

## NEWS



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## Whitt wants impact plays from cornerbacks

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By Ricky Zeller



Joe Whitt, Jr. goes back to school annually to expand his teaching skills, searching for new methods to sharpen his message and get the most out of the hours of meetings he spends in front of his platoon of cornerbacks each season.

Whitt, however, completed his degree in communications a decade ago.

He reaches way back in his past, shadowing high school teachers at his alma mater at Auburn High School in Alabama. He takes notes on their approach, picks up tips on how they relate lessons to teenage students, and looks for fresh techniques for when he goes over his detail-rich assignments about the game plan.

It was a suggestion from Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin years ago, and the new ideas Whitt has found yearly in high school classrooms are useful in getting across the complexities of Dom Capers' defense to **Charles Woodson**, **Tramon Williams** and the rest of the Packers' cornerbacks.

Whitt's appearances at Auburn High have served the Packers well. Now in his third year as the club's secondary/cornerbacks coach, Whitt has led his unit for 37 games, including the postseason. During that stretch, his defensive backs have picked off 31 passes, recovered four fumbles, forced 12 fumbles and helped make the Packers' secondary among the NFL's best, and certainly the most opportunistic.

"Being able to relate to players is very important, and that's why I try to learn different teaching styles," said Whitt. "In high school, for the advanced classes, the teacher gives them general ideas and the students just take off. For players like (Charles) Woodson and Tramon (Williams), that works.

"For general classes, teachers spend more time. You start with the concepts and then you get into the details. You work with them to where they really learn it, and then they really take off. That's what you do with young players. Watching how teachers do that has helped me. You learn their different approaches with different students."

Whitt established the "10 Commandments" of cornerback play not long after his promotion to his current position, after serving as defensive quality control coach in 2008. The list is the foundation of everything he teaches. They include rules about leverage and film study, basics that aren't so simple on the heels of wide receivers such as Detroit's Calvin Johnson or Arizona's Larry Fitzgerald. When all else breaks down, the first rule on the fly is go back to Whitt's "10 Commandments."

"Those were created two years ago, and that's the level where we want to play," he said. "That's the standard we want to set. They've changed, based on the way we play. We changed four of them. We want to set the standard of secondary play in the NFL, but our play has to show that."

His level of detail is infectious, according to Capers, the Packers' defensive coordinator. When details matter so much to the coach, it matters to the players. Whitt spends hours going over film in his office, sharing insights with secondary/safeties coach Darren Perry, looking for "nuggets" they can give to their players, printed on small cards. Whitt does the five-game breakdown, then digs deeper into the season for more keys on an opponent. He says Perry might be the best in research, sometimes going back three years for one small advantage.

"When Joe tells you something, you can put money on it," said Williams, who went to the Pro Bowl last year for the first time. "Joe does his homework; I know that. He puts the time in, so when he says something is going to happen out there, it does.

"The best thing about Joe is he relates to all of us differently. He also wants to hear about what we see. There are coaches who don't want your input. He tells me different ways to do things than he may tell another player, and he has a real understanding of how things work. Then he wants to know how I see it."

Whitt's group at cornerback is diverse. Woodson was named to the seventh Pro Bowl last season from the NFL Defensive

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his seventh Pro Bowl last year and was the NFL Defensive Player of the Year in '09. Williams has become one of the league's best corners over the last two years after coming off the practice squad. **Sam Shields**, an undrafted rookie last season, emerged as a playmaker under Whitt's tutelage. There are youngsters in the pipeline.

All are sitting in front of him, demanding either an accelerated pace or Whitt's patience.

"You have so few opportunities to work with an elite player, and I feel blessed to work with Charles," he said. "He takes my coaching and keeps working. Charles is still improving. When you get Sam and other young players who are so raw, that's something you also really enjoy. My job is to maximize all of their potential. With Tramon, the kid is so talented. He is a role model for what an NFL player should be."

Whitt makes one thing clear to all of them, from rookies to veterans: It's not just about creating turnovers for his unit, it's when. Making interceptions with the Packers up by three touchdowns is OK, but not what he's after. Those aren't true impact plays.

In 2010, the cornerbacks came through again. Woodson, who had returned an interception 48 yards earlier in the game for a TD, made three big plays at the end of a 28-26 victory over Detroit, including breaking up consecutive passes on the Lions' final possession to force a punt. For his efforts, he was named NFC Defensive Player of the Week.

Williams put together a highlight reel in the offseason. He clinched the victory in the Wild Card playoff at Philadelphia with a leaping interception of Michael Vick in the end zone with 33 seconds remaining. At Atlanta, in the Divisional playoff, he twice intercepted Matt Ryan, including a 70-yard touchdown return in the final seconds of the first half that increased Green Bay's lead to 28-14.

Shields had two interceptions in the NFC Championship, including one late in the game to seal the win.

In the final seconds of Super Bowl XLV, Williams knocked away a high pass from Pittsburgh's Mike Wallace, ending the Steelers' final drive.

"We need to make critical plays, not just plays that show up on the stat sheet," Whitt said. "Sam's interception against Dallas – where he jumped up and caught it with one hand when we were up by 14 – that's what we call a 'splash play.' Sam's interceptions in the NFC Championship, that's big-time.

"That's what we are all about. It goes to preparation, the time in the classroom, the time studying film. Real life teaching allows them to play fast. When you take doubt out of the equation, we're going to play downhill at you. This is a partnership, though. This isn't about me. It's an honor to work with these men."

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