

# Dom Capers simplifies defensive playbook, amps up speed

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

Green Bay — On the day Joe Thomas completed his first practice after being plucked from the practice squad of the Dallas Cowboys, the linebacker stood at his locker and swatted away the notion that reconfiguring himself within the confines of Dom Capers' defense would be difficult.

He assured reporters that two weeks away from the Green Bay Packers, who released him on the final day of roster cuts in September, did not pose a significant mental challenge.

"Nah," Thomas said, drawing out the word for emphasis. "Dom really simplified everything for us this year. It's really easy for me to come back and pick up where I left off."

The simplification Thomas mentioned was part of a concerted effort by Capers during the off-season to increase playing speed. Capers saw the need to create an up-tempo defense to match the league's burgeoning up-tempo offenses, and the solution came in the form of a two-part process: first he wanted to streamline the playbook and then he wanted to overhaul the entire defensive communication system.

So far, the early returns have been impressive. The Packers rank tied for fourth in the league in fewest passing touchdowns allowed (4), tied for third in fewest passes of 20 yards or more allowed (11) and tied for second in opposing quarterback completion percentage (56.5%)

"When these teams are going to go, go, go and they're trying to run as many plays as possible, you have to adapt and adjust," Capers said. "If it's a fast-break offense, you've got to be a fast-break defense. What you don't want is guys sitting there and waiting around and confusion, and they're at the line of scrimmage coming at you."

So Capers set about reducing his playbook to alleviate some of the mental strain on his pupils. He removed from the defensive menu a number of plays cornerback Casey Hayward said were unlikely to be used anyway.

The result, according to Hayward, was a significant reduction in the number of missed assignments and mental errors by the defense during training camp. "An all-time low," he said.

Phase one complete.

The second item on Capers' revision list was always going to be more difficult as it involved the creation and installation of a brand-new defensive language. Gone were the

lengthy play calls whose titles featured as many as six or seven words each — plus contingencies, which we will get to later — and in their place would be a system featuring one or two words per play and an accompanying hand signal.

"It takes time to say, 'Eagle Wide Open Me Special Seven,'" Capers said with a smile. "To where now you have a one-word term. Those guys all know the one-word code terms."

Though time consuming to pronounce, the longer play calls of the past served a distinct purpose when it came to relaying a wealth of information from Capers to the headset-wearing linebacker and then to the rest of the defense. Each portion of the play name applied to a different defensive unit, so the linemen would listen for different key words than the linebackers, who would listen to different key words than the secondary, and so on.

Chris Banjo, a core special teams player and backup safety, explained the concept using a play he ran in college at Southern Methodist. The play, known as "Saw Deuce Trio," had a shorter name to begin with because the Mustangs faced a number of up-tempo offenses in Conference USA.

As a safety, Banjo said the final two words of the play call were all that mattered to him and the defensive backs. Hearing "Deuce Trio" would let them know whether to play a Cover 2 or Cover 3 concept.

"A lot of times when you have those big play names, in different positions you're waiting for your key word and what you have to do," Banjo said. "It can kind of slow things down."

Further complicating the longer play names were the various contingencies woven into a single call. Hayward said the information from Capers, who watches games from the press box high above the field, often contained as many as three variations depending on the offensive formation.

The result was a maddening memory test in the form of conditional statements: If the offense is in this formation, then they play this defense. If they're in a different formation, then they play that defense.

"We had a long call one time and we were like, 'Yo, what was that again?'" Hayward said with a laugh. "They took a couple of those calls out, so there's less thinking."

"That's some of the things we talk about in our exit interviews. The coaches, they listen to those things. And we've been able to do a good job this year and have a lot less mental errors than what we normally have."

The introduction of the new defensive language took place during organized team activities, when each player was given what amounted to a giant sheet of new words,

terms and hand signals to memorize. And instead of each positional group having its own verbiage, a single word was now applicable to the entire defense. It just meant different things to different people.

To expedite the learning process, Capers and his staff retained some of the more important words from the old system. This meant the new material for a veteran was significantly less than the new material for a rookie, and on the whole it reduced memorization time.

"The thing that's good here is you have a lot of guys who have been here for a long time," said Banjo, who is in his third season with the Packers. "You have the continuity and the chemistry is good.

"Even though they're not using those long words anymore, there's carryover in terms of knowing what this word means. It may mean those seven words (from before), but you just hear that and you don't have to sit there and wait."

The effectiveness of the new communication system and reduced playbook revealed itself long before the Packers took the field in the regular season. Day after day practicing against quarterback Aaron Rodgers and the Packers' offense, which is capable of moving as quickly as any team in the league, served as an extended trial run where mistakes did not yield actual points.

While Hayward admitted facing Rodgers is never easy, even with a revamped defensive language, he began to notice less pre-snap confusion for the defense when using the single-word play calls. Things were simpler, faster and substitutions were more efficient. Rodgers' ability to catch his own defense with 12 men on the field, something he has done repeatedly during the regular season, suddenly waned.

"You better be efficient at communicating," Capers said, "and not have any time where guys are wondering or not on the same page. They have to understand their assignments on that one-word term."

Which included Thomas, who spent two weeks cramming in Dallas before his phone rang to return to Green Bay. The defensive calls flooded in, and they were much less complicated than before.

"It's easy to remember once you learn the signals," Thomas said. "It's very easy to come back."