

What's it like to play defense for Mike 'You So Crazy' Pettine? Some of his former rookies tell all

By Michael Cohen

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GREEN BAY, Wis. — At the conclusion of his first drive as defensive coordinator of the Green Bay Packers, the bald and mustachioed Mike Pettine saw the Tennessee Titans employ a natural pick to create a throwing lane for quarterback Marcus Mariota. On third and goal from the four-yard line, slot man Nick Williams hooked right toward the sideline as fellow wide receiver Darius Jennings sliced left across the middle. The closest Packers defender, cornerback Davon House, was left stuck at the intersection of an uncontested score: Mariota to Jennings, 7-0 Titans.

In Pettine's world, opponents who throw so close to the goal line are met with eye rolls and rancorous discontent, the sheer gall of their play selection prodding one of the coach's most fundamental pet peeves. With the New York Jets, where Pettine vaulted into the upper echelon of assistant coaches during his first stint as a coordinator, teams who forsook the run inside the red zone were harangued with adjectives unsuitable for print.

Pettine's defense is predicated on having enough swagger and determination to emasculate the man on the other side of the ball — mindset over scheme, he likes to say — and watching the Titans pass the ball from 12 feet beyond the goal line surely stoked his fire, even in the context of a meaningless preseason game last week.

“That's part of the mental side of the game where if somebody can't run on you, we always used to say in the red zone you never wanted them to walk in,” former Jets linebacker Jamaal Westerman told *The Athletic*. “If they're going to get in the end zone, they're going to have to pass it in, and we used to call them chickens and a couple other choice words if they want to throw it on goal-line situations. If they're going to get in, they're not going to walk in from a missed gap. They're going to have to take the hard road in.”

For Westerman, who made the Jets' roster as an undrafted rookie in 2009, adopting Pettine's ideologies was a months-long process that played out across his first season in the league, from understanding the core tenets of the defense to learning multiple positions to embracing the alpha mentality his coach espoused in practice and meetings. It's the same cultural metamorphosis happening now in Green Bay, where the entirety of the defensive roster — save for end Muhammad Wilkerson, a former first-round pick by the Jets — is adjusting to life without Dom Capers, who served as the team's defensive coordinator the previous nine seasons.

The steepest learning curve belongs to rookies Jaire Alexander (CB), Josh Jackson (CB) and Oren Burks (ILB), the Packers' top three draft picks earlier this year. In addition to beginning new lives as professional athletes, all three have been fast-tracked toward significant playing time near the start of the regular season. They are acclimating to the National Football League while simultaneously conforming to Pettine.

So consider this story a rookie's guide to Pettine as told by several players who debuted during his time with the Jets. This is how Alexander, Jackson, Burks and all the other rookies can earn Pettine's trust and find their way onto the field.

"If you learn your shit and you know it, and by know it I mean you can teach it to the next man, then you'll be fine," former Jets cornerback Marquice Cole told *The Athletic*. "That defense is fucking — it's like playing video games. It's so much fun."

In 2009, during the first practice after rookie minicamp, the Jets shifted Westerman from outside linebacker to inside linebacker with numbers thin at that position. Westerman was 6-2 and 257 pounds with a background as a defensive end at Rutgers, where he had 26 sacks and 44 ½ tackles for loss in four seasons. Aside from working out with the linebackers during his pro day, Westerman lacked any kind of training as the "Mike" linebacker at the heart of a defense.

Pettine had seen the footage of Westerman's pro day when he studied the incoming rookies prior to their arrival in Florham Park, N.J., and he used that workout as a means of motivating his young player — just not in the way one might expect.

The Jets incorporated some of the drills from Westerman's pro day into their fundamental periods during organized team activities. There was a coverage drill, for example, where linebackers made cuts at various angles before flipping their hips and sprinting to catch a ball thrown by a coach. The movements themselves were easy for Westerman, but snagging passes remained problematic.

"On my pro day tape I dropped every single ball they threw to me," Westerman said. "When I say every single ball, I mean I've seen better hands on a clock, man. It was horrible. It was bad. Even myself, I was embarrassed.

"And every time I would hear [Pettine in practice], 'Hands, hands! I've seen better hands on a clock. Hands like a snake. It hit him in a bad spot: his hands!' And every day, every day he just rode me. But you know what? It's the pressure that you feel in a game when the lights shine the brightest, and I think he was preparing us — especially me being a rookie, new position, being a professional my first time, having to play a lot as a rookie — I think mentally he was trying to prepare me for that spotlight."

Pettine's rewiring of players is the bedrock for establishing the culture he expects from a defense, wherein the individuals are secure enough to withstand criticism. The belief in one's

self — plus a belief in the system overall — serve as a catalyst for the tenacious edge Pettine craves.

His was an ethos well-suited for New York, perhaps the most volatile market in the country, and the principle should square nicely in Green Bay as remnants of Capers' methodical gentility fade.

Yet any suggestion that Pettine is overly harsh would be incorrect, especially considering how many of his former players speak fondly of their time together. His jabs and critiques are offset by acts of supreme loyalty toward players who embody the values Pettine holds dear. The Packers need only consider the free-agent signings of Wilkerson and cornerback Tramon Williams, both of whom played for Pettine earlier in their careers, as evidence for Pettine's commitment to maintaining relationships.

"Everything is up front," former Jets defensive lineman Ropati Pitoitua told *The Athletic*. "A great coach. I enjoyed my time with him and I loved playing with him."

Even their meetings were softened by wisecracks from all corners of the room, with players encouraged to contribute. Pettine was one of the funniest people in the building, according to Cole, and the coaches wanted everyone's personality to be part of the team. The freedom of being yourself was repeated by nearly every player *The Athletic* contacted.

"It was like high school," said Cole, an undrafted free agent from Northwestern who made his regular-season debut with the Jets in 2009. "You out there playing with your buddies. Of course, you want to win, but you just out there having fun. And you do a good play and I'm like, 'Hell yeah, I know Pettine is going to like that and we going to joke about that shit.' You think about those things afterward and you just have a bunch of fun out there. And then it's not work. You're just going to play ball with your buddies."

Pettine sharpened their competitive spirit by raising the stakes at practice. There were times in New York when Pettine's meeting room became a discussion hall for determining how many interceptions the defense needed on a given day. Pettine and the players would set a benchmark of as many as five picks in a single practice, and there were actual repercussions if not enough passes were intercepted.

Perhaps that's why Pettine, speaking to the media in Green Bay on Aug. 1, corrected a reporter about just how many times his players picked off quarterback Aaron Rodgers through the first few practices of camp. "Seven to be exact," Pettine said.

So confident was the Jets' defense under Pettine — it finished first, third, fifth and eighth in the league in total defense during his tenure — that players were instructed to taunt the offense when skill players shifted before the snap.

"We had a thing where we had to say the words, 'You so crazy!'" Cole said. "The offense would start shifting and stuff, and we would have to say, 'You so crazy!' Because it didn't matter to us.

It don't affect what we're doing. So you can do that shit all you want, it doesn't matter. .. It wouldn't affect us because we were so confident in our defense and knew our concept."

In other words, Pettine's defense wanted to dictate what the offense was doing. Not the other way around.

"I know bully is a tough word now," Westerman said, "but be the tougher opponent, be the hardnosed team that's coming and doesn't matter what you're going to do, we're going to try to put you out. And not put you out of the game, but just put you down. Whatever you think you're going to do offensively, we're going to try to stop it."

So how can the Packers' rookies crack the rotation like Wilkerson, who played all 16 games in 2011, or Westerman, Cole and Pitoitua, who combined to play 33 games as undrafted reserves in Pettine's first season? How can Green Bay's newcomers earn his trust?

The answers to those questions are multi-pronged, though everything begins with various levels of playbook comprehension, the most basic of which is an understanding of individual responsibilities for every call. In other words, rookies should glean everything they can about their own position before straying to other parts of the defense.

"Learn your position first and then if you can learn other spots, do that as well," Wilkerson said.

Once their own plays are committed to memory, players described an outward rippling of knowledge that moves at different rates for different people. Westerman wanted to demonstrate his versatility by learning the "Mike" linebacker, both outside linebacker positions (the "Sam" and the "Rush") plus the full cadre of roles along the defensive line. He recalls wearing what felt like 16 wristbands during practice to keep track of the calls at each position.

With this type of cross-training comes a broader understanding of the defensive concepts Pettine likes to employ. As a player's scope of the playbook expands, from one position to two and two positions to four, his football IQ blossoms accordingly. And then eventually, be it weeks or months or even several years later, his development reaches new levels whereby he can comprehend the interplay between various parts of the defense.

That is why Pettine's description of rookie cornerback Josh Jackson was so flattering earlier this week. By categorizing Jackson, the Packers' second-round pick, as someone who the coaches "foresee being able to play multiple positions for us," Pettine was speaking to the nexus of both mental and physical ability. He also praised Jackson for employing multiple techniques suitable in both press-man and off coverage.

"It seems like a crazy, intricate-ass defense," Cole said. "But when you go play by play, it's simple concepts that are already run in football. It's the way they put them together that makes it [difficult for some guys]. If you got to the NFL, you're smart enough when it comes to football

to understand things, so it's not impossible. It's not fucking quantum physics of football, you know what I'm saying? ... It's just different moving parts."

Assessing the complexity of Pettine's scheme has been a popular topic of conversation in Green Bay given the number of mental errors the Packers experienced in recent years. No matter how much Capers simplified the defense — he spoke repeatedly about scaling things back — there always seemed to be missed assignments or blown coverages at inopportune moments.

Pettine's former players describe his system as a "thinking-man's defense" and one that requires above-average intelligence on the football spectrum. But those same players praised the coaches for making the defense easy to learn because, at its core, Pettine's system consists of familiar ideas that only seem complicated when players are asked to swap roles.

One of the Jets' mottoes was Keep It Likable and Learnable — KILL for short — and several players interviewed for this story said being part of Pettine's defense was the most fun they had in the NFL.

"I think as you grow in the defense," Westerman said, "it's not even like you're learning it, it's like a natural progression, like you're evolving more than learning. You're evolving into, OK, where are the guys around me fitting? Why are we doing this? Why did he call this play? What is he expecting?"

"And I think when you start thinking like that, then you start knowing, OK, he's calling this play because this is a run play, this is supposed to be a run situation for him. So instead of me maybe taking the cheese on a quarterback boot, I understand that he's calling this play, he's done his preparation, I've done my preparation and we're expecting run in this situation. Or you know what, there are four guys inside to take the dive or to take the inside run play on a short-yardage play. Let me not be the guy that tries to run down and be a hero. Let me stay outside and play my outside contain and take the dive-pitch.

"And those are things that I messed up in camp. But I think the thing with them is, you know, you can make a mistake, but do you make it twice? Are you learning from your mistakes? Are you learning how to play the game as a professional? Are you thinking the game rather than just every time everybody has to get you lined up and you can only do one thing what you heard? Can you adjust, you know, midstream because you saw something or somebody made a check that you haven't heard for a couple weeks? Can you remember it? Can you understand why they're making that check?"

And then, Westerman says, "you can take it graduate level."

Taking it graduate level is another of Pettine's mantras the Packers will become familiar with this season. It constitutes the highest level of playbook mastery, and players who get there are rewarded with a veritable blank canvas for defensive improvisation.

Every player interviewed for this story spoke about the collaborative nature of Pettine's defense, about how he and Rex Ryan, the former coach of the Jets, fostered an environment that was open to feedback, tweaks and new ideas during both practice and games. As long as players were acting within the confines of the scheme — in other words nobody was going totally rogue — Pettine and Ryan were more than willing to extend latitude to their most trusted players. Everyone was capable of, and responsible for, playing multiple positions.

“If something doesn't work out or if there's something that a player suggests, they're pretty open to that,” Pitoitua said. “Our team with the Jets, that's what made it more fun for everybody. They tend to involve every player from every position for everything. It's not like, ‘Oh, this play is meant for this guy, this play is meant for this guy.’ It's for everybody.”

So there were moments when Pitoitua and his fellow defensive tackles would switch places with the inside linebackers, lining up off the ball to confuse the opposition. They chuckled as the play clock wound down and quarterbacks tried setting the protection by identifying the “Mike” linebacker, only to realize the person in the “Mike” linebacker's spot was a 300-pound lineman.

There were moments when Westerman, who now plays for the Hamilton Tiger-Cats in the Canadian Football League, would confer with fellow inside linebacker Bart Scott to adjust their blitzes on the fly. If Pettine dialed up a cross-dog blitz, which asked both of them to rush the passer by crossing over each other's path, Westerman and Scott had the freedom to alternate who went first and who went second based on feel.

“He empowered you to do things,” Westerman said.

There were moments when big men dropped into coverage and little men rushed the passer, which is something the Packers have incorporated through the first few weeks of camp. There were times when Cole, who weighed 193 pounds, lined up at nose tackle or defensive end and blitzed against massive offensive linemen. Pettine told Cole to put his “big-boy pads on” and catch the linemen by surprise. In three years with the Jets, from 2009 to 2011, Cole said he lined up at all 11 positions on defense, “be it zero technique, free safety and everything in between.”

“It's part of the philosophy of the defense that we want to do some unconventional things,” Pettine said earlier this month. “Unless you just have dominant talent, you can't line up and just rush your down four and drop your seven and bring the traditional guys on pressures. That's just way too cookie-cutter. I like to put stress on an offense as far as identifying who the rushers are going to be, and when the guys do it, they usually enjoy it. Those little guys like rushing the passer as long as they don't get squared up by those offensive linemen. But I think it adds just some creativity in the room that I think the guys enjoy, that we can rotate those jobs week to week.”

And then there were moments of sheer madness, moments reflective of Pettine's incredible trust in his secondary and veteran safety Jim Leonhard, now the defensive coordinator at Wisconsin, and a player Cole described adoringly: “This motherfucker was the coach out there.” In these unique moments, Pettine would make a blank call like Cover 5 — two deep safeties with man

coverage from corners and linebackers underneath — and then allow his defensive back to outline the specifics as the play clock ticked. Everything else was their decision.

“That’s what makes it fun,” Cole said. “Once I understand it and show them that I understand the defense, as long as it’s within the scheme, I can do whatever the hell I want.

“We had our Cover 5s and things like that where they would just call the call and we made the plays. So he called ‘Mix,’ and then me and Jim would look back, or me and whoever the safety or corner was, and we would talk it out. ‘Yo, are we going to do this? Are we going to trap? Are we going hands? Thumbs? We going to play it this way or that way? ... We know they like running No. 3 to the flat, running No. 1 and 2 off, so we’ll trap it,’ or whatever. We had the ability to do that.”

On the fly. In actual games. Against real opponents.

“Hell yeah,” Cole said.

It really does sound fun.

“It allows you to have a little bit of an ego,” Cole said. “When you’re young, that’s what everybody’s got and they think they’re the biggest and baddest anyway. So I think it works because it plays on people’s strengths at their age, and then over time it comes into I understand the game and understand the concept of what we’re doing.”

On the morning before the first practice of training camp, Packers coach Mike McCarthy is asked about relying on rookies early in their careers, something that happens quite frequently within the draft-and-develop confines of Lambeau Field. Last year’s initial 53-man roster included 10 rookies or first-year players alone.

The question to McCarthy is designed to learn more about Pettine, to understand what his thought process might be regarding Alexander, Jackson and Burks, the top three picks in this year’s draft. And that’s when McCarthy turns arrestingly honest.

“I think if you coach in this league a long time, you’re not a big fan of rookies,” McCarthy said. “No one will ever come out and say it — I can’t believe I just said that.

“The responsibility of the rookies, and obviously with us as coaches, is to get them ready. I do know there’s one thing that is the same: There’s always a gap between your veteran players and your rookies, and you’ve got to close that as quickly as you can. Some guys get there quicker than others.”

Just ask Pettine. Graduate classes start soon.