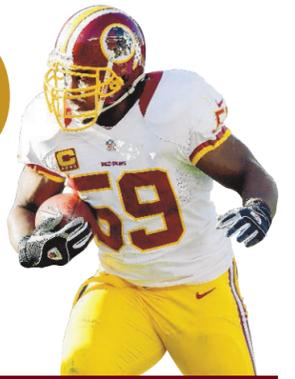


WILD CARD WEEKEND



FRIDAY, JANUARY 4, 2013



The Washington Times

washingtontimes.com/sports/football



ANDREW HARNIK/THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Redskins quarterback Robert Griffin III's rushing ability has been limited the past two games because of a sprained knee ligament, but he still scored on a 10-yard run (above) against Dallas on Sunday night. Fellow rookie Alfred Morris (below) was a workhorse in the NFC East-clinching 28-18 victory, churning out 200 yards and three touchdowns.

TIME TRAVELING

Rookies RG3, Morris hold their own against two Browns greats



DAN DALY

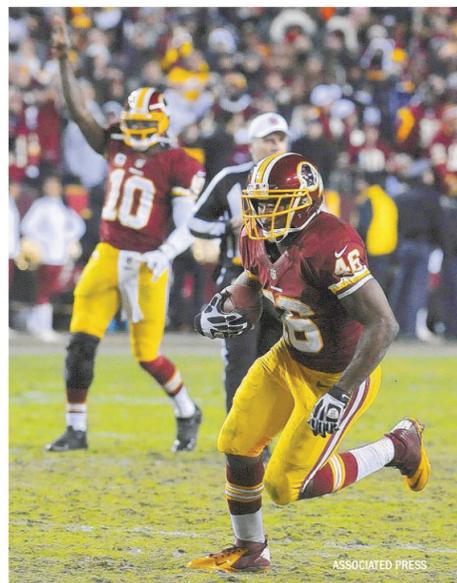
Hyperbole can run amok when an NFL team wins its division for the first time in 13 years, especially if much of the heavy lifting is done by two rookies, one of them a virtual unknown before training camp convened. But it's fair to say what we're seeing with Robert Griffin III and Alfred Morris is extraordinary, if not unprecedented. Indeed, to find anything like it in pro football history, you'd have to have to set the Way-Back Machine for 1946.

That was the year the Cleveland Browns

made their debut in the All-America Conference, a league that competed against the NFL (before partially merging with it in 1950). Perhaps you've heard about the Browns in that era. They hardly ever lost. Anyway, in their inaugural season, they had a rookie quarterback and a rookie running back who made just as big an impact as the Washington Redskins' dynamic duo. The QB was Otto Graham; the back was Marion Motley. Both went on to the Hall of Fame.

Graham led the AAC that year with 17 touchdown passes and a ridiculous (for the time) 112.1 rating. Motley, a 6-foot-1, 232-pound cement mixer of a fullback, rushed for 601 yards, fourth in the league, and averaged an outrageous 8.2 yards an attempt.

» see DALY | G2



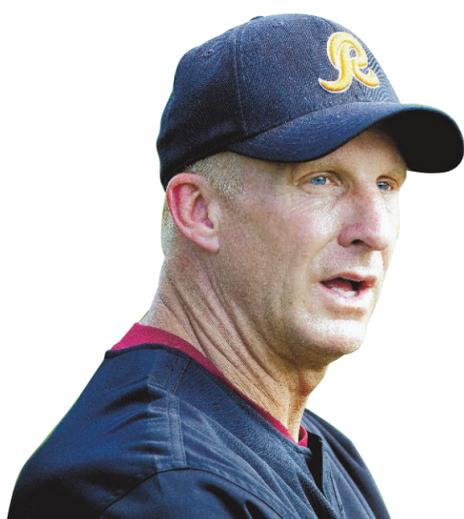
ASSOCIATED PRESS

THE COMPETITION

Robert Griffin III (102.4 passer rating and 815 yards rushing) and Albert Morris (1,613 rushing yards) arguably are the best rookie backfield in NFL history. A look at other top tandems through the years:

- 1946 Browns: **QB Otto Graham** (league-high 17 TD passes and 112.1 passer rating), **FB Marion Motley** (601 rushing yards, 8.2-yard avg.)
- 1956 Colts: **QB Johnny Unitas** (55.6 percent completions and 74 rating, both third in the NFL), **RB Lenny Moore** (649 yards rushing, 7.5-yard avg.)
- 2012 Colts: **QB Andrew Luck** (rookie record 4,374 passing yards, seven game-winning drives), **RB Vick Ballard** (814 rushing yards)
- 1939 Bears: **QB Sid Luckman** (91.6 rating, 44.4-yard punting avg.), **FB Bill Osmanski** (league-leading 699 rushing yards)
- 2008 Ravens: **QB Joe Flacco** (80.3 rating, only 12 interceptions), **RB Ray Rice** (727 yards from scrimmage)
- 1976 Seahawks: **QB Jim Zorn** (2,571 passing yards, 12 TD passes), **RB Sherman Smith** (921 yards from scrimmage)

— Compiled by Dan Daly



Haslett's defense unwavering

By RICH CAMPBELL
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A slight smile finally brightened Jim Haslett's hardened countenance after midnight Sunday. His wife, Beth, and daughter, Kelsey, walked alongside him up the ramp that leads from the Washington Redskins' locker room out of FedEx Field. Haslett's defense had just helped the Redskins complete an historic turnaround, and the afterglow was in full effect.

Haslett didn't view it from that perspective, though. He's a football player at his core. Leave the grandiose analysis to others. He

cared only about the final result: Redskins 28, Dallas Cowboys 18. Washington's maligned defense, his defense, had survived early-season injuries and ineptitude to become NFC East division champions.

A few steps ahead of the Hasletts, a man whipped around to greet him. Wade, a nationally known hip-hop artist, D.C. native and renowned Redskins fan, had to congratulate the defensive coordinator.

"Coach Haslett, Wade," he said, reintroducing himself. "Great job."

"Oh yeah, the rapper!" Haslett belted out, much to his daughter's amusement. "Thanks." They shook hands and hugged.

What a sight: a local celebrity going out of his way to praise Jim Haslett, the subject of so much vitriol on talk radio and Twitter during the Redskins' 3-6 start. Only seven weeks earlier, coach Mike Shanahan faced questions about whether his coaching staff would remain intact during the bye week.

But Haslett, as it turned out, helped save this charmed season. He and his assistants brainstormed and tinkered to help the Redskins overcome injuries to key players. Now the defense has significant momentum entering Sunday's playoff opener against the

» see REDSKINS | G2

EXPANDED COVERAGE INSIDE: With renewed focus, Trent Williams plays through pain, G2
Ravens roots run deep for Colts' Pagano, G3; Wilson's rookie season continues long track record of success, G4

EXPANDED PLAYOFF COVERAGE: WASHINGTONTIMES.COM/SPORTS/FOOTBALL

REDSKINS

Focused Williams playing through the pain

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Trent Williams can't look back. The Washington Redskins left tackle won't watch tape from his rookie season because "it just wasn't good." So much changed from 2010 to now. "My approach to the game's changed. My knowledge of the game has changed. By looking at my film from a couple years ago, I'm ashamed of it, I'm embarrassed by it," Williams said. "To be a rookie, it was OK. But I try to hold myself to a higher standard."

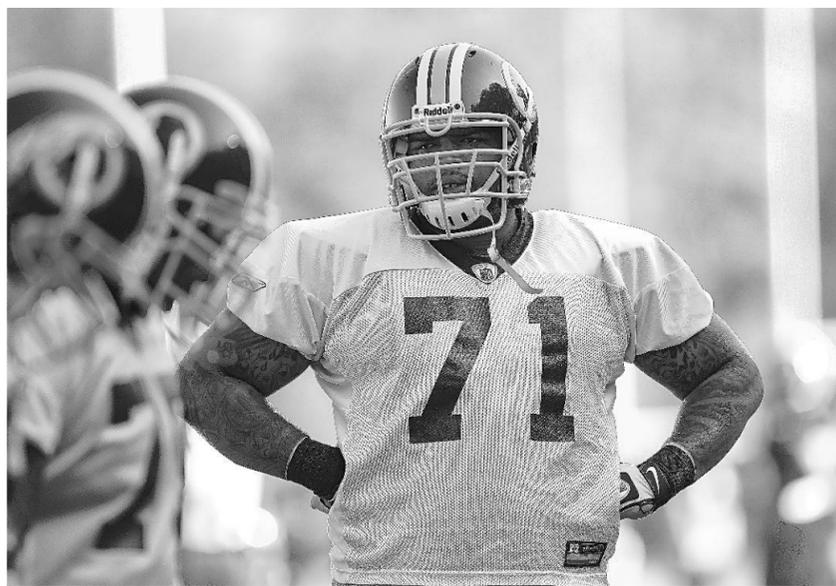
Getting to that higher standard took time and missteps along the way. Now Williams is not only going to the Pro Bowl later this month, but he's arguably the most valuable piece of an offense that includes prolific rookies Robert Griffin III and Alfred Morris and game-changing receiver Pierre Garcon.

Of 1,024 offensive snaps in the regular season, Williams played 961. He missed one snap in the season opener and 62 Sept. 23 with a bone bruise in his right knee.

The 24-year-old has played through a deep left thigh bruise since Thanksgiving Day, and that's by necessity.

"I just feel like for me to be a huge asset to this team I have to play hurt and I have to be able to finish games," Williams said. "I take a lot of pride in it. But I take pride in playing hurt just because it's football. You have to be tough to play this sport. There's nothing more than playing hurt. There's nothing more you could prove to say you're tough enough to be fit to play this sport."

There's little left for Williams to prove to his teammates, who voted him captain the past two seasons. Watching him play hurt and grow up since a four-game suspension last season for violating the NFL's substance abuse policy validated that faith.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Redskins left tackle Trent Williams was selected to his first Pro Bowl this season, a year after having his second campaign cut short by a suspension for violating the league's substance abuse policy.

"He's not just a great player, but he's someone that we lean on," left guard Kory Lichtensteiger said. "I think him being elected captain after the year that he had last year says a lot about what he means to us and how people follow him."

Griffin said recently that he doesn't even ask Williams if he's OK anymore because "he better be all right." There's no other choice.

"I don't ever act as if he's not there," Griffin said. "On the field, during the game, he'll get up, he'll start grabbing something and I'll look at him

and I'll go back to the huddle because I know he better get his butt back in the huddle because you've got to go the next play."

That's a departure from a couple of years ago, when an injury as painful as this thigh bruise might have landed Williams on season-ending injured reserve. Just like veteran linebacker London Fletcher playing through his ankle injury, there's no doubt Williams will be on the field Sunday afternoon against the Seattle Seahawks for his first playoff game.

Rest, only when the Redskins' season is over, will help Williams heal. Until then, it's full-speed ahead even if he can't go full speed.

"He's not at his best because he's not at 100 percent, but he's definitely helped the team being out there," offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan said. "He believes that no matter how bad he's feeling, as long as he's not going to risk his career or anything, he feels he can get out there and compete and help us win."

Williams called it a matter of "heart." "When your body feels pain, you automatically want to shut down and it's not an easy thing to play through, especially when you're playing against people who get paid millions to beat you," Williams said.

That "heart" has grown stronger since two years ago, when Williams had to sit down and reflect on how much he needed to focus on football to be successful. As the No. 4 pick in the draft, he conceded his life changed so much it was hard to concentrate.

To excel in this job, though, he had no choice but to embrace high expectations, internally and externally.

"It definitely was a lot of pressure. Definitely a lot of pressure. But no, I wouldn't change anything," Williams said. "To [whom] much is given, much is expected. I thank God for that position because it helped me learn a lot, and I definitely, definitely don't take anything for granted now."

Certainly not being a Pro Bowl offensive tackle, an honor he made no secret he wanted. Upon learning of his first selection, Williams couldn't stop smiling.

But it's far from mission accomplished. "As a player you strive to be great, and this is just a process of that," Williams said. "Five years down the line, I want it to be a consensus that I am the best tackle in the game. I'm going to continue to work hard until I reach that goal."



PRESTON KERES/SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Good times have been plentiful for Alfred Morris (left) and Robert Griffin III, who have made the biggest impact as rookie backfield mates since Otto Graham (below) and Marion Motley for Cleveland in 1946.

DALY

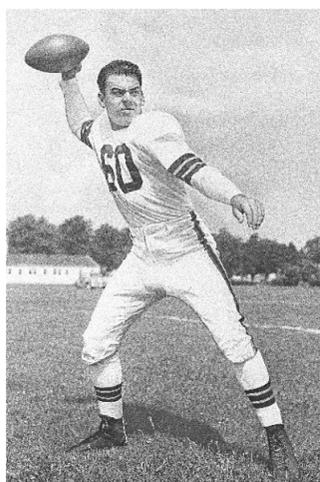
From page **G1**

The Browns scored 66 points in one game, 51 in another and easily won the championship. The two rookies, meanwhile, made the all-pro team.

And that, friends, is the closest comparison, in the annals of blocking and tackling, to the first-year feats of Griffin and Morris. You have to go back to the days before face masks, to the days when some clubs were still running the single wing (including the New York Yankees, who played the Browns in the first AAC title game). Why, Motley was one of just four black players in the two pro leagues in 1946; he helped reintegrate the sport after a dozen seasons of all-whiteness.

Griffin and Morris can't do anything that historic, of course, but their statistical feats are pretty impressive. RG3 finished third in the NFL in passer rating (102.4), set a rookie rushing record for quarterbacks (815 yards) and made the Pro Bowl. Alfred finished third in the league with 1,613 rushing yards, the third-most ever by a rookie, and *should* have made the Pro Bowl. (Alas, the ballots were cast before he went for 200 yards and three touchdowns in the division-clinching win against Dallas.) Imagine: an instant Pro Bowl QB and an instant 1,600-yard back in the same draft.

That's how you go from 5-11 to 10-6 in a single season, as the Redskins have. But it's incredibly hard to pull off, for any number of reasons. For one thing, you have to hit the lottery in the draft. (And getting Morris in the sixth round, after taking Griffin



ASSOCIATED PRESS

second overall, certainly qualifies as that.) For another, the rookies have to have an opportunity to play — a lot. It helps, in other words, if the team is talent-starved at certain positions.

Take the 2001 San Diego Chargers. Their first two picks that year were LaDainian Tomlinson and Drew Brees — future Hall of Famers both. Drew, though, hardly got on the field as a rookie. Three seasons later, the Chargers' rookie class included Philip Rivers and Michael Turner. But Rivers threw only eight passes in his first year, and Turner carried just 20 times (thanks to the presence of Tomlinson).

Or how about the 1958 Chicago Cardinals? They took a quarterback, King Hill, with the first pick in the draft and a running back, John David Crow, with the second pick. (That's right, they had the first two selections.) But Hill was a bust, spending

most of his career as a punter, and Crow, a four-time Pro Bowler, didn't get going until his second season. The Cardinals, as a result, finished 2-9-1, worse than the year before (3-9).

Then there are the Minnesota Vikings, who came out of the 1993 draft with a back who would later rush for 1,500 yards in a season (Robert Smith) and a quarterback who had just won the Heisman Trophy. Sound familiar? The QB was no RG3, though. In fact, he was Gino Torretta, who played in a grand total of two NFL games.

So it's not just a case of drafting a quality quarterback and running back in the same year. That's just the beginning. Oh, and lest we forget, durability matters, too. Morris had 335 rushing attempts; only five rookies have had more. And Griffin toughed it out the past two weeks with a sprained knee. If Alfred had broken down or Robert had been more badly hurt (he shook off the effects of a concussion two months earlier), we probably wouldn't be talking about this.

FYI: Aside from Graham and Motley, some of the best rookie backfield combos are Johnny Unitas and Lenny Moore with the 1956 Baltimore Colts, Sid Luckman and Bill Osmanski with the '39 Chicago Bears and, this year, Andrew Luck and Vick Ballard with the Indianapolis Colts. (See the accompanying chart for more details.) But it wouldn't be exaggerating to say that, in terms of sheer production, Robert Griffin III and Alfred Morris might be the best of the bunch. We just don't know whether — like Otto, Marion, Johnny U., Lenny and Sid — they have Canton in their future. It should be fun to find out, though.

REDSKINS

From page **G1**

Seattle Seahawks.

"We were kind of lost for a little while trying to find our way," Haslett said Thursday. "Then guys have stepped up and done a nice job playing."

While the Redskins during the 2012 offseason used their penalty-reduced salary cap space to add a slew of playmakers to their sputtering offense, Haslett sought to progress with last year's personnel. But season-ending injuries to first-string linebacker Brian Orakpo, defensive end Adam Carriker and strong safety Brandon Meriweather — each of whom has a first-round draft pedigree — sent the defense reeling.

They surrendered 27.6 points per game and a whopping 6.22 yards per play during Washington's 3-6 start. Haslett faced heavy fan criticism.

"We had a lot of changes in personnel and a lot of ups and downs, and his demeanor stayed the same," nose tackle Barry Cofield said.

That stemmed partly from accountability, defensive lineman Kedric Golston said.

During the tumult, players publicly accepted blame for mistakes. Haslett was honest with players in his evaluations, but he also pointed the finger at himself when appropriate.

"He'll say, 'I made a bad call. It's on me,'" Golston recalled. "I think players understand because as players, you get corrected so much. When a coach can admit, 'I'm human, too. I made a mistake; you just want everyone to be accountable because we're all in it for the same reasons.'"

As the defense continued to struggle, Haslett and his assistants strived to find solutions.

They rotated outside linebackers with hopes of replacing Orakpo's production. Rob Jackson has played in the base defense since Orakpo tore his left pectoral muscle in Week 2. But sub packages have included Jackson, Lorenzo Alexander, Chris Wilson, Mario Addison and Markus White. Addison and White are no longer on the team.

That rotation thinned to include only Jackson and Alexander after they established themselves as the best options.

Haslett also has rotated personnel at safety, where Meriweather lost 15 games to knee injuries and Tanard Jackson was suspended for the season for violating the NFL's substance abuse policy. Veteran Reed Doughty, Jordan Pugh and DeJon Gomes still rotate depending on the situation.

Because Orakpo and Meriweather combined to play only three games, their replacements now have significant game experience, which enables them to play better.

"The staff has also gotten comfortable with what they can do," linebacker London Fletcher added. "We have adjusted our defense to fit that accordingly, and we've been able to play fast."

The improvements are easy to see.



SEAHAWKS AT REDSKINS

SUNDAY, 4:30 P.M. TV: FOX
RADIO: 980 AM, 92.7 FM, 94.3 FM

5 QUESTIONS

1. How effective will QB Robert Griffin III be? Griffin rushed for 63 yards and a touchdown on six carries against Dallas in his second game back from a sprained right knee. He's still limited, though, by the injury and the knee brace. The Redskins need him to be able to run in order to keep Seattle's front off-balance.

2. Which team will best protect the ball? The Redskins led the NFL this season with only 14 turnovers, but Seattle had only 18. Griffin III (five interceptions) and Seattle QB Russell Wilson (10) have combined for fewer than the total of Indianapolis rookie Andrew Luck (18).

3. Can the Redskins contain Seattle QB Russell Wilson? He is similar to Griffin in that he is adept at extending the play and finding an open receiver downfield off schedule. The Redskins must keep him in the pocket by maintaining the integrity of their rush lanes. Defensive backs must realize they could have to cover for five or more seconds.

4. Which team will best stop the run? Only one team ran the ball more often than Washington this season: Seattle. The Seahawks (55.03 percent) and Redskins (52.21 percent) were among the three teams that rushed more than half the time. Whoever stops the run, then, has the advantage.

5. How will Redskins receivers fare against Seattle's tall CBs? Richard Sherman (6-foot-3) and Brandon Browner (6-4) break the mold because of their height. That will put a premium on separation and timing.

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Redskins have allowed only 20 points and 541 yards per play during their winning streak. They're pressuring the quarterback more consistently because they're blitzing more frequently. Haslett continues to disguise coverages effectively. Washington has forced 31 turnovers this season, fifth-most in the NFL.

The progress was on full display Sunday night. The Redskins intercepted quarterback Tony Romo three times. The Cowboys' 18 points were their fourth-lowest total of the season. Washington pressured Romo all game by mixing blitzes and blitzers.

"He was the chess master," Cofield said, "and we were just pawns."

NBC analyst Cris Collinsworth called Haslett's game plan "masterful," before a record-sized national audience.

"We worked a number of different combinations to get to the point where we were at," Haslett said. "It took us a longer time than we would've liked, but it worked out for the best."

EXPANDED PLAYOFF COVERAGE: WASHINGTONTIMES.COM/SPORTS/FOOTBALL



INDIANAPOLIS AT BALTIMORE

SUNDAY, 1 P.M., CBS, 1500 AM

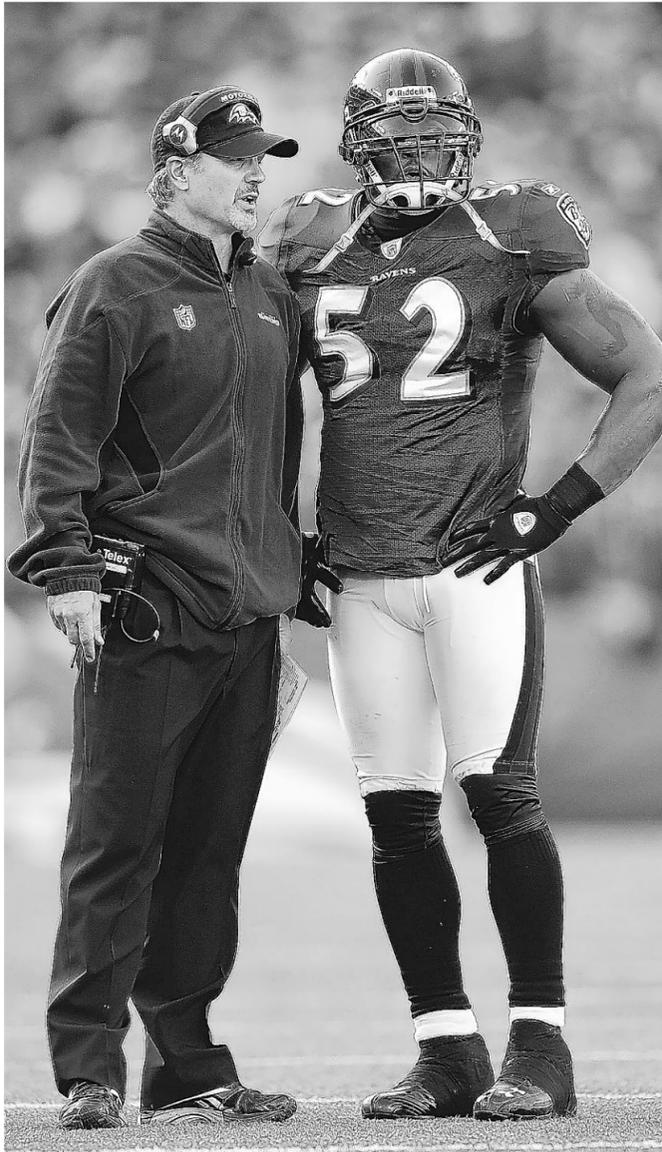
SERIES RECORD: Colts lead 9-3

LAST MEETING: Ravens beat Colts 24-10 on Dec. 11, 2010

LAST WEEK: Colts beat Texans 28-16; Ravens lost to Bengals 23-17

QUICK HITS: Colts left Baltimore in 1984 and are 4-3 in their former home. That includes 15-6 win in January 2007 playoff game. Game marks return of Indianapolis coach Chuck Pagano, who spent four seasons with Ravens, 2011 as defensive coordinator. Colts DE Cory Redding played for Ravens from 2010-11. Indianapolis has won 5 of 6 and 9 of 11. Baltimore has dropped 4 of 5. Colts are 19-20 all-time in postseason, Ravens are 10-7. Twenty-eight members of Colts will be making first playoff appearance. Baltimore, on other hand, will be participating in postseason for NFL-high fifth straight time. Indianapolis followed Miami as second team in NFL history to win 10 or more games following 14-loss season. This is Colts' 10th playoff appearance in last 11 seasons. Colts went 9-1 in games decided by seven points or fewer. QB Andrew Luck led Colts on seven winning drives in fourth quarter or overtime, most by NFL rookie since 1970 merger. His six 300-yard passing games are most by rookie in NFL history. Indy WR Reggie Wayne has at least one catch in 112 straight games. PK Adam Vinatieri has scored in 146 consecutive games. Luck is first QB selected No. 1 overall to start a postseason game as rookie. Colts RB Vick Ballard ranked second among AFC rookies with 814 yards rushing. Indy WR T.Y. Hilton has 861 yards receiving, second most among NFL rookies. Ravens are 2-2 at home in postseason.

THE WASHINGTON TIMES



Chuck Pagano, shown with linebacker Ray Lewis, had a philosophy that resonated with Baltimore's players when he was the Ravens' defensive coordinator. He'll return Sunday for an AFC playoff game as Indianapolis' coach.

RAVENS

STILL FAMILY

Baltimore holds place in its heart for Colts' Pagano

By Jason Butt

SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

OWINGS MILLS, MD. | Chuck Pagano is a man still loved and revered in Baltimore's locker room. Pagano was the Ravens' defensive backs coach from 2008-2010 before assuming defensive coordinator duties in 2011. His unit ranked among the NFL's best, which gave him the opportunity to become the head coach in Indianapolis.

But there's still admiration for Pagano even though he's wearing another team's colors. And Sunday, Pagano will face his former team for the first time in the first round of the NFL playoffs.

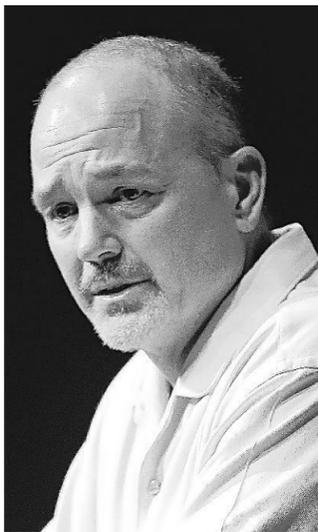
"I'm sure the fans are going to welcome him," Ravens safety Bernard Pollard said. "We're going to love him, we're going to embrace him."

It's a compelling story for the Ravens, who still consider Pagano a member of their extended family even though he no longer resides near Baltimore. When Pagano began battling leukemia after his diagnosis during Indianapolis' bye week, many Ravens players sent him text messages to keep up with his progress.

Defensive end Arthur Jones shaved his head in support of the coach, who missed the majority of the season on the sideline because of his disease. But Pagano was cleared to coach again before Week 17's game against Houston, which the Colts won 28-16.

"Coach Pagano is a great coach," Jones said. "He was a guy I grew to love. He brought a passion to the locker room when he was here. He was a guy I loved playing for. Unfortunately, now we're battling for the same thing. There's no joint champion in the Super Bowl. There's only one true champion. We're fighting for the same thing and unfortunately it's against the Colts."

Ravens coach John Harbaugh also has stayed in touch with Pagano during his recovery as Pagano remains



one of Harbaugh's closer friends in the coaching community. Yet, now he has to prepare to play against him in a win-or-go-home scenario.

"It's a big deal," Harbaugh said. "Relationships are important but by the same token, it's a game. They are the opponent, and right now, they are just the opponent. That's what we are going to compete against."

Pagano is known as a quintessential players coach. Multiple times during last season's run to the AFC championship game, Ravens players would say that Pagano was one of them, that his style of coaching suited their style of play. Pagano has been a hit in Indianapolis, too, with the Colts turning their 2011 misfortune into an 11-5 season a year later.

When Pagano returns to M&T Bank Stadium on Sunday, it'll be with a heavy heart. He would have overcome a disease to return to the stadium he used to coach in.

"It's going to be special," Pagano said in a conference call Wednesday. "I love all those guys. I have great relationships with so many people in that organization. They were so good to me and my family. I wouldn't be sitting where I'm at today if John Harbaugh hadn't given me the opportunity to join him when he first was hired as a head football

coach there."

With Pagano one year removed from the Ravens organization, there's a school of thought that the Colts could be more familiar with what the Ravens want to do on both sides of the ball.

Pagano even said as such, since there hasn't been any coaching turnover in Baltimore either. Replacing Pagano at defensive coordinator was Dean Pees, who was the linebackers coach. The defensive system has been tweaked, but Pagano still sees similarities in the base package.

Take into account Colts offensive coordinator Bruce Arians' familiarity with Baltimore dating to his coaching days with Pittsburgh, and the Colts would appear to have more experience with Baltimore than one may think.

"We've got an advantage as far as what you are talking about because of Bruce's familiarity," Pagano told the Indianapolis media Monday. "So when he pops on the tape, even though it's a new coordinator, that system has been in place a long, long time, going back to 2000."

Conversely, the same could be said about the Ravens. Harbaugh, hired as Baltimore's head coach in 2008, is just as familiar with Pagano and Arians as those two are with him.

"It's a two-way street," Harbaugh said.

Advantage or not, the dynamic of Pagano being back in Baltimore is a compelling storyline, especially considering Baltimore fans loathe the Colts. The hatred stems from the Colts organization leaving Baltimore for Indianapolis in the middle of the night of March 28, 1984.

Though the city still has disdain for the Colts, there's much respect for Pagano from players and fans. Ravens safety Ed Reed thinks of Pagano as more than a coach. In addition to playing under him for four years in Baltimore, Pagano was his defensive backs coach in college at the University of Miami. The two had a bond in Baltimore, which allowed Reed to be an extension of Pagano on the football field.

"He's like a dad to me," Reed said. "That's family, which is first before football."

AFC PLAYOFFS

Sack-happy Bengals are a threat to Texans

By Joe Kay

ASSOCIATED PRESS

CINCINNATI | Michael Johnson towers over blockers at 6-foot-7. At 6-foot-1, Geno Atkins often is dwarfed on the line. Domata Peko is gregarious. Carlos Dunlap tends to cut off interviews after a few questions.

The Bengals' defensive line is an eclectic mix of players from far different backgrounds with very different personalities and body types. Together, they formed one of the NFL's best units this season, one of the main reasons Cincinnati is in the playoffs again.

The Bengals set a club record with 51 sacks, 40 coming from the line. Cincinnati also has held opponents to 13 points or fewer in six of the past eight games.

"I hope this young group can stay together and go on for a long time and be part of something special," Dunlap said.

They're having a special season, one of the main reasons the Bengals have reached the playoffs as a wild card for the second straight season. It's also one of the main reasons they think they can knock off the Texans on Saturday in Houston and get their first playoff win since 1990.

These guys know how to get to the quarterback.

Atkins led all interior NFL linemen with 12½ sacks and was voted a Pro Bowl starter for the first time. Johnson had 11½ sacks, giving Cincinnati its first pair of players with double-digit sacks totals since 1981, when the Bengals reached the Super Bowl.

The reserves have done well, too. Wallace Gilberry has 6½ sacks. Robert Geathers has three.

The Texans' offense struggled down the stretch, contributing to three losses in the last four games. Houston scored 16 or fewer points in those losses. If the Texans can't slow Cincinnati's front four, they're in trouble.

"They've been so good because they're very talented up front," Houston offensive coordinator Rick Dennison said. "They can pressure well with the four guys or adding any number of guys to it. It's a unique challenge for us."

It starts with four linemen who



CINCINNATI AT HOUSTON

SATURDAY, 4:30 P.M., NBC, 980 AM

SERIES RECORD: Series tied 3-3

LAST MEETING: Texans beat Bengals 31-10, Jan. 7

LAST WEEK: Bengals beat Ravens 23-17; Texans lost to Colts 28-16

QUICK HITS: Houston looking for fifth straight win against Bengals. Bengals have reached playoffs in two straight seasons for first time since 1981-82. Cincinnati is looking for first playoff win since Jan. 6, 1991 against Houston Oilers. It is Cincinnati's fourth postseason appearance under coach Marvin Lewis. Bengals QB Andy Dalton is 19-13 as starter, highest winning percentage by Cincinnati quarterback with minimum of 20 starts in franchise history. Dalton's 3,669 yards passing and 27 touchdown passes were both career highs. Dalton grew up in Houston suburb of Katy. Bengals RB BenJarvus Green-Ellis ran for career-high 1,094 yards this season.

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

seem to have little in common except a commitment to getting to the quarterback.

Two of them arrived together. Dunlap was a second-round pick in 2010, while Atkins slipped to the fourth round because of his lack of stature. Atkins quickly developed into one of the league's best, able to use his low center of gravity to push his way into the backfield.

Dunlap was more of a project, known for wanting to do things his way. Defensive coordinator Mike Zimmer made him understand the need to change.

"I figured one of us was going to lose the fight, and it wasn't going to be me," Zimmer said. "They're much easier to mold the way you want them molded when they're young rookies."

NFC PLAYOFFS

Packers' receiving corps gets healthy at right time

By Nancy Armour

ASSOCIATED PRESS

GREEN BAY, WIS. | Aaron Rodgers is putting up MVP-worthy numbers again, throwing for more touchdowns than anyone in the NFL and ranking near the top in completions and yards passing.

Imagine if he'd had all of his favorite toys for the whole year.

With Randall Cobb back from a sprained ankle and Jordy Nelson planning to play in Saturday night's NFC wild-card game against Minnesota, the Green Bay Packers finally will have all four top receivers for the first time in, essentially, three months.

"It makes us very dangerous," Greg Jennings said Thursday. "It's pretty obvious when we have all four guys healthy, the amount of big plays that we can accumulate goes up. Aaron has a lot more options."

There's no question Rodgers is a special quarterback, one of the league's finest, and he'd put up impressive numbers if he had only one or two guys to throw to. But he has four — count 'em, four — receivers who could be No. 1s on many other teams.

"I don't think so," Nelson said when asked if any other team is as loaded at receiver as the Packers. "I don't think you can go four and five deep like we can."

Jennings had 1,000-yard seasons from 2008-10, and came up just short (949) last year despite missing three games. Nelson has a career average of 15.1 yards per catch, and joined Jennings in the 1,000-yard club last year. James Jones led the NFL with 14 TD catches this year, and matched a Packers record with two scores in three straight games. Cobb is the newest of the bunch, and all the second-year receiver has done is lead the team in catches (80) and yards receiving (954).

Add in big tight end Jermichael Finley and you can see why defensive coordinators have nightmares about facing the Packers.



MINNESOTA AT GREEN BAY

SATURDAY, 8 P.M., NBC, 980 AM

SERIES RECORD: Packers lead 54-49-1

LAST MEETING: Vikings beat Packers 37-34, Dec. 30

LAST WEEK: Vikings beat Packers 37-34

QUICK HITS: First wild-card rematch of regular-season finale since 2009, when three of four wild cards, including Green Bay's loss to Arizona, were do-overs. Packers are 1-1 when facing same team in last week of regular-season and following week in playoffs. They beat Lions in 1993 after losing regular-season finale, and lost to Arizona after winning in last week of regular season in '09. NFC North rival Packers and Vikings have met once in postseason, a 31-17 Minnesota victory at Lambeau Field in 2004 NFC wild card. Including that loss to Vikings, Packers have dropped four of last six postseason games at home.

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

"You can go to any one of them and get a big play, so it makes it more difficult for defenses to defend," Green Bay offensive coordinator Tom Clements said. "If [opponents] only have one guy or two guys that they have to defend against, they can structure their defenses and set it up in certain ways to take those guys away. But if you have four out there, and sometimes even five, it makes it more difficult."

"So if it's more difficult for them, it's advantageous for us."

But injuries have kept the Packers (11-5) from making full use of that advantage. The Big Four have played less than three full games together this year.

"It's going to be special. I love all those guys. I have great relationships with so many people in that organization. They were so good to me and my family. I wouldn't be sitting where I'm at today if John Harbaugh hadn't given me the opportunity to join him when he first was hired as a head football coach there."

— Chuck Pagano

EXPANDED PLAYOFF COVERAGE: WASHINGTONTIMES.COM/SPORTS/FOOTBALL

SEAHAWKS

Watching Wilson, seeing is believing

Rookie has delivered at every level

By MICHAEL PHILLIPS
RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

Russell Wilson has been winning people over with his arm since fifth grade.

The Seattle Seahawks quarterback served as a ball boy at Richmond's Collegiate Schools. During one game, he wasn't paying attention and had to chase down a loose football.

When he threw it back, he launched it over the official's head. Collegiate coach Charlie McFall noticed.

"I thought, I'd better hang around for this kid," he said with a laugh.

Wilson will be showing off that arm this weekend when his Seahawks face the Washington Redskins in a first-round NFL playoff game Sunday at FedEx Field. It is the closest Wilson has played to his home since Nov. 19, 2006, when he won a fourth consecutive state title as Collegiate's quarterback.

He has since had success at N.C. State and Wisconsin, but it's his play at Seattle that has launched him to stardom.

While Wilson's ascent has been swift to outsiders, it merely confirms what people in Richmond have known for a long time.

Russell became a quarterback because his older brother, Harrison, was a wide receiver. Harrison, who played at the University of Richmond, remembers visiting Russell in Wisconsin two years ago.

"We started throwing the football, and I told him to throw me one as hard as he could," Harrison said. "It just kept getting faster and faster. It hit my hand

between the finger and the joint, and my hand started bleeding. But you know, I'm the older brother, so I'm trying to play it off like it's no big deal."

That season ended for Russell with a Rose Bowl appearance and the NCAA record for passing efficiency.

Despite those accolades, he went in the third round of the NFL draft, as teams passed on him because of concerns about his 5-foot-11 height, the shortest in the league.

He showed up in Seattle ready to work, though, and thinks playing at two major colleges helped ease the transition.

"I just think playing in front of big crowds, being in big-time situations and big moments at a high level always helps," he said. "The more successful you are, the more attention you get. I think the key for me — and any famous football player — is to key in and ignore the noise."

"No matter how well you're doing or how poorly you're doing, just focus on what you can control and try to help your teammates win."

That preparation is what led his Seahawks teammates to stick with him early in the season, when the team started 3-2 and he threw six interceptions.

He settled in, though, and was named the NFL's Rookie of the Month for December, finishing the month with a 5-0 record, nine touchdowns and just two interceptions.

"I can't even come up with enough descriptive words to define what this kid is all about," Seattle coach Pete Carroll said Wednesday. "Really, I can't stop talking about him once you get me going

"I can't even come up with enough descriptive words to define what this kid is all about. Really, I can't stop talking about him once you get me going."

— Pete Carroll



Seattle's Russell Wilson threw 26 touchdown passes and 10 interceptions while compiling a 100.0 quarterback rating. Wilson was the Rookie of the Month for December, compiling a 5-0 record with nine TDs and two interceptions.

because there's so much to accentuate. The cool thing is, he's going to go out today and practice and work his butt off. He'll be the first guy out there and the last guy to leave the building."

Talking to those around him, Wilson's preparation is a theme that comes up time and again.

Fox Sports announcer Chris Myers, who has called several of Wilson's games this year, compares him to another undersized third-round draft pick who was born in Richmond.

"When he scrambles, he has a unique way of doing so, and it's like Fran Tarkenton, really," Myers said. "I mentioned that to Dolphins coach Joe Philbin, and he said he had made the comparison to his team, but some of the younger guys didn't know who Tarkenton was."

Myers said the thing that stood out to him over the course of the season was hearing the stories about Wilson's drive.

After late flights back from the East Coast, receivers would find notes at their lockers when they arrived Monday. The quarterback had already started film study, and had suggestions of plays for the week.

"You can tell by talking to him that he not only prepared himself, but would try to prepare other players on the team more than they normally would," Myers said. "He has this natural, positive, genuine enthusiasm."

That focus hasn't wavered, even as Wilson arrives in Washington on Friday, with family and friends looking to greet him.

In the NFL, visiting teams don't get the same access to tickets college teams do. Instead of spending time tracking down tickets for everyone, he's advising people to use StubHub, and guessing that many will.

As for the hometown connection, Wilson said he was too busy to be a

Redskins fan growing up.

"I was always playing games — football, baseball, basketball, whatever — so I didn't get to go to many Redskins games," he said. "I went to one when I was younger."

Those other sports have taken a back burner to football these days, as Wilson's routine involves early mornings and late nights — interrupted only for his Tuesday visit to the Seattle Children's Hospital.

Teammates describe a player who they knew was going to be special, even if they haven't learned everything about him.

"He's real quiet most of the time, and just talks about football," wide receiver Sidney Rice said. "He's trying to find a way to get the job done."

As the team's top receiving target, Rice learned what people in Richmond found out long ago: Don't bet against Russell Wilson's arm.



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