

Season weighs on Packers' Eddie Lacy, family

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

The weekly audience for Eddie Lacy's locker-side chat engulfs the table where the 5-foot-11, 240-pound running back always sits. Like an inverted fishhook, an opening awaits. He enters the fray. The arc completes.

What follows is often an exercise in uncomfortable predictability, a star player for the Green Bay Packers inundated with difficult questions about his weight, his demotion, his worst season of football since falling in love with the sport as a 5- and 6-year-old in the playground leagues of Louisiana.

Frustrated, disappointed and, by his own admission earlier this month, partially stumped about the origin of his on-field struggles, Lacy turns to his favorite reply — "It's cool" — to address and deflect repeated inquiries about his mood or the injuries to his ankle and groin.

It's the same conversational pattern he follows with his mother Wanda Lacy, only this year he pulls it off with less success.

"As I'm sure you've heard over and over, 'It's cool, Mom,'" Wanda said in a phone interview. "...But there's a certain thing I can hear in his voice that's like OK, it's time for me to start praying."

At 25 years old and in his third season with the Packers, Lacy is traversing what amounts to the first significant dose of adversity he's faced on a football field.

Success at every level — an All-American in high school, three national championships at Alabama, back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons and The Associated Press Offensive Rookie of the Year award in Green Bay — magnified the vexing nature of his current struggles.

Through eight games Lacy has rushed for 50-plus yards only twice, and his number of fumbles (three) exceeds his touchdown total (two).

The slump has spawned rampant speculation about Lacy's body composition and eating habits (read: weight gain), conversations made worse on the noxious, unfiltered channels of social media.

It ushered in a learning experience for both player and family that tested the depths of a running back's confidence and the strength of his emotional support.

The Lacys banded together to begin digging their way out.

"It's difficult because you know what you're capable of doing," Lacy said in early November. "You know what you can do, but it's just not happening. It's difficult."

...

Born and raised in New Orleans, where he spent the first 14 years of his life, Lacy entered the spotlight as something of a prodigy while playing for the Oakdale Park football team.

As a running back, Lacy attracted crowds to his youth games with touchdown after touchdown, smile after smile. He bounced almost every run to the outside of the defense, Wanda said, galloping down the sideline for lengthy scores.

"There was one particular guy who was videotaping all of his games," Wanda said. "And I'm like, 'Why are you doing that?' He said, 'Because one day (Eddie) may be famous and they may need some footage on him when he was little.'"

The age groups and opposition changed over the years, but his on-field success remained.

Lacy rushed for more than 1,000 yards and 17 touchdowns in each of his final three years of high school and emerged as one of the top 150 recruits in the country, according to ESPN.

He chose to attend Alabama over Oklahoma, Tennessee, Mississippi, Mississippi State and Louisiana State.

But in Tuscaloosa, where Lacy would play alongside future pros in Mark Ingram and Trent Richardson, his weight became a focal point of weekly preparation.

The coaching staff at Alabama, according to Wanda, provided specific weight requirements and dietary restrictions for every player. Lacy, she said, often returned home for the holidays with a list of foods he could and could not eat.

The school put an app on his cellphone that identified acceptable items at various restaurants, including the fast-food chain Wendy's. And in the cafeteria at the football complex, where he ate all his meals, Lacy could only choose from predetermined groups of food.

"He came home one holiday and he was a little heavy; he may have been 10 pounds overweight," Wanda said. "Then he went back and when the season started I was like, 'Oh my god, Eddie. What did they do to you?' He's like — and he was joking — 'They gave me lettuce sandwiches. That's it. That's all I eat, Mom.'"

"They slimmed him down really well."

It was a jarring departure from his diet at home, where Lacy and his siblings enjoyed hearty meals prepared mostly by their father.

Lacy loved pork and beans, fried pork chops and fried chicken, and Wanda, who said the family consists of "big people" to begin with, kept buying them because it kept her children, all of whom played sports, in good spirits every night.

But while his brothers learned to cook, absorbing some of the recipes from their father, Lacy had no interest in preparing meals for himself.

"I'm not cooking in a kitchen," his mother recalls Lacy saying, and she encouraged him to get a chef.

A playful indifference to cooking morphed into a legitimate problem after the Packers chose Lacy, who weighed 231 pounds at the scouting combine, in the second round of the 2013 draft.

Alone in Green Bay, where he was more than 900 miles from the structure of Alabama and over 1,000 miles from the comfort of his childhood home, Lacy had the opportunity to consistently choose his own meals.

"Then the pounds just started to creep up," Wanda said. "Does it bother him? I would say it does, now it does. Because before he's a big kid so the weight acted like a cushion when he's being hit, you know?"

"Now that he sees that this is not what they're wanting from him, he and his brother and even his sister talk about it a lot, what he has to do to eliminate the problem, to not be as thick. He doesn't want to lose all the weight....He just doesn't want to be 250, 260."

Earlier this season, coach Mike McCarthy said Lacy is playing heavier now than earlier points in his career, though he did not think it influenced performance.

Lacy, who lamented a potential loss of money if he missed weight, said he has been "cool" for each weigh-in this season and had not heard from general manager Ted Thompson about his size.

...

During Lacy's last trip home, to the house he bought for his family after Hurricane Katrina dismembered their neighborhood, Wanda noticed signs of growth in her son.

His previous visits to Louisiana consisted mostly of relaxing, eating and playing video games, she said.

But now, as a third-year pro and considered, before this season, to be among the best running backs in the league, Lacy thought more about his job and less about lounging.

He asked his mother if she had a jump rope he could use. He wanted to know if the family had a membership to a nearby gym. He told his sister which days he needed to jog and asked her to join.

"I can see the maturity in knowing that it's his job to keep himself a certain way so that he can be effective as a running back," she said.

The family approach to Lacy's body composition carried over to the handling of his subpar 2015 season, which tugged at the emotions of parents and siblings alike.

A chain of communication was set up, with Lacy contacting his brother and sister first if he's having a problem. His siblings would decide whether to bring their mom into the equation, though Lacy contacts Wanda first for more pressing issues.

Twice Wanda flew to Green Bay and visited her son — once in late September, once for a game against the St. Louis Rams in early October — to offer a soothing presence, to pray, to read scripture.

"I'm there just to listen," she said.

Every Tuesday night, Lacy and his siblings hold Bible study sessions over the phone. His mom texts him positive thoughts at least three times per week.

The family learned to avoid the ravenous culture of Twitter and blogs, even if it meant Eddie Lacy Sr. pulling his crying wife away from the computer screen.

"I'm wondering if my baby is reading this," Wanda said.

They all studied film to decipher the on-field problem, which they believe stems from Lacy moving away from the style of football he played all his life.

"It's going back to basics of dropping your shoulders and keeping the feet moving," she said.

Sidelined with a groin injury during the loss to the Detroit Lions, Lacy intends to play Sunday in Minnesota. Good or bad, win or lose, the media swarm will assemble around his locker. Lacy will once again stand alone.

But in reality, his family is always behind him.

Said Lacy: "I'm going to be out to do whatever I can for this team."