

# As season opens tonight, Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco ignores the pressure

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BALTIMORE - The Baltimore Ravens were ready to break the team huddle to start practice recently when Joe Flacco took off his helmet and his teammates erupted in laughter.

"The guy was wearing a (skull) cap," wide receiver Torrey Smith said. "You know, the thing that Ray Lewis wears."

For the past four seasons, the quarterback has been scrutinized more than any other athlete in Baltimore. His body language has been interpreted and critiqued. His quotes have been dissected and, at times, mocked. And his performance every weekend during the football season has ranged from acceptable to terrible, depending on whom you ask.

As he enters the most important season of his young career, Flacco is supposed to be feeling the pressure that comes with increased expectations and responsibilities. He is supposed to be consumed by his contract situation and the fact that he'll enter the season as a lame-duck quarterback.

But watching him during training camp play practical jokes on teammates, command the huddle and hit a wide receiver in stride across the middle, observers have never seen him look more in control or more at ease.

"I was down to watch him practice, and it was obvious that this is his team," said K.C. Keeler, Flacco's coach at Delaware. "He was killing it that day. It was all Joe. He's gotten a certain comfort level with everything. It's all kind of come together."

Heading into Monday night's season opener against the Cincinnati Bengals, Flacco, 27, conceded that he's more comfortable than he has ever been. With the addition of wide-out Jacoby Jones and the continued maturation of Smith and tight ends Ed Dickson and Dennis Pitta, Flacco feels this is the best offensive personnel that the Ravens have had in his tenure.

He has meshed well with new quarterbacks coach Jim Caldwell and he's been buoyed that some of his suggestions in terms of play calling and offensive philosophy have been "taken a little bit better" than they had in the past. That includes the implementation of a no-huddle offense, which Flacco thrived in while he was at Delaware.

"I'm really confident," Flacco said. "I think we have a good group of guys, and we'd be doing ourselves a disservice if we weren't looking at ourselves like (a top offense) and giving ourselves a good chance to go out there and put up a lot of points. It takes a lot of work and we have a big step to make. I'm not saying that we're going to put up 50 every game from the very beginning, but I do believe we're going to have a good offense, and I do believe we're going to get better and better as the season goes on."

Does Flacco's future in Baltimore depend on it? Probably not.

The Ravens, who drafted Flacco in the first round in 2008, are committed to him going forward despite his rookie deal expiring after the season. The two sides have been negotiating with Flacco's agent, Joe Linta, since February, but at this point, talks appear to be at a stalemate.

"It is what it is. If they don't want me here anymore, I think it's their loss," Flacco said. "If I'm not good enough to be here, then that's the way it is. If I go out and perform the way I think I should this year, then I think I'm getting more expensive. Things are going to work out with the way we go out and play. It's not my job to worry about it."

Flacco has given Linta permission to continue the negotiations during the season, vowing it won't be a distraction.

"Joe is single-minded of purpose and his focus is on taking the team to the next level," Linta said. "He has a contract, and he's fine with it."

Asked about his earlier statement that his contract is not on his mind, Flacco said, "Come on, everybody thinks about it a little bit. But when I'm (at the training facility), I don't think about it one bit. It's exciting that we're even having conversations, but that stuff doesn't affect me. I've been playing football for a long time and I love to play this game. That's what it's about. My job is to go out and play."

Flacco has said on several occasions that he expects to be in Baltimore long-term, and Ravens coach John Harbaugh credited Flacco for "making a conscious decision to not make (his contract) an issue, and I know that because of how the negotiations have gone."

Though teammates are well aware of the situation, they say that's mostly because of the media's fixation on it rather than Flacco discussing it. Pitta is Flacco's closest friend on the team, and the only reason he knows about the negotiations is he asks about them. Smith agreed.

"I think that speaks volumes about Joe because he's not worried about it at all," Smith said. "It doesn't faze him, it doesn't faze his game. He's not like, 'All right, I got to play well so I can make that happen.' He lets everything take its course. You can just see it with the way he is playing, the throws that he is making. There have been a lot of 'wow' throws that we've gotten to see all preseason."

From his teammates and current coaches to Keeler to former NFL quarterback Scott Brunner, who tutored Flacco before the 2008 draft, those who know Flacco well insist he's the last player who would let a contract situation affect his play. Brunner stays in touch with Flacco and visited the quarterback and his wife, Dana, after the birth of the couple's first child in June.

"If you know Joe, he's going in there to compete. That's what he has done his whole life," said Brunner, who played six seasons in the NFL and now tutors young quarterbacks. "He's supremely confident in his ability, and I think his attitude is the longer the team waits, the higher his price is going to be because he's just going to put up bigger and bigger numbers."

It's not exactly a foreign concept, an athlete who buckles under the weight of playing for a contract. Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver DeSean Jackson struggled all last year and later acknowledged that his tenuous contract situation had a lot to do with it. On the other side of the argument is New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees, who celebrated the final year of his contract by setting an NFL single-season record for passing yards.

"Is there pressure? Yes, but guys have responded in both situations. Some guys, it bothers them and they are looking at their quarterback rating every week and they can become paralyzed by it," said Tim Hasselbeck, former NFL quarterback and current ESPN analyst. "You don't know what's going to happen until you see a guy go through it. They're going to find out if he's the right guy and maybe that's

the team's angle on it. If he's the right guy, he'll play through it."

The Ravens know that there is risk on their side as well, and owner Steve Bisciotti has expressed interest in getting a deal done before the season. Ravens officials feel that they've made a generous offer, believed to be in the range of five years for \$100 million.

However, at this point, Flacco seems content to deal with the contract after the season. If it gets to that point, he knows that it's likely he'll either get a long-term deal or be affixed with the franchise tag.

For now, he's consumed by improving on his uneven 2011 season, one in which he set a career low in completion percentage (.576) and tied his career high in interceptions (12). He also had his fewest touchdown passes (20) and passing yards (3,610) since his rookie year.

However, he beat the Pittsburgh Steelers with a last-minute touchdown pass to Smith, and he was at his best in the AFC championship game, throwing for 306 yards and two touchdowns, and leading a late-game drive that would have likely gotten the Ravens to the Super Bowl had Lee Evans been able to hold on to a pass in the end zone.

"The very first day that we came back for (organized team activities), I noticed a real difference," Harbaugh said. "There was a sense of urgency, a confidence and a command of what we were doing, and I'd say it's continued to build from there. I think he has really made a leap from last season."

In April, Flacco said in a local radio interview that he feels he's the best quarterback in the NFL. The comment only added to the scrutiny that he faces this season. The quarterback has more regular-season wins (44) in his first four seasons than any other starting quarterback in league history. He's also the only quarterback since the 1970 NFL merger to go to the playoffs his first four years.

But by now, Flacco understands the deal. The scrutiny, both from fans and the media, won't lift until he leads the Ravens to the Super Bowl.

"Everybody in the league is capable of winning that one game," Flacco said. "It's the hard work and it's performing on the Sunday or Saturday or whenever it is that gets you there. It's kind of crazy how much we put on that one game, but that's the way it is. That's what you have to deal with."