EXPANDED REDSKINS COVERAGE THROUGHOUT THE SEASON: WASHINGTONTIMES.COM/SPORTS/FOOTBALL

FAMILY DYNAMIC

Mike and Kyle Shanahan are not just father and son; they’re tasked with returning a proud franchise to glory. Story, D2
Two Shanahans make it work as team rebuilds

BLOODLINE ON THE SidELINE

Redskins coach Mike Shanahan bucked the trend that says you can't be an offensive coordinator last year. The veteran coach said his team has "learned how to adapt and react during a meeting with the entire offense present." The coach has been working with his team to get ready for the season.

By RICH CAMPBELL
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Peggy Shanahan feared the worst because she knows her husband and son as well as anybody. A pair of intense, dedicated, football-obsessed competitors, they worked closely for 18 hours a day or more. Oh, yeah, that would end eventually. She could see the outcome clearly — the awkward silence at family dinners, the tumultuous discussions on vacation. What if a joy it would be for Mike to capture the Washington Redskins' building project with the team's assistant coach, who co-founded their position with the Houston Texans to work for his father.

Yet the Shananahs are back at quarterback that persist after a bumpy 6-10 debut campaign, Mike and Kyle still have to prove that what they produce will produce in Washington's success on which they separately built their reputations in other cities.

"When you have any adversity and your last name is the same as the head coach's, I know what it's like, what people are going to say," Kyle said. "I've known my whole life. But I'm very confident in myself because of what I've accomplished. I'm also confident that you can ask any player that I've ever played with, and I feel very good about that." "With the 2011 season..." Peggy said. "It was a total of football; the running game, the passing game. It was apparent that what you did as a football player is not limited to one position together talking ball." "Coaches' reviews were highly critical at times last season, as the Redskins averaged 5.56 yards per play, 19th best in the NFL. That is not good enough for Mike and Kyle Shanahan. Kyle's offense during his two years calling plays in Houston ranked with 5.38 yards and fourth (6.65 yards). During Miller's two Super Bowl seasons in Denver, the Broncos' offense ranked third each year.

Kyle themselves that is not the end. They could have picked up on the immediate change ideas throughout the season, as all head coaches and coordinators do. However, their relationship allowed for greater candor. "Sometimes I'd be a little more nervous to piss the head coach off," Kyle, 31, said. "It's a little easier for me to ask him a tough question than it has been (with other coaches) in the past. That has been nice because I can always ask that question. And definitely being his son, he probably gets more after me than he does with most people. So it goes both ways." "You want your assistant coaches to be loyal," said Wade, now the Texans' defensive coordinator. "Nobody is going to be more loyal than your son, so you can al- ways count on that." "Tell them the truth. Some other coaches might hesitate about telling you what you want to hear, but if you ask your son, he's going to tell you exactly what he thinks. You get a valuable opin- ion then."

That was the case at Redskins Park last year as the first-year coaching staff eval- uated new吱吱声 and the offense. Peggy, Mike's wife, and Michael John Shanahan, the son, determined which players fit into each scheme. Peggy worked with Kyle for a few years to get him to be the head coach. Kyle has got a lot of football in his background; what I mean by that is we're on the same page," Mike, 59, said. "We talk a lot of football; the running game, the passing game. It's apparent that what you do as a football player is not limited to one position together talking ball."

"Coaches' reviews were highly critical at times last season, as the Redskins averaged 5.56 yards per play, 19th best in the 32-team NFL."

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"When Kyle was growing up, topics centered on his playing career and the path he hoped would lead him to the NFL. While Kyle broke into coaching, first with UCLA and then the Tampa Bay Buc- caners, the father-son discussions about coaching were limited because their experiences weren't shared."

"Now, because they work so closely to- gether, the depth of their interaction is more beneficial to how they coach." "I know, I have learned a lot of things from Kyle, being so young but having the ear of players and just new things and different ways to do things," Peggy Shanahan said.

"Kyle, for example, uses film analysis to anchor his meetings. The young genera- tion of NFL coaches entered the profes- sion with the technology to digitally break down game footage. Many young coaches, such as Kyle, have developed their methods accordingly.

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Jim Zorn (left) experienced a four-game dropoff in 2005, his second season as the Redskins’ coach. Joe Gibbs (right), on the other hand, has shown a great deal of improvement in 2005 — his second season in his second stint as coach — and took Washington to the playoffs. Mike Shanahan is entering Year 2 and coming off a 6-10 record he has to improve upon.

**SHANAHANS**

spokes he Redskins play a run incorporated with plenty of play-action plays. But their team then ran an effective pass offense that was driven by better than average quarterback play and a solid running game.

**Family time, football time**

It doesn’t matter which of Kyle’s last name is Shanahan or Smith, there’s never a bad time for ice cream.

Friday mornings around 10:30 Joe Shanahan perfectly. That’s what a time for 10 minutes or so across Lebkuecher, Va., to Kyle’s house and take in a bit of family fun.

**Second (year) and goal to go**

Jim Zorn (faded): 8-8 in Year 1 (2008), 4-4-2 in Year 2. Was canned as soon as he stepped off the plane from San Diego after the 59-game finale. The pattern is fairly well-established in Washington, at least. If things are on the upswing in your second year, you got to keep your job. If not, you might want to put together your resume. Which isn’t to say the boss will run in on a plane with his resume in tow.

In Shanahan’s second year in Denver by the way, the Broncos made major strides, going from a middle-of-the-pack 6-8 to an AFC West 5-5 (The next season, they won the first of back-to-back Super Bowls. But it’s hard to imagine the Redskins winning more games than they did in 2011.

They’ve made some nice roster additions — Barry Cofield, O.J. Atogwe, Tim Hightower, Chris Chester — but an 8-6 record seems a little out of reach, especially with so much uncertainty at quarterback.

That said their depth is undoubtedly better, almost across the board. And while they’re still very much a work in progress, they appear headed in the right direction. The 50-pound weight of Albert Haynesworth has been lifted from everyone’s shoulders — he’s New England problem now — and the signing of a large draft class and several other young players has created a sense of renewal. This is no longer an old team, it’s one whose best football is likely ahead of it. The question is: How far in the future are we talking about? December? Next year? The year after that?

The year after that, after all, would be Year 4, and there are only a few hand South’s Boxes. They’re also pushing the limits of Gibbs’ patience. There are no free years in the NFL. But first-time first-timers have only seven wins on the 20th schedule.

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2011**

**EXPANDED REDSKINS COVERAGE THROUGHOUT THE SEASON: WASHINGTONTIMES.COM/SPORTS/FOOTBALL**
Despite turnover, veteran remains a steady influence

Santana Moss was surrounded. Moss stumped in the locker room at Redskins Park. In the press conference before the season opener, coach Jay Gruden and his staff were all too eager to talk about the young players. Moss was completely out of mind.

If there’s a moment worth comparing this team to one of those moments when the Redskins were a great team in the ’90s, this might be it - 37-year-old Santana Moss has had six catches for 111 yards and one touchdown. Last season, Moss caught a career-best 93 passes for 1,115 yards and six touchdowns. Kyle Shanahan used Moss more in the slot than he ever played there before while Anthony Armstrong ran deep patterns. The relative familiarity of the offense, regardless of the quarterback, seems a luxury.

Moss isn’t a shadow of the player he was at his peak years ago, but he’s still able to do some good things. His target this season is 1,000 yards, and he’s well on his way to achieving it.

“An exuberant, high-flying receiver,” Moss said. “I probably have more of a personality than a politician, but I’m happy with the way things have gone this season.”

Moss remains one of the most reliable players on the field.

Offense

**Deep Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Player</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WR1</td>
<td>Santana Moss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WR2</td>
<td>Pierre Garcon</td>
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<tr>
<td>WR3</td>
<td>DeSean Jackson</td>
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<td>Josh Doctson</td>
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<td>FS</td>
<td>Sean Taylor</td>
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<tr>
<td>RB1</td>
<td>Jay Gruden</td>
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<tr>
<td>RB2</td>
<td>Alfred Morris</td>
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<td>RB3</td>
<td>Roy Helu Jr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>FB</td>
<td>Silas Redd</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Position of strength**

- Offense: Running backs
- Defense: Defensive linemen

**Position of weakness**

- Offense: Tight ends
- Defense: Secondary

“With Moss in the lineup, things just seem to work better,” Shanahan said. “He’s a big impact player, and he’s really helped us in the passing game.”

**If I’m going to still play, why go somewhere and start all over?” Moss said. “If we put the right people in the right places ... we can really do some good things.”

— Santana Moss, Redskins receiver

**MOSS IS STILL THE BOSS**

Veteran wide receiver Santana Moss has had six offensive play-calls and five quarterback since the Redskins acquired him from the New York Jets in 2005. His 103 catches last season were the most in his 10-year career, and his 1,115 receiving yards were second best.
Okakpo keeps the pressure on opposing QBs

When Mike Shanahan was building winning football teams with the Den- ver Broncos, it wasn’t hard to identify the face of the franchise — first John Elway and later on players such as Ter- relle Davis and Shannon Sharpe. The Redskins don’t have an Elway or a Davis, but on defense they have an emerging star.

Brian Orakpo may not have the name recognition of a future Hall of Famer — at least yet — but the line- backer is growing into a vital role on an evolving defense as a playmaker and leader.

“If that (leadership) label is what you want to give to me, or my teammates want to give it, I’m going to embrace it,” he said. “I just want to win. That’s the most important thing to me right now. So if that role consists of me being more vocal, consists of me leading by example on and off the field, I’ve got to do what I’ve got to do.”

Orakpo is only in his third season, but his impact on the team and stature within the locker room has been steadily increasing. There’s a lot left to learn, though, his role for younger players such as Ryan Kerrigan because he’s quickly picked up on Haslet’s defensive system.

“Hey, he’s more comfortable, obvi- ously. He’s not thinking as much, he’s reacting,” Haslett said. “Obviously he has great pass rush skills and he’s power- ful and he knows what he’s doing on the run. It’s night and day from last year.”

In the offseason, a lot of the league’s top pass-rushers came out that jumped Orakpo into the third grouping, well behind the likes of Pittsburgh’s James Harrison and Dallas’ Marcus Spears. The most for the Redskins took with the 15th pick in the 2009 draft is using that as “that’s the time,” he said.

But it doesn’t seem like Orakpo — referred to as “Rak” by his teammates — needs external motivation. He has 19% sacks in two seasons (in two dif- ferent defensive schemes) and his pro- ducing even more in 2011 as nat- ural progression. The Redskins are counting on him for that.

“You need somebody that can make that quarterback get scrambled, throw bad balls, not give him the time to sit back there and wind up and throw those cornerbacks (Josh Wilson said). “Rak is a big part of this defense because he brings that pass-rushing ability to the team.”

It’s already evident how much Orakpo has developed a comfort zone in the 3-4 defense. The 25-year-old cited an ability to play more loosely rather than huckstering and playing ten- tatively.

That has shown in Orakpo’s im- proved ability to get off blocks and into the backfield.

“He’s using his hands really well,” Haslett said. “He would use his should- ers once in a while last year. But he’s doing a good job with his hand place- ment. He’s powerful and can throw those tight ends around.”

Simply — in a good way — follow defensive players approve of Orakpo’s increased role.

“He’s got to be accounted for. I’m sure if you ask any offense, they locate Brian on every play and they under- stand that he’s dangerous,” nose tackle Barry Cofield said. “Any attention that’s being paid on him is not being paid to me, so it helps.”

Orakpo is taking the first step to be- coming not just the best player on de- fense for the Redskins but an elite NFL linebacker. Still he’s learning on the job in a lot of ways.

Some teammates, including corner- back Kevin Barnes, see London Fletcher as the backbone of the defense because of his spot at middle line- backer and the Pro Bowl appearances of recent years. Orakpo’s haven’t been to rely on Fletcher for help, either.

“They learned from him what he’s brought to the table, what he’s done over the years and all the team’s been on — especially what he’s done for this organization,” Orakpo said. “That’s the first guy that I learned from, obviously being a linebacker. He made the transition a lot sooner seeing what he did.”

Fletcher taught — and still is teach- ing — Orakpo how to play “inside” and count on his athleticism to produce. In turn, Orakpo has used his new NFL ex- perience to assist Kerrigan, the Red- skins’ first-round pick out of Purdue in April who is making the same tran- sition from defensive end to linebacker.

“Talks to Brian all the time about little things — about hand usage, cov- erage — because Rak went through it last year,” Haslett said. “He’s another guy that didn’t drop a lot, more of a rush guy and he had a lot to learn. It’s kind of fun to have two young guys out- side that are big enough guys that can run and play and pass and get to the quar- terback.”

Orakpo helping Kerrigan with the adjustment is no shock: the Redskins hopes that 20th first-round is quite a study by his mentor. But on the field and off, Orakpo is becoming someone many teammates turn to for advice and leadership.

And that doesn’t surprise Fletcher in the least.

“Some guys, you can’t force leader- ship on someone — or they can’t try to force it, either. He has natural leader- ship qualities — he’s had it since he came here as a rookie,” Fletcher said. “He’s just not there really showing them his personality.”

REDSKINS LINEBACKER Brian Orakpo has 15% sacks in his first two seasons, coming under two defensive schemes. With Haslett already comfortable in the 3-4 defense, big things are expected from him in 2011.

‘RAK’ ATTACK SETS TONE

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Alexander a force when ball is kicked

By Rich Campbell

The choice of covering a kickoff return is a beautiful thing to Lorenz Alexander. Maybe it’s because, to him, it’s not all that common.

“The way he prepares and knows where his coverage is in the field is already made before it happens,” Redskins linebacker DeAngelo Wilson said.

“You listen to the way he talks and you’re like, ‘Man, how did you do that?’ He’ll say, ‘Well, they did this in Week 2 on a certain return.’ You’re like, ‘How are you thinking about Week 2 return?’”

Alexander, the two-time Pro Bowler who is still looking for his first Redskins interception, had simply started off as an outlier of the week that didn’t turn into a return.

“His physical prowess, leadership and desire that extends to the film room have made him one of our most valuable players,” Coach Mike Shanahan said.

“If there’s a better special teams player in the league, I don’t know who it is,” said special teams coach Danny Smith, who’s spent his entire coaching career at the NFL level. “I’ll match him up against anybody.”

Alexander, 28, is a big reason why the Redskins’ special teams, which has ranked in the NFL’s top five in kickoff return average to coach last five seasons. He didn’t play special teams during his college career at California, but after unscouted college tryouts with Carolina and Baltimore, the undrafted college free agent knew it was the only road to a football job.

“Newcomers

Best of the rest: HI Tim Hightower, FB Fullback Chase Johnson, RB DeAngelo Washington, WR Santana Moss

Notable departures: CB Santana Moss, DQ Brandon Meriweather, DL Ndamukong Suh, DT Jonathan Fanene, LB Jonnu Scallen, LB Danny Trevathan

By Terance Williams

To say 2010 was a short season for the Washington Redskins’ defense would be a huge understatement. Albert Haynesworth again proved to be the big man in the middle, but myrtle problems limited him to eight games or his team limited to a 4-10 finish.

Haynesworth is gone, his mammalian seven-year, $100 million contract from 2009 went to make way for someone—or anyone—to fill his spot. The Redskins consider themselves fortunate that among a host of new faces they picked up during rookie minicamp in the days after the lockout, they didn’t get anyone as a new nose tackle.

They got Ryan Cofield — a player with leadership skills who not only fits interim coordinator Jim Zorn’s scheme better but allows the Redskins to do much more on the defensive side of the ball.

“Coach Zorn has a great plan, and I think this year we have a lot of pieces for him to work with,” Cofield said. “The Slim F三年级大四’ull be in great shape by the time we get back, and our zone-blocking schemes are going to be a big part of what we do.”

To get his new starters Cofield at nose tackle, Stephen Bowen at defensive end, and first-round pick Rocky Bernard at outside linebacker, Josh Wilson at corner and Channing Crowder at strong safety. On offense, there will be a new starter at quarterback (Ryan Fitzpatrick) and running back (Tim Hightower).

But the addition of Cofield could be the biggest X-factor the Redskins made even though the six-year deal is worth just a smidge of Haynesworth’s at $26 million and because the 27-year-old isn’t hyped as the greatest defensive player

“Special teams happens too fast that you’ve got to be able to close distances and play with good level of play. When you’re a big guy you think you can just run over anybody. So between being smart and playing my leverage and understanding where everybody else fits, it has really helped.”

— Lorenz Alexander, Redskins’ special-teamer

200 yards.

“We want him to start with us. I like a lot of bad down-loss,” Cofield said. “I didn’t play my best ball.”

Cofield, a 6-3 and 270 over those past two seasons because the lockout, is 6-5 and 300, and the Redskins have a conference in determining field position.

“Special strength: The Redskins’ annual arrangement of veteran punter shopped on Steffes, 30, who Philadelphia traded him with the Ravens. The Redskins have a number of teams that can be competitive.

Want to get technical about kickoff return? Alexander is more than willing.

“You’ve got to understand who’s blocking you,” he said. “If the guard is blocking you, it’s going to be a touch return. If that tackle crosses my line in the back, I know the ball is going over, and then I go to squeeze a lot. It has to be a Huerk’s high kick, I’m squeezing right now to the bolt.”

So it’s no coincidence that he led the Redskins last season with 20 special teams tackles, 13 of which were.

“We’ll only beat you with your physical skills, but he outperforms you with his intellect,” Smith said. “When you get that combination, you’re special.”

Lorenz Alexander’s blend of size, speed and technique make him a matchup nightmare on kickoff coverage for the Redskins.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Opponent</th>
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<tr>
<td>Oct. 2</td>
<td>St. Louis Rams</td>
<td>1 p.m., Fox</td>
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<td>Oct. 30</td>
<td>Buffalo Bills at Toronto</td>
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<td>San Francisco 49ers</td>
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<td>Dec. 18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan. 1</td>
<td>Philadelphia Eagles</td>
<td>1 p.m., Fox</td>
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The Redskins have a game in Week 10 against the New York Giants at 4:15 p.m. on Fox. This game is the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and is a fitting matchup for the event. If the Redskins can win this game, they will be in the playoff hunt as the season winds down. The team has lost three of their last four games, but they are looking to get back on track against the Giants.
The Redskins have linked tight end Cameron远洋 (6-foot-5, 261 pounds) to the franchise tag.

The team made the move on Friday, eliminating the possibility of the 25-year-old catcher being released. The decision comes with the team facing a $2.68 million cap hit for the 2023 season.

Farley, a first-round pick in 2020, has struggled to stay healthy throughout his career. He missed the entire 2021 season due to a torn Achilles tendon. In 2022, he appeared in six games, starting five, before being placed on injured reserve with a shoulder injury.

The move to franchise Farley means the Redskins will still have to reach an agreement with him to keep him on the roster for the 2023 season. If no deal is reached, the team would be on the hook for his entire $15.5 million salary.

Farley, a former Virginia Tech star, was a consensus All-American in 2019 and was considered one of the top players in the 2020 draft. He was the 18th overall pick by the Redskins.

The franchise tag typically costs about 20% more than the average player's salary from the previous season. For Farley, that would be around $3 million. If the Redskins were to franchise Farley again in 2024, the cost would increase to about $4 million.

The team could also consider using the transition tag, which pays a deceased salary based on the average salary of the top 25 players at his position. But that would limit the team's ability to trade Farley during the season.

Farley's return to the lineup would provide depth at the tight end position, which has been a weakness for the Redskins in recent years. He started 10 games in 2022 and was considered one of the team's top pass-catchers.

The franchise tag is a strategy used by teams to retain high-caliber players who are set to become unrestricted free agents. The tag essentially locks up the player's salary for the upcoming season, allowing the team to negotiate a new contract with the player.

The Redskins have used the franchise tag before, in 2021 on defensive end Chase Young. Young was traded to the Panthers in 2022 after the team placed the franchise tag on him again.

The move to franchise Farley will likely impact the team's salary cap, which is currently at about $110 million.

The Redskins are scheduled to host the Carolina Panthers in their home opener on Sunday. The team is coming off an 11-5 season in 2022, which included a 17-14 victory over the Dallas Cowboys in the NFC East divisional playoff game.

The franchise tag is designed to give teams an opportunity to extend a player's contract while negotiating a new deal. It is a valuable tool for teams that want to keep a player but are unable to reach a long-term agreement.
OWINGS MILLS, Md. — Cary Williams was a little-known cornerback fighting for a roster spot when training camp started.

But as the preseason wraps up, Williams has emerged as a starter in Baltimore's backfield four. Needless to say, Williams rise up the depth chart wasn't expected, especially with Dominique Foxworth back from ACL surgery and the Ravens re-signing Chris Cade.

"It's been a lot of work eluding the dream," Williams said. "It's something I've always wanted to do since I was a little kid."

Compared to 2010, when he was a third-year player, Williams said his training camp is going better. He made a few starting mistakes, but his dream has been quite different. The other 30 defensive starters at all training camps all attended basic police schools.

Those schools didn't teach Williams, whose only major visit was to Alabama. A native of Hol-

lywood, Fla., Williams originally looked at Florida in New York. After minimal playing time and having both his starting positions and his freshman season, he transferred to Division II Webber in Taylors, S.C.

He excelled at Webber as he was named an All-American in 2007. He also is the only player in school history to score a touchdown on an interception, kickoff return and reception.

But Williams wasn't until he secured a spot at the University of Maryland. and start

where he ran a faster 40 than former Jets cornerback Asa Idlette, who caught that the attention of NFL scouts.

"He’s always played ball," Williams said. "I’ve always been the small guy or the player who didn’t get any attention. But I never worried on anything. I always worked hard. My number was to be the NFL and I really never thought of me getting to my goal and being where I am right now."

The Ravens had a defensible grade on Williams but were wary since he played at a small school. Others were interested though, as the Titans took him in the seventh round of the 2008 draft. When Williams said he had plenty of ups and downs in Tennessee, being in and out the majority of his time on the practice squad. In No-

vember 2009 the Ravens were scrounging a special teams player with up to contribute at any position. With pro-

fessional success, Williams on the top of that list.

"The thing that was interesting about him when he came out was he had the measurable that intrigued

you," said Vincent Newsome, the Ravens director of pro personnel. "What we ended up doing was a spring he’s worth another round develop his and see how he does." Williams has seen time in the first three and started once over the past two seas-

ons. Heading into camp this year, he was seen as a spe-

cial teams asset. Now he’s looking at locking down the opposition’s top receiver. The preseason, he’s gone toe-to-toe against Kansas City Chiefs receiver Dwayne Bowe and Wash-

ington Redskins wideout Santana Moss.

Against Bowe, he displayed solid technique in his drop before breaking on a pass and ripping the ball out of the tall receiver’s hands. Against Moss, Williams was best for what could have been a touchdown. But Williams needed his length to catch up and do just enough to strip the ball out of the receiver’s hands.

Williams looked like the best corner on Baltimore’s roster this pre-

season. He also saw extra time because of a hamstring injury to Carr and a slow rehab process afterward. But doing it the old-fashioned way, Williams outworked his competition to earn the inside track to a starting spot.

"We always tell them don’t count numbers," Ravens coach John Har-

baugh said. "You never know what’s going to happen. What’s based on is how you play. If you play well and do the things you need to do to be successful, then things will work out well for you."

Williams has turned into an ideal come far away dominates coordinator Chuck Pagano’s defensive scheme. At Alabama, 180 pounds, Williams has the size and strength to you. Williams Williams with reskipe comeback from his serious stinger injury last year. He's 20 pounds, and you have a random hit he has to take on the field. He’s physical at the line of scrimmage.

Williams’ opening game will be huge test to see Williams in reality for the NFL. The Ravens open with Pittsburgh, which has won seven of their last eight entering 2011. Through his journey, Williams’ thanks Baltimore took a chance on him when his time in Tennessee wasn’t certain.

"The Ravens see something, Ten-

nessee didn’t see in me," Williams said. "It’s tough to say, that’s how the NFL is. It’s a business. But you know what they say, one man trash is another man treasure."
The Colts have been able to count on Peyton Manning being the quintessential go-to guy since we opened the week of his rookie year in 1998. But the four-time MVP has been battling injuries the last two seasons, making him the perfect game changer to lead against the Texans, breaking a streak of 227 consecutive starts.

BUFFALO BILLS (4-12)

Key players: QB Ryan Fitzpatrick, RB Fred Jackson, WRs Donald Lee, Stevie Johnson, WR Trumaine Johnson, RBs Laurence Maroney, Da'Rick Rogers, ST Matt Teall

Strengths: Offense has five Pro Bowlers on the roster. Ryan Fitzpatrick has blossomed and has at least one 300-yard pass game in each of the last four games. The Bills are 3-1 in that span. The offense is playing with confidence and is becoming a bigger threat. Fitzpatrick has a strong rapport with Stevie Johnson and Donald Lee. They have combined for 14 touchdowns and 929 yards.

Weaknesses: The Bills have the second-worst run defense in the AFC East and 11th-worst in the NFL. They need to make a run defense and improve the team's second-half performance.

Expectations: The Bills need to improve their defense and get a jump on division leader New England if they want to make the playoffs.

CINCINNATI BENGALS (4-11)

Key players: LB Vontaze Burfict, DB Leon Hall, WR A.J. Green, QB Andy Dalton, LB Cunningham

Strengths: Defense has been the best part of the Bengals this season. They lead the NFL with 17 interceptions. Their defense is ranked fourth in yards allowed, second in points allowed and fourth in takeaways. The team has not allowed a touchdown in five quarters.

Weaknesses: Cincinnati is 0-8 in its last eight road games. The team is 2-16 away from Paul Brown Stadium since 2010.

Expectations: The Bengals are one of the most improved teams in the league, but they need to address their offense if they want to make the playoffs.

Cleveland Browns (5-10)

Key players: WR Josh Gordon, LB Barkevious Mingo, CB Joe Haden, Gsat Mariota, DT Jabaal Sheard, RB Trent Richardson

Strengths: Cleveland has a young core of players that can develop into a championship team. The Browns have an exciting group of young defenders, including Barkevious Mingo, who was a top pick in this year's draft.

Weaknesses: The Browns have struggled on offense, ranking second-to-last in the NFL in total offense. They are 1-9 at home and 0-2 on the road.

Expectations: The Browns have a young and talented team that could make a playoff run if they can improve their offense.

Denver Broncos (4-11)

Key players: WRs Demaryius Thomas, Emmanuel Sanders, Qb Peyton Manning, CB Aqib Talib, Garett Bolles, WR Emmanuel Sanders, RB Devontae Booker

Strengths: The Broncos have one of the best defenses in the NFL. They have added several key players to the defense, including Von Miller and Aqib Talib. The defense is ranked second in the NFL in points allowed and third in yards allowed.

Weaknesses: The Broncos' offense has struggled all season. They are last in the NFL in yards per game and have scored fewer than 20 points in six games.

Expectations: The Broncos need to improve their offense if they want to make the playoffs.

Indianapolis Colts (7-9)

Key players: WR T.Y. Hilton, WR Duron Carter, RB Frank Gore, CB Darius Butler, WRs David Grinnage, WR Donte Moncrief

Strengths: The Colts have a talented receiving corps that can stretch the field and make plays. They have a balanced offense with a strong run game and a capable passing attack.

Weaknesses: The Colts have a young defense that has struggled against the run. They are last in the NFL in rushing yards allowed.

Expectations: The Colts need to improve their defense if they want to make the playoffs.

Kansas City Chiefs (7-9)

Key players: QB Alex Smith, RB Jamaal Charles, WR Dwayne Bowe, CB Marcus Peters, WR Jeremy Maclin

Strengths: The Chiefs have a talented roster with a balanced offense and defense. They have a strong running game and a capable passing attack.

Weaknesses: The Chiefs have struggled on special teams, allowing three punt returns for touchdowns.

Expectations: The Chiefs need to improve their special teams if they want to make the playoffs.

New York Jets (8-7)

Key players: LB Calvin Pace, WRs Santonio Holmes, Timmy Brown, QB Mark Sanchez, G Matt Slauson

Strengths: The Jets have a talented roster with a balanced offense and defense. They have a strong running game and a capable passing attack.

Weaknesses: The Jets have struggled on special teams, allowing three punt returns for touchdowns.

Expectations: The Jets need to improve their special teams if they want to make the playoffs.

New York Giants (10-6)

Key players: WR Victor Cruz, CB Prince Amukamara, CB Janoris Jenkins, WR Steve Smith, RB Andre Brown

Strengths: The Giants have a talented roster with a balanced offense and defense. They have a strong running game and a capable passing attack.

Weaknesses: The Giants have struggled on special teams, allowing three punt returns for touchdowns.

Expectations: The Giants need to improve their special teams if they want to make the playoffs.

Oakland Raiders (12-4)

Key players: WR Amari Cooper, QB Derek Carr, RB Marshawn Lynch, LB Khalil Mack, TE Clive Walford

Strengths: The Raiders have a talented roster with a balanced offense and defense. They have a strong running game and a capable passing attack.

Weaknesses: The Raiders have struggled on special teams, allowing three punt returns for touchdowns.

Expectations: The Raiders need to improve their special teams if they want to make the playoffs.

Philadelphia Eagles (8-7)

Key players: WRs Alshon Jeffery, Jordan Matthews, RT Lane Johnson, CB Nolan Carroll, WR Nelson Agholor

Strengths: The Eagles have a talented roster with a balanced offense and defense. They have a strong running game and a capable passing attack.

Weaknesses: The Eagles have struggled on special teams, allowing three punt returns for touchdowns.

Expectations: The Eagles need to improve their special teams if they want to make the playoffs.

San Diego Chargers (12-4)

Key players: QB Philip Rivers, WR Keenan Allen, CB Jerry Attaochu, G Mike Pouncey, S Jahleel Addae

Strengths: The Chargers have a talented roster with a balanced offense and defense. They have a strong running game and a capable passing attack.

Weaknesses: The Chargers have struggled on special teams, allowing three punt returns for touchdowns.

Expectations: The Chargers need to improve their special teams if they want to make the playoffs.

Tennessee Titans (8-7)

Key players: QB Marcus Mariota, WR Hakeem Nicks, WR Kendall Wright, LB Zach Brown, CB Coty Sensabaugh

Strengths: The Titans have a talented roster with a balanced offense and defense. They have a strong running game and a capable passing attack.

Weaknesses: The Titans have struggled on special teams, allowing three punt returns for touchdowns.

Expectations: The Titans need to improve their special teams if they want to make the playoffs.
Already a solid Super Bowl contender, the Eagles reloaded their roster and have been declared the champion of free agency, for what that’s worth. The Eagles ended cornerback Asante Samuel (left), and defensive tackles Mike Patterson and Jason Babin to their defense, and wide receiver Steve Smith, coaching Bessie Brown and quarterback Vince Young to their offense.

WASHINGTON REDSKINS (2-14)
New face: QB Kevin Kolb, TE Jeff King, ILB Stewart Bradley, WR Louis Murphy, OL Ogie Maggard.

Raiders lost three of their top players through free agency. Coach Ron Rivera, QB Kevin Kolb, and the team's defensive coordinator Rob Ryan will have a lot to develop in a year’s time, with Kolb expected to battle for the starting job with Jimmy Clausen.

Covering the last few games of 2012 with...

Weakenesses: Expectations for Kolb, who last year played in a weak NFC East, won’t be as high.

GREEN BAY PACKERS (22-0)

Green Bay’s offense will return relatively unchanged from a year ago. The Packers were dominant in passing and total offense.

Weakenesses: Kuhn, a fullback, will have to work on his blocking skills.

Rookie of the Year: WR Julio Jones, DE Ray Lewis, WR Julio Jones, DE Ray Lewis.

optimizer 2011

Weakenesses: With the exception of Kolb, and his quick acceptance as leader of the team, there were some holdovers.

DALLAS COWBOYS (1-15)
New faces: RB DeMarco Murray, WR Mike Williams, WR Dez Bryant, LB Linebacker Wilcox.

Dallas made a major change in its offense with the addition of Brian Scott, the offensive coordinator of the St. Louis Rams.

Weakenesses: Dallas could go 1-15 again and still have more players than the Cowboys.

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