

High fives, chest bumps help Packers cornerbacks raise level of play

NBA's Mavericks, Georgia women's basketball coach influence Whitt

By [Michael Cohen](#) of the *Journal Sentinel*

Green Bay — With the Minnesota Vikings approaching field goal range in a game that, a few weeks from now, may go a long way in deciding a division winner, cornerback Sam Shields burst forward to upend tailback Jerick McKinnon on third down. Shields put his shoulder through McKinnon's knees and halted a promising drive.

Upstairs in the press box, high above the field at TCF Bank Stadium, cornerbacks coach Joe Whitt Jr. celebrated Shields' tackle for another reason. He watched the two-handed, fist-slammng celebration from Shields, his No. 1 corner and took note of teammate Casey Hayward swooping in for a celebratory shove.

This was one of Whitt's lessons personified. A coaching point shining through.

"I think you saw so many positive touches in this past game that it was contagious," Whitt said a few days after the Packers throttled the Vikings, 30-13. "Just look how many times you saw guys were together pulling people off the pile, tapping the (helmet) and just having real positive energy."

The play of Shields embodied a message delivered approximately one month earlier before a game against the St. Louis Rams. Whitt, 37, presented his pupils with a lesson derived from the National Basketball Association and shared by an unlikely friend.

Citing the 2011 NBA Finals as evidence, along with an article in *The Wall Street Journal*, Whitt emphasized the need for more "positive touches" during the course of each game. He wanted to see more high fives, hugs, butt taps and chest slaps among the cornerbacks because of their proven link to team chemistry and, in the case of the Dallas Mavericks, an improbable upset over LeBron James and the Miami Heat.

It was a lesson Whitt hoped would inspire a philosophical change in his position group, and over the last two games he's seen the mentality take a firm hold.

"I saw so much of Sam's energy, I saw so much of Casey's energy, them showing that energy together," Whitt said. "Those two really, really popped more than I've seen before."

The origin of Whitt's lesson was a begrudged phone call some 15 years ago between athletes on opposite sides of the Iron Bowl rivalry. Whitt, then a player at Auburn, and

Joni Taylor, a women's basketball player at Alabama, were both members of the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee for the Southeastern Conference.

Paired together for a project, neither Whitt nor Taylor had much interest in conversing with someone from the opposite institution. When the line of communication finally opened, some 48 hours before their presentation, the two became fast friends.

"We made a bet that the next time someone spoke ill of the other person's school, they had to wear a shirt," Taylor said in a phone interview. "That's how we were able to get the project done.

"Once we started talking about what we were actually supposed to be talking about, I found out that he was pretty intelligent and smart and driven and going to do something special. Ever since then we've pretty much been connected at the hip."

As rivals-turned-friends navigated their respective career paths — Whitt dove straight into coaching at Auburn, The Citadel, Louisville and onto the National Football League; Taylor wanted to be a high school counselor before jumping into coaching herself — the lines of communication remained open. Whitt and Taylor traded ideas over the phone about recruiting, motivational tactics and which cross-sports metaphors were most effective.

Taylor, who moved through the ranks and is now the head women's basketball coach at Georgia, took from Whitt the idea of making "WANTED" fliers for potential recruits. Whitt sent her pictures of the personalized motivational posters he makes for each cornerback on the Packers.

"Last year I gave each one of them a nickname and themed it around that," Whitt said. "Sam was Sticky. Tramon (Williams) was The Technician. Everybody had their deal, and on the poster you'll have their hometown and just personal things about them."

Said Taylor: "They're amazing. He's just always about motivating and inspiring."

The pendulum of coaching tips swung toward Whitt a few weeks into the 2015 season. Taylor, searching for a way to improve the demeanor of her team at Georgia, found an article she thought Whitt would enjoy.

In response to a study by researchers at the University of California-Berkeley, The Wall Street Journal made a tally of every moment in which teammates could be seen touching each other on the television broadcasts of the 2011 NBA Finals. The results were startling: 250 positive touches for the Mavericks, 134 for the Heat.

The Mavericks were 82% more likely to high five each other, according to the article, and went on to win the series in six games.

"I was really pleased that Joni shared that with me because it's something that I believed in but I just didn't have a term for it," Whitt said. "We've been talking about it for (several) weeks. It's something that I think showed."

Hayward and rookie Quinten Rollins said the lesson provided fresh perspective on the well-worn idea of being a team player. To support your teammates is one thing, they said, but to understand how your demeanor can influence the energy level of those around you was something new and different.

Lately, Hayward said, the cornerbacks have been racing to congratulate each other after a strong play on the field. They want to be the first to offer a high five or chest slap, just as Hayward did on the important tackle by Shields against the Vikings.

Shields, the leader of the cornerbacks, is encouraged by Whitt to release his emotions on game day in the form of visible celebrations. His behavior trickles down to everyone else, Whitt said, and against the Vikings and Chicago Bears, Shields could be seen pumping his fists, flapping his arms and yelling.

"That was definitely a good thing to incorporate because of the positive energy, the positive vibes, giving each energy," Rollins said. "A guy might be down and then your positive energy might lift him up to where he needs to be so he's ready to go the next play."

Months from now, long after the season ends and the tackle by Shields is just a November blip, Whitt will bunker down and assess the effectiveness of his lesson. He will turn on the tape from each game, good days and poor days alike, to record each high five, hug, butt tap or chest slap. He wants to know if higher numbers of touches coincided with better on-field performances.

And if Whitt's cornerbacks mirror the 2011 Dallas Mavericks, he will have an unlikely friend to thank.

"That's going to be one of my off-season studies," Whitt said. "Positive touches, I believe in them."