

Why the Packers are prioritizing press-man cornerbacks

Michael Cohen, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
Published 1:00 p.m. CT May 19, 2018

GREEN BAY — In late November 2011, the New York Jets gathered for a team meeting to review the film of a narrow victory over the Buffalo Bills.

The performance had been atypical for a Jets team at the mercy of quarterback Mark Sanchez, whose erraticism would account for 18 interceptions in 16 games played. In this particular week Sanchez dazzled as the defense gulped, with a dropped pass by Bills receiver Stevie Johnson helping to preserve a 28-24 win.

“This isn’t going to be a (expletive) session,” defensive coordinator Mike Pettine said, according to “Collision Low Crossers,” a behind-the-scenes chronicle of the Jets’ season by Nicholas Dawidoff. “This is being men. Treating you like men.”

As the session progressed, Pettine, who is now the defensive coordinator for the Green Bay Packers, criticized starting cornerback Antonio Cromartie for failing to press the Bills’ receivers at the line of scrimmage.

Cromartie had consistently given too much cushion, but the veteran bristled at the negativity. He told Pettine to “shut up” before hurling an expletive at his coach as weeks of tension boiled over.

“We knocked heads, but it was good,” Cromartie told the Journal Sentinel about his three seasons with Pettine. “I think he has a great defensive mind-set. He knows his X’s and O’s.

“He understands what offenses are trying to do. And I just think when he gets into his groove, he understands what his players want and what he needs from them.”

What Pettine needs from his cornerbacks is a willingness to play aggressively at the line of scrimmage and the cover skills to blanket receivers across the field. His scheme, while amorphous, was most effective when Cromartie and fellow corner Darrelle Revis battered opposing wideouts to disrupt an offense’s timing.

Pettine liked “smart, physical play,” according to Dawidoff, “and when he didn’t get it ... he was fierce.”

Fierce is hardly the word to describe what the Packers have cultivated at cornerback in recent years, be it the languid approach of top draft picks Damarious Randall and Quinten Rollins, the wide-eyed inexperience of undrafted rookies or the tightfisted approach to free agency by former general manager Ted Thompson.

Pettine told the scouting department of his affinity for feisty, press-man corners prior to the Senior Bowl, according to a source familiar with the team, and new general manager Brian Gutekunst responded by using his first two picks on Jaire Alexander (5 foot 10, 196 pounds, 4.38 speed in 40-yard dash) and Josh Jackson (6-0, 196, 4.48), respectively.

If their rookies progress well, the Packers could nurture a nickel lineup featuring Jackson, Alexander and Kevin King, last year's second-round pick who also fits the Pettine mold.

"I think they're a great fit for how we want to play defense," coach Mike McCarthy said.

The next step is sharpening their press-man coverage.

During the first practice of the Packers' rookie orientation weekend, cornerbacks were given the freedom to choose their approach on a snap-by-snap basis. They could play tight to the line of scrimmage and engage receivers in a hand-fighting scrap, or they could play off coverage and rely more on intellect than brute force.

Jackson always favored aggression. He crouched an arm's length from the wide receiver with shoulders squared and eyes burning through his opponent's facemask. He fired his arms on the snap and wrestled through the first 5 yards, grabbing and pulling in a pad-less and flagless drill.

"Strong, smart, can get on people at the line of scrimmage with those long arms," said Alonzo Dotson, a former college scout for the Packers who recently took a job with the Jets. "... We really like what he can do with the press."

The traits Dotson and the scouting department saw on tape will form the bedrock of Jackson's press game with the Packers, where refinement is overseen by pass game coordinator Joe Whitt Jr. There are several different techniques associated with press coverage — primarily two-hand jam, off-hand jam and mirroring — but rookies tend to hone the skills they have rather than learn press coverage from scratch.

"You want to take and refine what he's already been taught; you don't want to change," said Dennis Thurman, the defensive backs coach for the Jets while Pettine was the team's defensive coordinator. "It's not a cookie-cutter deal. I think that's where a lot of coaches get in trouble is they want everybody to do it exactly the same way, and you can't do that."

In its simplest form, press coverage is a means of inhibiting the wide receiver from arriving at his desired location at the proper time. The most potent offenses thrive on timing, with the quarterback's drop and the receiver's routes working in harmony like synchronized swimmers. If a cornerback can disrupt that timing, the chances of a completed pass plummet.

The most daring form of press coverage is the two-hand jam, a violent action in which the cornerback uses both hands to halt, stall or reroute a wide receiver. This was the technique employed by Revis, who was named NFL first-team all-pro four times between 2009-'14, and

requires incredible composure, timing and precision to properly strike the receiver's breastplate while squaring the shoulders for maximum efficacy. Full extension of the arms — which means fully locking both elbows — can devastate a receiver's momentum before the route even begins.

But risk is inherent with two-hand jamming, and that is why only the most-talented press corners regularly use the technique. Striking too high on the shoulder or too low, toward the stomach, diminishes leverage and makes it easier for the receiver to slap away the cornerback's arms. Misfiring altogether is even more costly because corners must flip their hips and recover against a fleeing target.

Cromartie said he would never advise young corners to use a two-hand jam unless they were playing Cover-2 or 2-man concepts that guarantee safety help over the top.

“(Darrelle) had the ability to get two hands on you, OK, pretty much any time he wanted to because his focus was so good at the line of scrimmage,” Thurman said. “When he was having those exceptional years in '09 and '10 and '11, it didn't matter who the receiver was, he got his hands — two hands — on every receiver when he wanted to.

"And that was his success; he won at the line of scrimmage.”

Cromartie, on the other hand, was built differently than Revis. He stood 6-2 and weighed 210 pounds. He ran the 40 in 4.47 seconds and had a 38-inch vertical leap. His arms were tentacles (33 inches) and his legs were stilts. He was, according to Dawidoff, the best athlete on the Jets' roster, a player who could “throw a football more than 80 yards.”

To make use of those tools, Cromartie worked with Thurman to develop a one-hand jam, a technique predicated less on obtrusion than manipulation. Rather than strike an opposing receiver to obliterate progress — though he did this on occasion as well — Cromartie focused on using one hand to guide the receiver toward locations that favored the defense.

“I was more of the athletic guy that can run with anybody, had long arms, had long legs,” Cromartie said. “So when I got in press, I can use my arms, my length and make a guy try to run around me. ...

"If I get my hands on you, I can steer you any way I want you to go. It's just understanding your body and understanding who you are as a player.”

Picture Cromartie at the right cornerback position, which is the left side from the quarterback's point of view. If the receiver takes an outside release, Cromartie will drop his right hip and use his left hand to nudge the player closer and closer to the sideline, thus lowering the probability of a catch.

If the receiver takes an inside release, Cromartie — who boxed during the off-season to improve his hand strength and timing — will drop his left hip and use his right hand to nudge the player closer and closer to the line of scrimmage, thus diminishing the depth of the route to protect the line to gain.

"Being able to give the offense a whole different look when you have two guys that can go up and just physically beat the crap out of the person in front of them," Cromartie said. "Or at least just knock the timing off of it."

A third method of press-man coverage requires corners to use their feet instead of hands. This technique is used primarily by players who struggle to get their hands on receivers, be it a product of short arms, the inability to control a receiver or even personal preference.

Pressing with your feet is not unlike playing man-to-man defense in basketball, where aggressive contact with the hands is not permitted. Basketball players slide their feet to stay in front of their opponent; cornerbacks use glue-like coverage to influence the routes of receivers. This is known as mirroring and shadowing.

"I used to think of it like this," Thurman said. "You actually reroute the receiver with your feet because it's about your ability to stay in front of him and make him have to either go wide outside or have to go hard inside, where he's actually going flat toward the line of scrimmage before he gets up the field."

"The key to being a good press corner is how long does it take the receiver at the line of scrimmage before he's actually got both of his shoulders turned up the field moving in the direction that he wants to go."

Two weeks into last season, former Packers defensive coordinator Dom Capers fielded a question about the immediate influence of cornerback Davon House, who began his career in Green Bay and re-signed with the team in '17 after a stint in Jacksonville deteriorated.

House, 28, had won a starting job out of training camp and played 92% of snaps in the first two games.

"His experience is a big help to him," Capers said. "I think he recognizes splits and what routes come out of those splits and that type of thing. That comes with playing the position for a while."

Aside from being physical with receivers, which House does well thanks to 31-inch arms, it's the comprehension of press coverage on a schematic level that makes him valuable as a rotation player and mentor, even as his speed decreases with age. That Revis and Cromartie dedicated extraordinary amounts of time to the mental aspects of their position speaks to the supreme value of football intellect.

The ability to understand wide receiver splits is the primary catalyst in a cornerback's pre-snap process of elimination. By drawing connections between situational football, formational alignments and the tendencies of particular teams, corners can reduce the number of route possibilities from 12 or 13 — in other words, everything on the route tree — to as few as three viable options.

According to Cromartie: “It’s little things like that that you have to try to understand of where this guy is aligned, what does he run when he’s in this spot, what does he run on this down and distance, what is his split and who is connected with him — from the running back to the tight end to the fullback or whoever it may be. Is he playing the X or the Z?”

“When does he play the X or the Z and what routes does he run out of this position? It’s little things like that when you’re watching film and understanding guys and figuring out what they do best. Then you take it away from them.”

Thurman states: “One of the problems with young corners is thinking I want to cover everything on every play. Well, you’ve got to understand splits. You’ve got to understand situations. You’ve got to understand down and distance, where the ball is on the field, those types of things. ...

“It’s not just a guessing game. It is your ability to understand what a guy can do to you in a certain situation because you can’t cover everything on every route. You just can’t do it.”

Cromartie, who made four Pro Bowls and was named first-team all-pro in 2007, said it took years of study to reach his peak mental performance with the Jets. He credited one of his first NFL position coaches, Kevin Ross, for teaching him how to properly watch film, understand splits and analyze formations when they overlapped with the San Diego Chargers from 2007-'09.

A year later, when Cromartie was traded to the Jets for a second-round pick, Thurman began explaining how to recognize run plays or pass plays and the ways in which a receiver’s alignment influences the type of route he is likely to run.

Revis and Cromartie also had weekly film sessions together, according to Dawidoff.

“The best ones are students of the game,” an AFC scout said, “and it becomes more mental than physical. Obviously, you need to be able to run, but you need to know how your opponent will (attack) or has attacked certain play styles. Sounds corny but Sun Tzu talks about this in preparation.”

Just as valuable as his recognition skills was Cromartie’s journal of offensive coordinators. Beginning in San Diego, where Cromartie entered the league as the 17th overall pick in '06, he acted on a tip from Ross and hall-of-fame defensive back Deion Sanders, a fellow Florida State alum, that stressed the importance of studying the opposing play caller.

So Cromartie kept a portfolio with separate entries for every coordinator he ever faced, and included with each coach was a description of tendencies, formational preferences and how he utilized certain players.

Even now, nearly two years removed from his last NFL game, Cromartie’s recall is staggering.

“Like Brian Schottenheimer,” Cromartie said in reference to the offensive coordinator for the Seattle Seahawks. “Yes, I played against him and I played with him. I knew exactly what he was

going to do as an offensive coordinator. Once we crossed the 40-yard line, it was throw the ball to the end zone: deep-ball double moves, slant and go, curl and go, post-corner-post.

“Even with — what’s the coach down in Miami right now? Adam Gase. We knew what we was gonna get out of bunch (alignments). Out of bunch, you’re going to get double posts inside the 15-yard line. Or you may get posts with a corner by the No. 1 (receiver).

“Just because they change teams doesn’t mean they’re going to change their method.”

The application of football knowledge was tested in practice, where Cromartie said he and Revis played as aggressively as possible. They thrashed receivers at the line of scrimmage to sharpen their jamming techniques against members of the scout team, and the combative nature of press-man coverage lends itself to hostile practice settings. Such is the cost of doing business for coordinators who crave hand-to-hand combat on Sundays.

“If you’re not going up and pressing and being physical,” Cromartie said, “how are you going to do that in a game?”

Toward the end of a recent conversation, Thurman posits a theory that speaks to the arduousness of playing press-man coverage week after week, year after year.

The New England Patriots, who play primarily man-to-man defense, are notorious for allowing defensive backs to leave in free agency under coach Bill Belichick. This is especially true for corners, and in the 18 seasons since Belichick was named head coach, only three cornerbacks have lasted five or more seasons: Kyle Arrington (six), Ty Law (five) and Asante Samuel (five).

“They change corners every three or four years because they play a ton of man,” Thurman said. “And if you’re playing man, you’re not only playing man in games, you’re playing man in practice. These guys are running all the time, so you’re using up their legs.”

When presented with Thurman’s theory, the AFC scout strongly disagreed with the notion that press-man corners lose their legs after several seasons. There are players, the scout said, who find ways to maintain their physical abilities and speed while playing large amounts of man defense throughout their careers.

Instead, the scout believes turnover is higher for press-man corners because of the mental strain associated with that style of play. Players are critiqued strongly and harshly, evidenced by the dustup between Pettine and Cromartie in 2011, and that type of environment can be gnawing over time.

“Guys are coached hard and will only be able to take so much of that style before it gets stale,” the scout said.

But until players reach their breaking point — be it physical or mental — the honeymoon period with press-man coverage is quite enjoyable, and most corners relish the opportunity to smother a different receiver each week. After all, one man guarding another man is defensive football in its purest form.

The Jets reached back-to-back AFC title games on the heels of such stratagems in 2009 and '10, with Pettine's defenses at their ferocious best. But without Revis and Cromartie — and with more youth than experience at corner — do the Packers have the personnel to press?

Pettine has three more months to find out.

“I think you still have to be sound against the run,” Pettine said, “but you lose a heck of a lot faster when you're giving up chunks in the passing game.”