

## Game Face

By Joe Platania

The Ravens' defense has a strong reputation, built on a foundation of sturdy personalities.

When dealing with this unit, there is no quarter asked, no quarter given, no nonsense, no frills, no excuses ... and usually, for opponents, no chance to succeed.

But one thing that has made this unit unique -- one thing that has helped it sustain a peerless level of excellence for close to a decade -- is its occasional willingness

It has said yes many times to different schemes, players and game plans. It has permitted itself to be put under the harshest of spotlights and the most glaring media

Most of all, it simultaneously embraces the old and welcomes the new, as first-year defensive coordinator Greg Mattison has found out.



Rookie coordinator Greg Mattison and underrated workhorse Haloti Ngata lead an aggressive Ravens defense poised to dominate the league. (Sabina Moran/PressBox)

He doubtless already knows the story of how defensive tackle Tony Siragusa welcomed a then-fallow youngster named Kelly Gregg to the team in 2000. As team leader Siragusa saw the squat, brush-cut, earnest-looking 6-footer sitting in front of his locker and blithely asked, "Who are you?"

When Gregg, who had just been assigned to the practice squad, identified himself, Siragusa announced to no one in particular, "Hey, guys! We just signed Buddy. Things haven't changed much around the Ravens' locker room, as linebacker Terrell Suggs showed with his reaction to this year's second-round pick, defensive end

"I like Paul," Suggs said with a mischievous smile. "He's good; he's going to come along. But, just as I heckled [quarterback] Joe [Flacco], I wouldn't be myself if I didn't have a little bit of rookie some grief. ... I'm going to have my fun with him first."

How much fun? Suggs has already nicknamed Kruger "Goldilocks."

This is the world Mattison inherited from Marvin Lewis, Mike Nolan and Rex Ryan. This is the climate in which the 37-year, college-coaching veteran now finds himself. Part of the reason, he has easily embraced the change and doesn't mind it one bit.

Mattison, who turns 60 Nov. 15, strikes an imposing old-school presence with his gruff voice and weathered complexion that is born of years of coaching experience.

But he has adapted well to his professional charges, quickly immersing himself in the Ravens' routines, traditions and habits.

Mattison, the fourth man to hold the job in Ravens history, has quite a legacy he must follow. He knows it and, most of all, respects it.

Working under all of Mattison's predecessors over the past nine seasons, the Ravens' defense leads the NFL in takeaways, interceptions and pickoffs returned for

Not only that, it has allowed the league's lowest third-down conversion percentage, average rushing yards per game, points per game and is just a 10th of a yard behind the Pittsburgh Steelers in total defense.

Some have already recognized the 2000 Super Bowl-winning unit as the best single-season defense in league history. But a case can be made that despite free agent additions and four different coordinators, the Ravens' defense can be considered one of the best sustained units of all time.

Despite his large frame, Mattison is being asked figuratively to walk a very slim tightrope.

Can he continue simultaneously to embrace the old philosophies and welcome new suggestions? Can he respect what came before him and earn it as well? Can he keep the team's bedrock unit intact?

#### MORE UP-FRONT WEAPONS

One thing that has made Mattison's rise to the coordinator job even more improbable -- besides the fact he is only in his second year at the NFL level -- is that his last year was linebackers coach.

It's an assignment that -- even though he performed his duties well -- ran counter to his résumé. At seven of his nine college stops, Mattison coached the defensive line for two years at Navy under Elliot Uzelac.

"The thing we decided once I became coordinator is that I just wanted to coach," Mattison said. "I just don't think I would be happy just walking around. And rushing linebacker is a position that's kind of between a defensive lineman and a 'backer, so I decided [last year] that I would coach that position, and it's been great."

For the sake of the Ravens' defensive continuity, the transition from line coach to someone who has to handle all three levels has thankfully been a smooth one.

"One thing that's good about him, he's coached all the positions," Gregg said. "He coached the linebackers last year, he was a defensive line coach before and he's put everything together. He's a good teacher, he's real honest and he helps us get better each day. That's good for us."

However, the trench mentality has seemingly never left Mattison.

"I think deep down he's really a defensive line coach," defensive end Trevor Pryce said. "That's what I know him as, a defensive line coach. He spends a lot of time in the trenches. I'm like, 'Don't you have a secondary to deal with?' He'll say, 'Oh no, those guys will figure it out.'"

Even though Mattison has expressly stated he will be staying true to Ryan's attacking schemes, he also seems to be teaching the value of staying in a prescribed scheme and performing read/react duties wherever possible.

During the first quarter of the Ravens' preseason win over Ryan's New York Jets, it was obvious that lesson was learned.

On the second play of the game, Jets rookie quarterback Mark Sanchez faced a second-and-4 situation from his own 30-yard line. He looked to his right, hoping to throw to Tony Richardson out in the flat. Defensive tackle Haloti Ngata was engaged with a blocker from the right side of the Jets' offensive line and saw the developing play. Sanchez, linebacker Ray Lewis was coming from his left, preparing to deliver a hard hit. The ensuing hurried throw landed in the arms of Ngata, who returned the play for a touchdown.

Ngata's continued development toward a level of leaguwide excellence has translated into a first-alternate Pro Bowl berth, coming last year. A full all-star nod has likely won't much longer.

Ngata is one of seven defensive linemen the Ravens kept after final cuts this year, a change from the five- and six-man units of the past. Depth and dominance up the Philadelphia Eagles trademark, and Ravens coach John Harbaugh has imported that philosophy.

"These guys are powerful guys," Harbaugh said. "You've got to be able to play with leverage. You've got to bend. We talk about power-producing angles in football. You've got to be able to bend and produce power. If you're not in good position against a guy like Haloti, [Justin] Bannan, Kelly Gregg, or [the Jets' Kris] Jenkins -- you just don't have a chance."

Light on his feet but tough as nails, Ngata gives offenses enough to worry about without considering how many down linemen they are actually facing. With Suggs out of the preseason with a heel injury, rookie second-round pick Kruger was inserted at defensive end, giving Baltimore the 4-3 look it sported in 2000.

Since the Ravens allowed less than 10 points per preseason game, it's an option they could return to in the future. As Pryce points out, the move would have an impact

nature to it.

"It depends on whether or not whoever's playing the rush linebacker puts his hand on the ground," he said. "And that's a personal preference. If it's Suggs out there with his hand on the ground, we look like a four-man front. If it's Paul [Kruger] out there, and he stands up, we look like a three-man front.

"So really, it just depends on whatever that guy wants to do, is what we look like. Really, it confuses nobody except for them."

#### 'BACKER BRIGADE

Even with ever-changing defensive fronts, linebacking play has been at the heart of what the Ravens do best, and Mattison wants to take advantage of that. That's why the defense is as deep and fast as it has ever been.

Not only are the seven front men a change in philosophy, but the 10 linebackers kept are as well.

"That gives the depth where we need it, and that's the kind of combination that we've brought out for years, having that kind of depth and going two-deep," linebacker Mattison said. "The expectations are whatever they're going to be. Getting [safety Dawan] Landry back and signing [cornerback Dominique] Foxworth and getting Gregg Bunkley back are like that, that gives the depth where we need it."

Falling right in line with Harbaugh's philosophy of giving himself and his coaching staff as many options as possible, the 10-man linebacking corps consists of five inside players and five outside players.

Blitzes, stunts and twists will help disguise the looks so the inside-outside dynamic is occasionally switched. Versatile players such as Jameel McClain, who began his career as an outside man but now plays mostly inside, will add to the myriad of looks that are available.

Sometimes, teams try to give themselves quantity while sacrificing quality. The Ravens clearly haven't done that, no matter who has been in charge of the defense.

"I've said it time and time again, 'Do we love Rex?'" Lewis said. "Yeah, but Rex never made a play when we stepped on the field. No defensive coordinator has. But our players make plays and we have a core of guys around here who are dedicated to each other. Any time you have that type of chemistry, it's almost impossible to coach. You can't not have the same defense that's been successful year in and year out."

But as the years go on, it's up to Mattison, Harbaugh and the players to continue that success, and it won't be easy when Lewis -- the only active non-special team player who has been with his current team for 14 straight years -- retires.

The Ravens have certainly attempted to bring along a new generation, and have done it through several different avenues. However, Suggs, Jarret Johnson and safety Tavares Gooden -- the trio that starts alongside Lewis -- are the only real proven commodities at this point.

McClain and rookie Dannell Ellerbe were undrafted free agents. Prescott Burgess and Antwan Barnes are third-year players who have been slowed by occasional injuries. Brendon Ayanbadejo has a solid special-teams reputation, but he is trying to broaden his range. Kruger and practice-squad rookie William VanDeSteege show promise but are unproven.

"It's an intricate position," Mattison said of the outside role. "It's a hard position for a guy who maybe just played rush at one time or linebacker one time. [Kruger and VanDeSteege] have both been doing a great job of trying to get it."

#### SECONDARY CONCERNS

Defensive depth was certainly augmented up front and at the middle level, but it was probably needed more in the secondary than anywhere else.

Last year's starting cornerbacks, Chris McAlister and Samari Rolle, are mostly out of the picture now. McAlister's balky knee and attitude were his ticket out of Baltimore, and Rolle's continuing neck problems will force him to the sidelines for at least the season's first six weeks.

This was an area of great importance because if receivers get big plays behind the secondary, all the grunt work up front and all the fancy blitzes won't mean a thing. Mattison wants his defensive backs to be able to be on that proverbial island while the front seven does its own job.

"We're thinking that at third-and-long, most teams are going to try and throw the football right there," Mattison said. "We're always going to be aggressive in those situations."

Like I said, the good news is if a team does decide to do something like that, you better be sure your gaps are all covered and you're hitting the right places."

The speed-based pairing of Foxworth and Fabian Washington, along with veteran free safety Ed Reed and the return of strong safety Landry from a spinal cord injury, will be a unit that could again lead the NFL in interceptions. Last year, the Ravens picked off a league-high 26 passes.

The depth comes from two hard-hitting safeties, Tom Zbikowski and Haruki Nakamura, as well as the fast-talking riverboat gambler himself, cornerback Frank Walker.

And if things don't go well, Mattison won't be the only one to provide motivation. In Baltimore, defensive players do it themselves.

"This is one of the rare places," Reed said. "I haven't been anywhere else, but this place here has almost like a college feel. We talk about tradition. We talk about tradition, of upholding certain standards.

"When you come up into this defense, there's a certain way you practice and there's a certain way you play."

#### EMBARASSMENT OF RICHES

As a coordinator, Mattison will certainly be motivating, coaxing, cajoling, poking and prodding this defense until it is the best it can possibly be.

But because it has already spent close to a decade being the best -- or at least very close to it -- it's understandable if the new/old guy on the block simply stops and for a minute, wondering why he got so lucky and silently thanking those who have helped him.

"I feel like I am probably one of the luckiest coaches to have ever coached," Mattison said. "I can honestly say that all the coaches I have worked for have been tremendous with tremendous character."

Mattison cites people like Cornell's Bob Blackman, Michigan's Lloyd Carr and Notre Dame's Bob Davie and Ty Willingham. And as Western Michigan's defensive coordinator, Mattison served under a head coach with a familiar surname.

"John's father, Jack Harbaugh, I learned toughness from him," Mattison said. "[I learned] how you have to coach with toughness but at the same time with fairness and tremendous integrity. Don't bend the rules, don't do something that's going to give you a short-term fix. It's about the whole program."

It was true under Lewis, Nolan and Ryan, and it will likely be true under Mattison. If a player takes care of his own assignment -- if a unit takes care of its own job -- the whole can become greater than the sum of the parts.

That will be true no matter how charismatic parts like Ryan have been, or Mattison could be.

"They're not opposites," Pryce said of Ryan and Mattison. "They both love football, and they're both students of the game. The personality stuff -- everybody's different. Everybody has a different way of dealing with adversity and dealing with success and all those types of things.

"Now, we haven't gone through the season yet with 'Matti,' but I've known him a long time. What you see is what you get with him. There's not going to be a lot of funny quips and all that."

What Mattison is going to show his players is belief in himself and his new assignment, one that has helped stamp players and units into pro football lore with an air of being grounded in progress, toughness and selflessness.

"Playing like a Raven is a mentality," Reed said. "It's who we are. It's out here on this field. It's when you're off the field. It's training camp. It's what we built. There's a respect for it. It's respect for your teammates, respect for your family, respect for your coaches.

"It's a lot all up in one big pot."

And it's the guy with the pot belly who's providing a new foundation.

*Issue 141: September 2009*