



Baltimore Ravens coach Brian Billick, right, talks with quarterback Steve McNair during a game Dec. 31 in Baltimore. AP PHOTO

# Ravens' Billick may not deserve Indy fans' ire

INDIANAPOLIS

**B**rian Billick is an easy man to hate if you're not a Baltimore Ravens fan.

He has a smug mug with squinty eyes and the perpetual half-smile, half-sneer of a true smart aleck when disagreeing with calls or plays from the sideline.

He presided over Minnesota's high-scoring offense a decade ago, then parlayed his questionable "genius" tag into the head coaching job with the Ravens.

In Baltimore, he's won with defense and struggled with offense and, some say, humility.

He's candid and knows how to work the media. One year, he turned his training camp into an HBO reality series.

Yet here's the dirty secret about Billick that Colts fans should know before focusing all of their venom toward him and their television sets during today's CBS broadcast:

All the reasons to hate him from the exterior make Billick the kind of perceptive and courageous coach that any NFL fan would love to have and one who is quite successful in luring free agents.

Billick shows the gumption and makes the hard choices that Colts fans complain Tony Dungy won't. He fired one of his best buddies, Jim Fassel, as offensive coordinator in midseason, and the Ravens flourished.

He completed a 13-3 regular season — best in team history, surpassing that 2000 Super Bowl team — despite putting all his chips on Steve McNair's brittle body and Jamal Lewis' sagging yards per carry.

By all rights, the best quarterback he's ever had there is Vinny Testaverde.

And Billick is a smooth operator when it comes to his candor and showering praise on the Colts in this week's media blitz leading up to the game.

While at least a half-dozen Ravens took time to take shots at Indianapolis, Billick cut open a vein of emotion for how much esteem he holds for Dungy and the Colts.

There was the obvious kowtowing to Peyton Manning that each opposing coach performs weekly.

"It's impossible to confuse Peyton Manning," Billick said. "What on a football field has Peyton Manning not seen? Our hope is that we can get him to pause momentarily, to question just a little bit what he is seeing and what he's seen."

There was the requisite homage to Dungy, his former co-coordinator in Minnesota.

"Watching the way Tony Dungy prepared for an offense, the things he was looking for and the tells that he was working with, created a lot of the fundamental beliefs I have now in terms of the way we prepare knowing what a defense is looking at," Billick said. "I owe Tony a great deal in that regard."

Yet even on the trickier topics, Billick comes across as a sage.

Although some of his players and coaches did the trash talking, he did not resort to questioning the Colts' defense after one good showing.

"Their defensive difficulties, as is typical, were over-exaggerated," Billick said. "I think everybody got a little hot and bothered over it."



Jason Martin

And he flat-out deflected the opportunity to question how a team that hasn't won on the road since November would fare in Baltimore. Here's what he said about why the Colts lost their past four road games:

"I don't know that I can isolate that," he said. "That's probably a better question for them."

Of course, Billick might be faulted for allowing the bragging and fist-pumping and general performance theater to erupt from his notably expressive players.

The majority of the barking, as usual with the Ravens, took place on defense.

Billick's defensive coordinator is Rex Ryan, son of swaggering Buddy Ryan, and the son blitzes and talks junk just as frequently as his father did.

Rex Ryan went as far as to intimate that the Colts use their slow-down no-huddle offense to try to steal defensive signs.

"They're pretty good about picking up your signals," Ryan said. "Some people call it something else."

He didn't elaborate. But he did speak sarcastically and expansively about his plans to disrupt Manning with continual pressure.

"I heard there's some coordinators in the league that say, 'Well, you can't get to him so don't even try,'" Ryan said. "I have a feeling we'll try to get to him."

Added cornerback Chris McAlister, "He never runs the play they call in the huddle. It becomes a game of cat and mouse."

Naturally, the Ravens are confident enough to think they can get the job done with the league's best defense, ranked by statistics — or just their own opinions.

"It's not even close," linebacker Bart Scott said. "Not to disrespect anybody else, but we have some unique athletes at linebacker."

And, naturally, verbose middle linebacker Ray Lewis had the final word on the subject.

"Kansas City is Kansas City, and we're Baltimore," Lewis said. "No matter how many times Joseph Addai touches the football, he's going to be hit, bottom line."

The Ravens' players appear more worthy of Colts fans' anger and disgust than Billick.

And yet, maybe that's exactly how he wants it.

Perhaps Billick wants to appear as the wise and sympathetic figurehead who just can't be responsible for what everybody else is saying.

Maybe the guy is worth all that hateful emotion he's bound to conjure across central Indiana today.

Maybe this week, the offensive genius and the coaching mastermind pulled one of his greatest misdirection plays.

Jason Martin is a sports correspondent for the Daily Journal. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

# • Contrasts

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Scott and linebacker teammate Ray Lewis warned Addai, through the Baltimore media, that yards will be significantly, if not painfully, harder to come by than they were against what they insinuated was a soft Chiefs' defense.

"I think it's going to be a painful day for Joseph Addai," Scott said.

Added Lewis: "One thing about it, no matter how many times Joseph Addai touches the ball, he's going to get hit."

Addai's response? Not much, other than to express admiration for the Ravens and Lewis in particular.

"I've been watching him over the years in high school, in college," Addai said. "I have a lot of respect for him, and I'm just going to go out there and just do what I can do."

If teammates do the same, the Colts are confident of advancing to the AFC Championship Game.

"We just want to go out and be really efficient," Saturday said. "That's what we've talked about all

week. Let's be smart with what we do. Let's make them make plays. They pride themselves on it, so let's make them do that.

"That's really the way we're going at them. We don't have to talk about what we're going to do. We just want to go out and play really good football."

So do the Ravens. And they don't mind telling you.

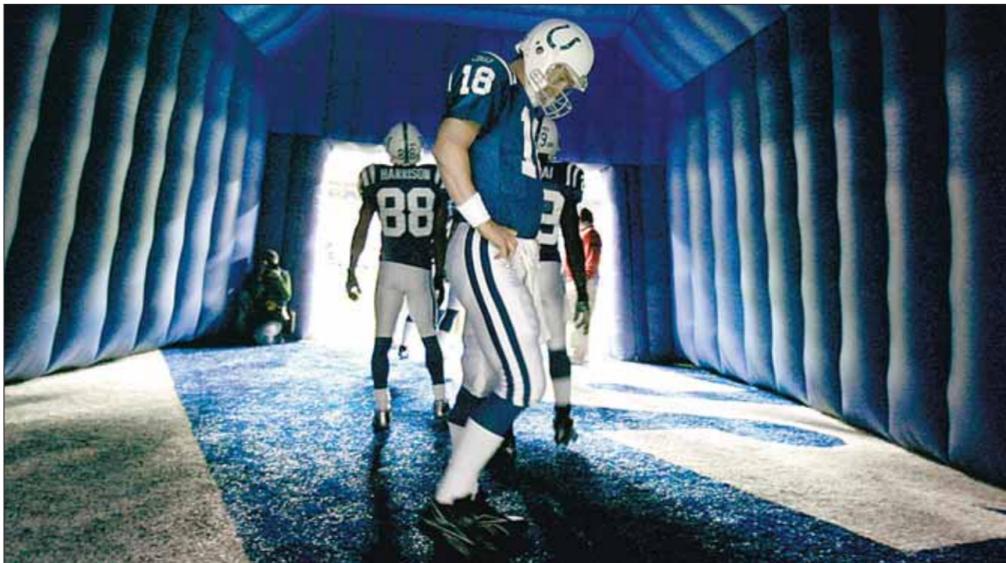
"We feed off each other," Scott said. "We know if we're making plays and we're in that mojo, and everybody's a part of it, it's tough for any offense just to move the ball on us."

"It's going to be a heavyweight fight, and we'll see who's going to last."

## INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

# Ravens' plan: Keep Manning on sideline

## Baltimore aims to play keep-away with NFL's top QB



Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning waits to take the field against the Kansas City Chiefs in their playoff game in Indianapolis on Jan. 6. The Colts take on the Baltimore Ravens in an AFC divisional playoff game today in Baltimore.

By DAVID GINSBURG  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### BALTIMORE

Just like every other team that faces the Indianapolis Colts, the Baltimore Ravens' top priority is containing Peyton Manning.

To reach that goal, the Ravens will depend as much on their offense as their top-ranked defense in today's second-round AFC playoff game.

"Any time you play the Colts and Peyton Manning, the old adage is true: It's hard to score when you're not on the field," Ravens coach Brian Billick said.

The Ravens (13-3) are well-equipped to play keep-away from the NFL's top-ranked quarterback. With Jamal Lewis getting around 20 to 25 carries a game and Steve McNair employing a precision passing game designed to move the first-down chains 10 yards at a time, Baltimore led the NFL this season in time of possession.

That brand of offense should come in handy today against Indianapolis (13-4).

"Controlling the clock lets our defense rest and lets them get after people when they do get on the field," Baltimore center Mike Flynn said. "The few games we lost this year, we didn't control the ball and the time of possession. If we make first downs, we're tough to beat."

The Colts allowed only one touchdown and survived three Manning interceptions last week in a 23-8 win against Kansas City. More often than not, however, Indianapolis relies on its prolific quarterback to win.

This game should be no exception. "The same basic principles are in place: We want to protect the ball, con-

### AT A GLANCE

Indianapolis (13-4) at Baltimore (13-3)

4:30 p.m. today, WISH-Channel 8

Opening line: Ravens by 3½

Record vs. spread: Colts 9-8; Ravens 10-6

Series record: Colts 14-2

Playoffs record: Colts 14-16; Ravens 5-2

Most recent meeting: Colts 24, Ravens 7, Sept. 11, 2005, at Baltimore

Last week: Colts beat Chiefs 23-8 (wild-card game); Ravens beat Bills 19-7 in Week 17.

Colts' offense: Overall (3), rush (18), pass (2)

Colts' defense: Overall (21), rush (32), pass (2)

Ravens' offense: Overall (17), rush (25), pass (11)

Ravens' defense: Overall (1), rush (2), pass (6)

Streaks, stats and notes: Indianapolis is second team in league history with four consecutive 12-win seasons; Dallas did it 1992-95. ... Indianapolis, with lowest-ranked run defense in football, held Kansas City to 44 yards on ground and 126 overall. ... Colts led AFC in total offense (379.4) and led NFL in third-down conversion (56.1 percent, 105 of 187).

vert third downs, and when we're in the red zone, we want to score touchdowns," Manning said. "But Baltimore makes that a real challenge."

Such was not the case in the opener last season, when the Colts took a 17-0 lead in the third quarter and coasted to a 24-7 win in Baltimore.

"We didn't control them early, let them get the lead and ended up getting into a throwing game," Flynn recalled.

This isn't the same Baltimore team. In that 2005 game, Kyle Boller started at quarterback and left with an injury before being replaced by Anthony Wright. Neither quarterback proved to be effective as the Ravens staggered to a 6-10 finish.

Now Baltimore has McNair, who for

the sake of variety might take a few shots at throwing long today. But the game plan calls for plenty of handoffs to Lewis and high-percentage short tosses to Todd Heap, Derrick Mason and Mark Clayton.

Fresh after taking a week off during the first-round bye, Lewis is eager to run the football and run down the clock.

"You want to keep Peyton off the field, because if you leave him on the field long enough he's going to make some plays," Lewis said. "We have a great defense. I'm sure they have a great plan for them. But, from an offensive standpoint, I think we're going to be the best defense."

The Indianapolis offense is known for its quick strikes: Manning to Marvin Harrison, Manning to Reggie Wayne, and so on. Manning threw an NFL-high 31 touchdown passes this season, and the Colts owned the top-ranked offense.

But the Ravens, thanks to McNair, showed they no longer have to rely on their defense to win.

"They just feel like they've got a whole package now," Indianapolis coach Tony Dungy said. "They've got a guy who's going to take care of the football. He's not going to get rattled, he's not going to have an off day in a big game, and if they are down four points with 3 minutes to go, that he's going to find a way to win the game. So, you can see the confidence that they are playing with."

McNair finished as the eighth-ranked passer in the AFC. That, however, has no bearing on his value to the Ravens.

"He doesn't get enough credit. I'm biased; I'm sensitive about it," Billick said. "You hear about a lot of other guys, but this is a former MVP that's been to the Super Bowl. He's pretty good."

# • Welcome

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

contests before the slide started in November.

Three of those road losses came at Jacksonville, Tennessee and Houston, none of which boasts the reputation for noise and home-field success of Baltimore, which at 42-14 (.750) has the NFL's best home record since 2000.

"We don't care about going back to Baltimore," defensive end Raheem Brock said. "The best team is going to win."

The buildup all week in Baltimore has focused on how the Colts bolted town in 1984 after then-owner Robert Irsay negotiated secretly with Indianapolis politicians to relocate the team.

Baltimore was left without a team until 1996 when Art Modell relocated the Browns from Cleveland.

"You can't live in this city and not really grasp the depth of emotion that it elicits," Ravens coach Brian Billick said. "It's very real and very tangible."

Yet a few players on each team weren't even born when the Colts

moved. Most were too young to form much of a memory.

"I was probably 4 years old, watching 'Sesame Street,'" said Ravens linebacker Bart Scott, 26, said. "I probably was in preschool messing with somebody."

The lack of direct knowledge does not mean that Baltimore's players don't have a sense of why many of their fans reserve a specific brand of distaste for the Colts.

"They were calling for us to play the Colts because they're still bitter, and they're still sore in their bellies," Scott said. "We want to oblige them."

The Ravens, however, are focused less on an almost 23-year-old grudge than on the noise level and disruption that their home crowd can provide.

Billick understands the strength of emotion that comes from perceived betrayal, but it's the 5-yard penalties and wasted timeouts that fans might force on the Colts that can be of benefit to him.

He said that he defines home-field advantages as the direct impact fans can have on the game through mistakes forced on the opponent.

"I have no doubt our fans will be up to the challenge," he said. "We can wear the Colts out physi-

cally come the fourth quarter fighting the crowd as well as us.

"If we can get them to call a timeout or two, get a procedure penalty or two, that would be huge; our fans are the best in the league at it."

The Colts' visit today marks only the third home playoff game in the Ravens' 10-year history. The others were a wild-card defeat of Denver on the way to a Super Bowl title in the 2000-01 season and a loss to the Tennessee Titans in the 2003-04 playoffs.

Scott said he prefers that the noise reaches a level where Colts QB Peyton Manning can't hear himself think.

Ravens middle linebacker Ray Lewis, who often exhorts the crowd more frequently and more directly than an applause sign, thinks such a racket is a distinct possibility.

"I'm not ready yet for how loud it's going to be and how crazy it's going to be," Lewis said this week. "It's almost impossible for us to hear defensive checks with me standing beside one person."

"The crowd affects everyone who comes in here."

For the Colts' part, they tried to downplay both the return-to-Baltimore storyline and their

road struggles.

"Regardless of where we are playing, it's a playoff atmosphere," Indianapolis defensive end Dwight Freeney said. "We know it's going to be rowdy, it's going to be loud, and you're going to have to just block that out."

Colts coach Tony Dungy tried to brush off the issue by saying that his defense actually blows more coverages and has more trouble communicating in the loud RCA Dome. He repeated that Indy's offense relies mostly on hand signals and silent snap counts anyway.

"The noise, the crowd, the atmosphere are side issues that won't affect the game," he said.

Yet Dungy explicitly said that a slow start could be disastrous.

"It would let them feed on the momentum," he said. "We can't have that happen."

And Dungy admitted that the Colts are the perfect opponent to help the Baltimoreans reach a fever pitch.

"We're going to face that emotion and energy," he said. "I think it's an added story of the Colts coming back, but regardless of who would be coming in there, that place is going to be revved up (today)."

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