outside linebacker Jadeveon Clowney. In the back left corner of the room, running back Gus Edwards is next to cornerback Marlon Humphrey, who is next to receiver Rashod Bateman, who is a couple of spots removed from outside linebacker Kyle Van Noy. The first locker on the right when entering the room, meanwhile, belongs to kicker Justin Tucker, who, as teammates are eager to point out, has less work to do than everybody else, so it makes for an easy in and out.

Players do not choose their own lockers and the layout of the room is not happenstance, a team official confirms. It is decided by coach John Harbaugh, with the idea of blending a group of disparate men into a homogenous sort of football feng shui.

"I was in the corner in other locker rooms; but this is the corner," Beckham, who has played for the New York Giants, Cleveland Browns and Los Angeles Rams, told The Baltimore Sun. "It's kind of a trapping feeling; it feels like you can't get out. I'm not mad at it. I don't mind it."

He also has no problem fitting his stardom and ego into a room with no shortage of both. Jackson is a former NFL Most Valuable Player. Clowney is a former No. 1 overall draft pick. Humphrey is a former All-Pro with designs on a second career in media. Van Noy is a two-time Super Bowl champion with the New England Patriots. Smith, an All-Pro, and Hamilton, a second-year star out of Notre Dame, are the vocal leaders of a defense that is perhaps the best in the NFL. Stanley is one of the highest paid at his position and often makes his way through the locker room cushioned by giant, fluffy slippers.

How does a group as vibrant as this and with that much individual acclaim all get along so harmoniously? Winning helps, a lot. The Ravens are 9-3 and have the AFC's best record. So, apparently, do cornhole and Connect Four. Both games are as paramount as helmets.

Cornhole made its debut in the Ravens' locker room in 2010 when defensive end Cory Redding introduced them to it. It offered a way to chill while also fueling their natural competitive nature, and it was at one time so popular that former quarterback Joe Flacco and ex-punter Sam Koch became members of the American Cornhole Association. When the team went to the Super Bowl during the 2012 season, their four cornhole boards made the trip to New Orleans, too.

While there is only one board in the locker room now, it remains a popular pastime among several players, including Jackson and Beckham, wide receivers coach Greg Lewis and even security.

Most players agree that Tucker is the best cornhole player on the team because of the rhythmic nature of his position and the extra time he has. "The thing about kickers is they're always good at everything they do," said Queen, who ranks himself third on the team behind Tucker and practice squad receiver Laquon Treadwell. "They're weird people."

"It's more like we're bonding," Beckham said. "You see people [trash] talking each other, competing trying to elevate each other. I enjoy it. We got 5-10 minutes, we could sit here and talk [trash] and then we go out there and we're locked in."

Smith, meanwhile, usually prefers Connect Four. One late August day during training camp, he took to social media to brag about beating Hamilton, outside linebacker Odafe Oweh and Queen in quick succession. He said he took up the game from a neighbor. But when he got beat during a recent visit to Henderson Hopkins Elementary School earlier this year, the 26-year-old sat there in disbelief.

"I'm a competitor," Smith said. "I approach it trying to win each and every game."

For those who wish to unwind elsewhere, there's also a small basketball hoop in the center of the room (though it gets little use) as well as a big screen TV with a couple of large leather couches.

Clowney, 30, is one of those who prefers a more restful pursuit. "I come in, take little naps here and there, go to meetings," he said. "I used to [play] but I don't play the games no more. I just have fun playing football."

That seems to be a common thread as much as anything (again, winning helps).

"More in past years guys would come in and work and get up out of here," Huntley said. "Now it seems everybody is of one accord. You're not just coming to work, you're coming to be with your teammates and actually enjoying days."

Added Queen: "Everybody trusts each other. I think the biggest thing from other years is, I wouldn't say selfishness, but people definitely wanted to make their own plays, including myself."

There have been other differences outside the locker room, too, including veterans getting days off when they need them and several "mental sweat" practices, as Harbaugh refers to them.

It's all led to a vibe that has been noticeable, particularly to Beckham and Clowney. Both had ugly and unceremonious exits from Cleveland, and while each had less to do with teammates than the organization itself, the two stars have found a certain amount of peace that has allowed them to continue to produce at an impactful level.

"There's no selfish individuals in here," said Clowney, who has also played for the Houston Texans, Seattle Seahawks and Tennessee Titans. "Everyone is looking out for each other. Makes it a lot easier when you got them type of guys around."

Beckham, 31, said he also sees a similarity in the dynamic of this team and the Rams team he won a Super Bowl with in February 2022.

"Before it starts [when there's] no wins, no losses, everything is all good," he said. "And then you see losses happen and you find out true colors."

"We had some losses early in the season and there was a lot of talk of, who is this team? I've been around long enough to know how it goes to know that looking at the people and the team we have in the locker room, the defense we go against every day is the best in the league, it's just an incredible team, incredible energy. I don't think there's ever a personality clash because the personalities are all competitive and everyone wants to be great. When I went to the Rams, I got to see what a championship locker room was like. It gives me that very familiar feeling. You want to see what you're like when adversity hits. We've seen a little bit of it, but things have been pretty good."

Yet, for all the cornhole and Connect Four and "Kumbaya," there's one thing that trumps them all.

Said Beckham: "Winning always helps."

Kyle Goon: ‘Balling Off The Couch’? Kyle Van Noy Stayed Ready For The Ravens’ Call.

BALTIMORE BANNER | NOVEMBER 3, 2023 | KYLE GOON

Ask yourself: Could you be ready for a new job in four days?

And if that job involved throttling your body against 300-pound men, how prepared could you be in less than a week?

The Ravens signed Kyle Van Noy on Sept. 27. Four days later, the 32-year-old was in action against the Cleveland Browns, playing 23 snaps after months out of football. Five games into his Baltimore tenure, Van Noy likes to play up the curve he experienced. He told ESPN host Pat McAfee last month: “I’ve been balling off the couch!”

But “the couch” is figurative for Van Noy, a linebacker who has never really starred for any of his teams but has been solid just about everywhere he’s been. That includes his Ravens stint, in which he’s accrued three sacks in five games. Saying he sprang from his couch belies the work Van Noy did to stay prepared for a phone call, which he ultimately got from Baltimore to play in his 10th NFL season.

If Van Noy gets his way, there will be a lot more production — this season and beyond.

“I just feel like I have a lot more in the tank,” he said last week. “I feel like I’m in my prime. I know this is a — what everyone says — a young man’s league, but I believe it’s also an experienced man’s league.”

A second-round pick out of BYU in 2014, Van Noy has at times been a polarizing player. He was drafted by Detroit into a defensive scheme that didn’t fit his strengths, he’s said, and was used largely in a reserve role. New England’s Bill Belichick, widely considered the best defensive coach of all time, traded for him, and Van Noy became a key player, appearing in three Super Bowls and winning two.

He parlayed that success into a \$51 million four-year deal with the Dolphins, after Miami hired Patriots defensive coordinator Brian Flores as head coach. He lasted only a year there before the franchise descended into chaos (Van Noy went into detail on that in a recent appearance on Marlon Humphrey’s podcast).

Throughout it all, Van Noy has strived to be consistent in his preparation and availability. He’s worked with trainer Dave Daglow for the last nine years, going through activations and other exercises that Daglow says help “undo” the wear and tear that football can cause on the body, and it has paid off. Van Noy played at least 13 games in his previous eight NFL seasons.

Van Noy was still doing these sessions this offseason, when no teams were calling.

“When there didn’t seem to be a lot of leads, there can be a lot of ups and down to stay with it,” Daglow said. “‘Why am I doing this’ or ‘Is this worth it?’ are questions a person asks. I think where [Van Noy] is at right now is: ‘I’m thankful that I did this. I wouldn’t have been ready to come off the couch if I hadn’t.’”

As a younger man, it was common for Van Noy to spend weeks at a time in Calabasas, California, with Daglow, going through two- or three-a-day workouts designed to maximize his skills as a pass rusher.

He’s not so young anymore. Van Noy has a wife, Marissa, and two young children, Trey (4 years old) and Giavanna (1 1/2). His offseason home is in Lehi, Utah, so now he flies out for three days at a time to complete in-person workouts with Daglow, then does more workouts with cones in his backyard with his son watching. He makes time for his fitness, but other leisure activities have fallen by the wayside. “Instead of watching college football on Saturday, I’m taking my kids to the zoo,” he said, laughing.

His conditioning allowed him to complete the Ravens’ conditioning workout — six 150-yard sprints in 29 seconds each, with 90 seconds of rest in between — on his own over the summer. “Not [a] bad lil work out!” Van Noy posted on X, formerly known as Twitter, in July. At the time, he was looking for work and trying to show the league he was ready.

He was in the dark in those months before the Ravens called, working out without any sort of understanding that any team would pick him up. His last game of 2022 was also one of the most disappointing: a playoff loss with the Chargers, in which the defense surrendered a 27-point lead. But Van Noy never thought it would be his last appearance in the NFL: “I’m just confident in who I am as a player. Everywhere I’ve gone, I’ve made plays.”

Now in Baltimore, Van Noy will do a workout for an hour with Daglow over FaceTime before team practices themselves. They aren’t physically exhausting, but to most people they would be tedious. Van Noy isn’t most people.

“I’ve seen Kyle in a lot of empty gyms over the years,” Daglow said. “In my opinion, he’s the ultimate professional.”

Van Noy was a standout playmaker at BYU, but he realized early on that he was not one of the NFL’s elite talents. In a league of athletic freaks, his upside was limited by comparison. But he knew he could be consistent.

Van Noy would instruct people to look at his record. In each of his last four seasons, he's had at least five sacks. He was a solid piece of the latter years of New England's dynasty, and his career record in NFL games is 88-45 (and 8-5 in the postseason). His teams, by and large, succeed, and Van Noy feels he fits well into winning cultures — one of the reasons the Ravens appealed to him when they called.

"That's one thing about me — I win games," Van Noy said. "I win more than I lose, and I hope to continue that streak."

The 10-year mark is significant to Van Noy. He recognized early that it wouldn't be easy to catch on in the NFL, or to stay. Now that he's played in a few games, he feels this season "counts," he quipped last week. He's told Daglow that, if he manages to pile up 10 sacks or more this season (admittedly a lofty goal for someone with 36.5 career sacks), they'll be back in the gym next spring.

But, in the larger scope, Daglow thinks what Van Noy has achieved in balancing his career with his personal life merits plaudits. He's stayed consistent on the field while getting married, having children, expanding his media pursuits and cultivating his second sporting passion on the golf course. He juggles more now, yet still finds time for the habits that have kept him in the NFL for a decade.

"I think he knows he belongs, and he knows you gotta keep proving it every year," Daglow said. "That in and of itself is a competitiveness with oneself. He thinks, 'I can still do this. I want to do this.' It's a good feeling to push yourself that way."

Van Noy has two Super Bowl rings, and while he avoids comparing his 2016 and 2018 Patriots teams to the Ravens, he obviously hopes for a third championship on the mantel someday. Ten years in the league was one goal — now it's time to reach for another.

"It's always awesome to reach a milestone that not many people can say they've done; it's always been in the back of my mind," he said. "At the same time, I'm never satisfied. We just gotta keep at it."

For Ravens' Tylan Wallace And Identical Twin, NFL Dream Came True With Game-Winning Punt Return TD: 'He Plays For Both Of Us'

BALTIMORE SUN | **DECEMBER 15, 2023** | BRIAN WACKER

There are 16 sets of brothers currently playing in the NFL.

"That was always the dream," Ravens wide receiver Tylan Wallace told The Baltimore Sun. "We were that close to getting it. Then, unfortunately, things happened."

Long before Wallace delivered the signature moment (so far) of Baltimore's season in the form of an electric 76-yard punt return for a touchdown to lift the Ravens to an indelible 37-31 overtime victory over the Los Angeles Rams on Sunday at M&T Bank Stadium, he grew up one of five kids in Fort Worth, Texas, and with an identical twin brother, Tracin.

Being identical, they already share a closeness that is unique because of a greater proportion of shared genes compared with fraternal twins. But their bond goes even deeper. Before they were born, sonograms showed their heads were always touching, so much so that their mother, Mandi Moore, feared the two were conjoined. And once they were born — Tracin arrived minutes ahead of Tylan — they soon developed their own language that only they could understand, a phenomenon known as Cryptophasia.

It was a confounding situation to Moore, who said they communicated only with each other until at least age 3.

The situation was also made more complex and difficult for the lifelong school counselor by the fact that she was raising the twins, along with their sister, who is four years older, on her own after the children's father left when the boys were 2. She leaned on family and friends, but life was still hard at times.

"I have great kids, they never gave me any trouble," Moore told The Sun. "[Their father] just kind of made a choice to not be there. So I just had to do what I had to do for my kids to make sure they had what they needed.

"It's kind of how I look at life. It's not always easy, it's not always pleasant, it's not always the way you thought it would go. You just gotta do what you gotta do to make it happen."

Tylan and Tracin only made it look easy as standouts in football, baseball and track at South Hills High School. And while they said they never wanted for anything as kids, they weren't blind to the hardships that go with being a single mom trying to raise five children.

They soon faced their own challenges.

Tracin, a standout quarterback as a freshman, suffered a torn ACL that wiped out his junior season in 2015. Then he tore the same ACL two games into his senior season. Tylan, meanwhile, was a star receiver who drew scholarship offers from prominent programs such as Michigan, Notre Dame, Oklahoma and Oregon. Oklahoma State was the best team, however, that was interested in both.

"That was always the plan since growing up; we're gonna go to college and ball out together," Tracin told The Sun. "Then the dream's always been to go to the NFL and be there together. That's been our goal since were little."

And that's what they did, until the fourth quarter of a 58-17 blowout of Missouri State to open the 2018 season. Quarterback Keondre Wudtee connected with Tracin, who was lined up in the slot, on a screen pass and the receiver was crunched after a 1-yard gain. That wound up being the first, and last, catch of Tracin's career. He suffered a third torn ACL to the same knee. His career was over.

In all, he underwent four surgeries, including bone graft and microfracture procedures.

"There was definitely an adjustment," Tracin said of life after football. "There was a time when I signed my medic's form where I couldn't compete anymore. I didn't know what I'd do.

"I'd go to school and after that I'd come home and my brother and roommate would be at practice. It was definitely a tough time, him being on the field."

With an uncertain future, Tracin hung around the football program, working out with the team in the offseason because he didn't know what else to do and couldn't bear the thought of not being around his brother. Tylan, meanwhile, went on to have a prolific college career, with 3,434 receiving yards and 26 touchdowns over four years, including 1,491 yards and 12 scores as a sophomore in 2018.

The following year, however, Tylan suffered his own torn ACL and missed the final five games of the season. He bounced back in 2020, though, and was a semifinalist for the Biletnikoff Award, given annually to the nation's best receiver.

Despite his own success — or, more accurately, because of it — he had carried guilt with him through it all. A few months before being selected in the fourth round of the 2021 NFL draft by the Ravens, he penned an emotional letter to his brother.

"We made; it's here now," it read. "We've been inseparable since birth, but we knew this day would eventually come. A bitter sweet moment. We carried each other through the good, the bad and the unforeseen. We started in the backyard of our childhood home just

throwing the football around with no idea of where the love of the game would take us. From Blue Raider to Wedgewood to South Hills and then Oklahoma State.

“Although our paths did align how we exactly thought, we embraced what life threw at us. With the support from one another, there is nothing we can’t accomplish or overcome. So, here we go brother, our paths are taking a turn. Even though we won’t be physically together, you’ll still forever be by my side. Our story will be one to remember; the Wallace brothers bonded by the love of the game.”

Nearly 1,300 miles separate Baltimore from Stillwater, Oklahoma, but there is a connection between the two otherwise disparate locales. Ravens offensive coordinator Todd Monken’s son, Travis, is in his fourth season as a student football assistant for Oklahoma State, and on Sunday, Tracin and the other Cowboys coaches were gathered at the team’s facility watching the day’s games as usual. The room “went crazy,” Tracin said, when his brother broke free, stayed on his feet down the left sideline and eventually flipped into the end zone for the winning score. It’s just the fourth overtime punt return for a touchdown in NFL history.

“It was tough not being able to be [in the NFL] with him,” Tracin said. “I think in a way he plays for both of us.”

Moore, meanwhile, was at home in Texas with her daughter, youngest son and granddaughter streaming the game from her phone onto the television. Before Wallace even caught the punt, her phone was blowing up with text messages about the dramatic conclusion. It was still a nerve-wracking moment before chaos likewise broke out in the Moore household.

“I dislike him being on punt return; it’s the most stressful thing for me to watch for him to be back there to have all the pressure on him,” said Moore, whose son was only returning the punt because two-time Pro Bowl return specialist Devin Duvernay was injured earlier in the game. “I was a nervous wreck.”

There was a time when she was concerned, too, about the twins being apart after Tylan was drafted and moved to Baltimore.

“When he was drafted was the first time they hadn’t lived under same roof,” she said. “That was such a huge change. I was worried for them both, honestly.”

Tracin was the first person Tylan called after the game — they speak five or six times a day — and the barely younger twin recounted the play and regaled his sibling with details of the celebratory dousing he took from teammates in the locker room. His mom, whom he surprised with a new Mercedes-Benz a week earlier, was next.

“It’s been a long time coming,” she said of the touchdown. “I knew one of these days he would get his moment.”

It’s one that Wallace has since watched “a million times,” he said, and will continue to watch even as he continues as the Ravens’ punt returner for now with Duvernay on injured reserve and out for the rest of the regular season.

On the return, Wallace broke one tackle, then another. With running back Justice Hill blocking punter Ethan Evans out of the way, Rams defensive back Shaun Jolly was the last player who had a chance to tackle him. He clipped Wallace’s feet as he raced down the left sideline and the receiver stumbled.

“I could’ve gone down, but I thought I made it this far I can’t go down,” he said. “It’s a moment you want to live forever. It’s like a dream.”

For Wallace, and for his twin brother.

How Ravens' Veteran Additions Have Contributed To Team's Success: 'It Was Just A Perfect Fit'

THE ATHLETIC | **DECEMBER 14, 2023** | JEFF ZREBIEC

Nelson Agholor had spoken to his former USC teammate, Buck Allen, about what it was like to play for the Ravens. When he was in Philadelphia, Agholor remembers Torrey Smith, Haloti Ngata and Timmy Jernigan talking about how much they enjoyed their time in Baltimore and the strong culture the organization possessed.

Agholor was about to turn 30 years old. He was looking for his fourth team in the past five seasons after his two years with the New England Patriots weren't very productive. As he set about finding a new team this past March, Agholor established two priorities: he wanted to win, and he wanted to have fun doing it.

Nine months after signing a one-year, \$3.25 million deal with the Ravens, Agholor is experiencing everything he was hoping for in his ninth NFL season.

"It's up there with some of the most fun I've had, and I'm super grateful for it because it came at a great time of my career, where I'm in this now to win football games and to do something special and have fun doing what I love," Agholor said.

As Agholor spoke last week, he stole a glance at a cornhole game that was generating good-natured trash talk in the middle of the locker room. He smirked.

"I didn't realize how much fun this was going to be," he said. "This is super fun. It's a great locker room. I feel like they put together a group of men, at every position across the board, that truly enjoy each other, and that are doing this for the same goal."

Agholor is one of several established veterans who signed a short-term deal with the Ravens at some point since free agency opened in mid-March. A number of them brought some baggage, whether it was extensive injury concerns, questions about their production or age, or difficult partings with former employers. Many of them had hoped to have a more robust free-agent market, and in some cases waited months for one to develop.

Yet, they ultimately found their way to Baltimore, joining a perennial playoff team with a history of bringing in well-respected veterans, often late in the offseason and beyond, that organization decision-makers feel will fit well into the well-crafted culture.

From Odell Beckham Jr. and Agholor's production and leadership in a young receiver room to Jadeveon Clowney and Kyle Van Noy's ability to bring down the quarterback to Ronald Darby and Arthur Maulet's solid play in the secondary, the group of veteran 2023 additions is a major reason why the Ravens are 10-3 and in the top spot in the AFC heading into Sunday's prime-time matchup with the Jacksonville Jaguars at Everbank Stadium.

"We have the right kind of guys who understand what we're about and what we stand for from a football standpoint," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "Our guys have done a great job. I love our culture, so to speak, the environment, the values that people have here. They love football. They want to work hard, they want to be at practice, they want to be in meetings, they love to go play games. That's where we start. We're here for football."

Perennially up against the salary cap, the Ravens have long depended on finding value veteran free agents to fill holes. They rarely are the highest bidder. Yet, they sell players on a chance to join a winning program and enter a close-knit locker room, where individuality is supported and a selfless approach is preached.

It's the job of general manager Eric DeCosta and his personnel staff to find guys who will flourish on the field and fit into the team's carefully protected culture in the building.

"Guys have been to other places and been a part of success and been a part of failure. Experience is the greatest teacher," Beckham said Wednesday. "I saw Jadeveon Clowney walking around the building before he signed, and I was like, 'Listen, bro, I'm telling you, you're going to like it here.' He's been a part of places where you've succeeded and failed."

"Nelson has been a part of championship teams. When we signed Kyle, I was like, 'Great pickup.' He knows exactly what to do, how to practice, how to do all these things. When you have veteran guys, it's not really so much of an ego thing. But we just know our role out there and we're just willing to do whatever to buy in. Not to say you can't have a team full of younger guys do that, but I just feel like we understand our roles and know exactly what's going on."

Beckham was the team's highest-priced outside addition in the offseason. The Ravens' decision to commit \$15 million on a one-year pact to the wide receiver was panned around the league. After all, Beckham was in his 30s, sat out the entire 2022 season as he recovered from a major knee injury and wore out his welcome with both the New York Giants and Cleveland Browns. No other team was offering Beckham anything close to what Baltimore paid him. To Beckham, the money was important, but the "love" that the Ravens showed him, which included phone calls from owner Steve Bisciotti, was most impactful.

The Ravens saw the signing as a major opportunity to please their quarterback, Lamar Jackson, at a time when he was involved with tumultuous contract negotiations with the team. It also pacified a fan base that was frustrated by the difficult start to the offseason. They

knew the charismatic and wildly popular Beckham would sell tickets and jerseys. They believed he'd be a leader in the locker room and make some plays on the field, too, even if he wasn't the dynamic performer he was before myriad injuries.

Beckham has put up solid numbers (31 catches for 505 yards and three touchdowns), but he's been especially good of late and has been a significant presence in the locker room throughout. Beckham has talked on several occasions about how the Ravens run a first-class operation, and there's been little evidence of some of the behavior that marred and ultimately ended his tenure with the Giants and Browns.

"When you have a guy like Odell Beckham come in, I was waiting to see how he was in the building, his work ethic, stuff like that," said Ravens veteran defensive tackle Broderick Washington. "We got a lot of great receivers on the team. It would be interesting to see how he would fit in not being the only guy. He immediately fit right in and he's been thriving ever since."

Like Beckham, Clowney had a bitter parting with the Browns following two seasons. He was sent home late last season after he complained about his role and questioned his future with the organization. The 30-year-old was accused of quitting on the team, which he categorically denies. Either way, the first overall draft pick in 2014 had already been labeled an underachiever who didn't always play hard and get the most out of his eye-popping physical traits.

He had been on three different teams in four seasons since he moved on from the Houston Texans following the 2018 campaign. The Ravens had pursued Clowney before. They finally signed him midway through training camp to a one-year deal for just \$2.5 million. Seventy-three different edge rushers have a higher average per year than Clowney this season.

Yet, he's having one of the best years of his career. He's 2.5 sacks shy of his first double-digit sack season, and Harbaugh said he's fit in so well that it feels like he's been a Raven his whole professional life.

"I came in this season like, 'I just want to be available and be healthy through these games. I'm going to go ahead and try to dominate like I know I can,' and I put a lot of pressure on myself," Clowney said. "I take pride in that. I know people count me out, because I'm 30 or whatever they want to say, but I just go out there and play my game and give you what I've got."

With Tyus Bowser (knee) missing the entire season so far and David Ojabo (knee) being sidelined for most of it, Clowney and Van Noy have formed a formidable edge-rushing duo. The 32-year-old Van Noy didn't sign with the Ravens until after Week 3. He visited the team in July, but he and Baltimore were significantly apart in contract talks. A little more than two months later, they found common ground.

While playing just 10 games, Van Noy's six sacks are only one away from a career high. The Ravens are his fifth team in 10 seasons. He was cut by the Miami Dolphins in March 2021 just one season into a four-year, \$51 million deal. Van Noy said earlier this year on teammate Marlon Humphrey's podcast that he was wrongly accused of leaking negative stuff about quarterback Tua Tagovailoa to the press.

Meanwhile, it's taken Van Noy no time whatsoever to emerge as a leader in Baltimore's locker room.

"It's been great, but I'm confident in who I am as a player," said Van Noy, who mentioned that his former Patriots teammate Matthew Judon gave him a strong scouting report on playing for the Ravens. "I feel like everywhere I go, we win. I bring that type of attitude and they already have that attitude here. So it's worked really well."

The Darby and Maulet signings were even less heralded. Darby has 94 career starts and eight interceptions on his resume. Yet, the 29-year-old veteran of five different teams was still available in late August because there were concerns about his knee. He wowed Ravens officials in a workout, which came less than 10 months after he tore his ACL, ending his 2022 season prematurely. The Ravens signed him to a one-year, \$1.7 million deal, and he's already started six games and helped the team deal with Humphrey missing a chunk of the season.

Maulet became available in early May when he requested his release from the Pittsburgh Steelers over a salary dispute. The Ravens respected the 30-year-old cornerback from all the times they played against him. They signed him to a one-year, \$1.1 million deal on the eve of training camp. He has two sacks, an interception and four pass breakups this season.

"I was constantly on the phone with them throughout the whole process and it just made more sense," Maulet said. "I was in the AFC. I knew the teams that I was going against, I knew what they bring to the table. And I'm an AFC North guy. I'm a physical guy who likes to stick my nose in some dirty places. That's playing the nickel and things like that. It was just a perfect fit for me."

Many of the new Ravens were quick to credit DeCosta, Harbaugh and other team decision-makers for knowing how the pieces would fit and building a strong roster with a healthy mix of veterans and young players. Of course, winning helps bring everything together. Still, Agholor said it was his free-agent visit to Baltimore where he met with DeCosta and Harbaugh and learned what they were about that sold him on signing with the Ravens.

Others pointed to how members of the front office and coaching staff embrace players of different personalities and backgrounds and don't try to stifle them or have them conform to a definitive way of doing certain things.

"Every team is trying to be player-friendly now, but they don't want you to be no one but yourself here," Maulet said. "That's what I appreciate so much. I can get in my feelings if I don't like something and they are not going to be like, 'Oh, he's not a good player.' It's like, 'It is what it is. He's a human being.' I respect that. They know their personnel and they judge it off of that."

After the Ravens won Super Bowl XLVII, the organization moved on from some of its most accomplished and vocal players. A few of them, including safeties Ed Reed and Bernard Pollard, have been occasional critics of Harbaugh. The moves created a narrative that the team, and Harbaugh in particular, didn't want too many big/strong personalities or outspoken players in the locker room.

There, however, was never much evidence to support that narrative. The post-2012 veteran purge was largely due to retirements (Ray Lewis, Matt Birk) and a tight salary-cap situation that made keeping certain players next to impossible.

Since then, the Ravens have added many accomplished and vocal veterans at different points of their careers, a group that includes Steve Smith Sr., Marcus Peters, Earl Thomas, Eric Weddle, Dez Bryant, Calais Campbell and Roquan Smith.

Quite a few of those players had good runs in Baltimore, just like Beckham and Clowney, the biggest of the team's acquisitions before the season, are doing now.

"I just think that credits the coaching staff here, the style that we are here. And I think it just goes to good leadership and just making everyone feel welcomed — welcomed to be themselves and not try to be anything that they're not," said Roquan Smith, who the Ravens acquired from the Chicago Bears last October. "Guys just are being themselves, and it makes them play like the best version of themselves."

'We're Just Going Crazy': How The Ravens' 2020 Draft Class Is Powering Their Elite Defense

BALTIMORE BANNER | **OCTOBER 19, 2023** | JONAS SHAFFER

In 2020, the Ravens drafted a rookie class that needed time to come together. The draft had fallen during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, forcing offseason meetings and workouts into virtual classrooms and gyms. The Ravens' draft picks, all 10 of them, wouldn't meet until the start of training camp. Inside linebacker Malik Harrison, a third-round pick, said they talked — gasp! — on the phone instead.

As the Ravens gear up for Sunday's much-anticipated home game against the Detroit Lions, it's easy to forget where the spine of their defense was built. But it is perhaps fitting that the team's foundational 2020 class had a halting start to its NFL journey. Because only now, years later, are that draft's defensive pieces coming together as one, bolstering one of the league's best units.

"It's always good to see your class excel and all of y'all balling together," Harrison said Wednesday. "We came in together, not knowing what was going on. We had a crazy year, a COVID year. ... Just to see it all fall together and then all of the pieces just come together, we're just going crazy."

The class' impact is undeniable. According to TruMedia, 2020 draft picks have combined to play 28.1% of the Ravens' defensive snaps this season. The team's leaders in sacks, interceptions and tackles for loss are all fourth-year Ravens. It's not inconceivable that all five defenders from that draft class start Sunday against the Lions' high-octane offense.

Up front are defensive linemen Justin Madubuike and Broderick Washington Jr. Madubuike, a third-round pick, leads the team with 4.5 sacks — one shy of his career high — and 11 run stops, according to Pro Football Focus. Washington, a fifth-round pick who signed a three-year, \$17.5 million contract extension in August, is one of the team's hardest-working players and has been a pillar of its elite run defense over the past two-plus years.

Inside linebacker Patrick Queen, the No. 28 overall draft pick in 2020, is maybe the group's brightest star, a Pro Bowl-level running mate to Roquan Smith who leads all off-ball linebackers in sacks (3.5) and quarterback pressures (11), according to the NFL's Next Gen Stats. (His five tackles for loss are also tied for the team lead with Madubuike.) Harrison, taken two rounds after Queen as another inside linebacker, has found a home early this season on the outside, helping to set the edge and grading out as one of PFF's highest-rated linebackers.

Safety Geno Stone, a seventh-round pick and the Ravens' 10th and final selection in the 2020 class, has been one of the NFL's most unlikely stars. Waived near the end of his rookie year before returning to Baltimore in 2021, he's now tied for the league lead in interceptions (three).

"The fact that you have guys that work hard, that have been able to stack reps in the system ... and try to pay attention to detail in terms of technique and are talented and are hard workers — to see the results out there is really rewarding," coach John Harbaugh said Wednesday.

For as much as the 2020 draft offered the Ravens' defense, its returns on offense have been less resounding. Running back J.K. Dobbins has averaged 5.8 yards per carry but appeared in just 24 games, his promising career marred by injury after injury. Devin Duvernay is a two-time Pro Bowl returner but has struggled to break out at wide receiver. Offensive linemen Tyre Phillips and Ben Bredeson lasted a combined three seasons in Baltimore. Wide receiver James Proche II had just 25 catches over three seasons before he was released.

Of the Ravens' defensive holdovers, only Washington is signed beyond this season, and quarterback Lamar Jackson's megadeal will limit general manager Eric DeCosta's spending power in future offseasons.

Time and salary cap space are running out. Tough decisions will have to be made. Can the Ravens afford top-tier contracts for both Smith and Queen? Has Madubuike played himself into a free-agent bidding war? Will Stone and Harrison look for bigger roles elsewhere?

If any kind of endpoint is nearing for the Ravens' 2020 class, it hasn't sunk in yet. Stone said Wednesday that he'd thought recently about how far the group has come since its "COVID year." He beamed with pride as he rattled off the names of his classmates. It had been a long wait for a season like this.

"We're all guys that came in together ... and now we're all key contributors to a defense, making plays as much as we can, especially on special teams," Stone said. "So I feel like our class [has] been playing really well together since we came here, got our opportunities, as much as we can, and made the most of them."