Lewis could have made the announcement during the offseason.

OWINGS MILLS, Md. (AP) -- It seems almost impossible to imagine the Ravens without Ray Lewis, who has anchored Baltimore's renowned defense ever since the team came into existence.

For 17 years, Lewis has been stalking opposing quarterbacks and running backs. He inspired his teammates with emotional speeches, proudly donned his No. 52 jersey on Sunday afternoons and did everything in his power to help Baltimore win.

Soon, all that will only be a memory. In a stunning announcement Wednesday, the two-time AP Defensive Player of the Year said he will retire after the Ravens complete their 2013 playoff run.

"It caught me by surprise, because we all thought the great Ray Lewis was going to play forever," Baltimore outside linebacker Terrell Suggs said. "I thought he was going to surpass

Brett Favre and still be out there doing it well into his 40s. He let us know that the sun is setting on his career. It's amazing and it's sad, all at the same time."

When Lewis gathered his teammates together Wednesday morning, no one had a clue what he was about to tell them.

"Everything that starts has an end," the 37-year-old Lewis said. "For me, today, I told my team that this will be my last ride."

The reaction was stunned silence.

"I thought we were getting our `Let's go on a run in the playoffs' speech,'" Suggs said. "Not that."

Lewis has been sidelined since Oct. 14 with a torn right triceps. He intends to return Sunday to face the Indianapolis Colts in what will almost certainly be his final home game.

And when he does his trademark dance after emerging from the tunnel, Lewis will receive an ovation 17 years in the making.

"That moment I walk out of that tunnel Sunday, every person that was a Ravens fan - 1996 to this day - we will all enjoy that moment," he said. "It will probably be one of the glorious moments in my life."

Lewis is poised to walk away from the game because he wants to spend more time with his sons. While working to return from his injury, Lewis watched two of his boys play on the same high school football team in Florida. He intends to see Ray Lewis III perform as a freshman next year for the University of Miami, where Lewis starred before the Ravens selected him in the first round of the 1996 draft.

"God is calling," Lewis said. "My children have made the ultimate sacrifice for their father for 17 years. I don't want to see them do that no more. I've done what I wanted to do in this business, and now it's my turn to give them something back."

That's why Lewis will pull off his uniform for the last time after the Ravens lose or claim their second Super Bowl title.

"It's either (that or) hold onto the game and keep playing and let my kids miss out on times we can be spending together," Lewis said. "Because I always promised my son if he got a full ride on scholarship Daddy is going to be there, I can't miss that."

Lewis was the AP Defensive Player of the Year in 2000, the same season he was voted Super Bowl MVP following Baltimore's 34-7 rout of the New York Giants. Lewis was also Defensive Player of the Year in 2003, and is the only player in NFL history with at least 40 career sacks and 30 interceptions.

"I never played the game for individual stats," Lewis said. "I only played the game to make my team a better team."

After the Ravens moved from Cleveland, Lewis was drafted 26th overall in Baltimore's first draft. He became a fixture at middle linebacker and a beloved figure in Baltimore, and remained that way even after his alleged involvement in a double-murder in Atlanta in early 2000.

In June of that year, a judge approved a deal allowing Lewis to avoid murder charges and jail time by pleading guilty to a misdemeanor and testifying against two co-defendants. Within a year, Lewis was in the Super Bowl, leading the Ravens to their only NFL championship.

Hundreds of games later, he's ready to call it a career.

"I'll make this last run with this team, and I'll give them everything I've got," he said. "When it ends, it ends. But I didn't come back for it to end in the first round."

The news of his decision to retire quickly resounded throughout the NFL.

Colts coach Chuck Pagano, who served as Lewis' defensive coordinator last year, said, "I thought, shoot, the guy could play forever and would play forever. Great person, great man, great player, just an unbelievable human being - what he's done for that organization, that city and for that matter, so many people. He's obviously a first-ballot Hall of Famer and will be sorely missed."

Marvin Lewis, now Cincinnati's head coach and Lewis' first defensive coordinator in 1996, said, "He's had a tremendous career, tremendous impact. His mentorship to other players, his leadership is hard to describe."

The two men met last Sunday before Baltimore's game against the Bengals. Marvin Lewis recalled, "I said to myself, `He doesn't look a day older than when we drafted him.'"

Lewis was respected by his peers, too, even those who were on the receiving end of his crushing tackles.

Green Bay defensive standout Clay Matthews said, "I know guys around the league - offense, defense, special teams - look up to him because of how he goes about his business and the influential role he has not only for his team but around the league."

Lewis is the key figure in a defense that has long carried a reputation for being fierce, unyielding and downright nasty. He led the Ravens in tackles in 14 of his 17 seasons, the exceptions being those years in which he missed significant time with injuries (2002, 2005, 2012).

When Lewis tore his triceps against Dallas, it was feared he was done for the season. But he

would have none of that.

"From the time I got hurt, everything I've done up to this point has been to get back with my team to make another run at the Lombardi (Trophy)," he said.

Well, not everything. Lewis spent time watching his boys play football, which caused him to call his rehabilitation "bittersweet." After spending countless hours from Monday through Thursday working to return from the injury, he hopped on a plane toward Florida to be with his boys.

"I got to be there every Friday," Lewis said. "Me being who I am, not having a father myself, that damaged me a lot. I didn't want my kids to relive that.

"One of the hardest things in the world is to walk away from my teammates. But the now I'm going to step into other chapters of my life.

"I knew I couldn't split my time anymore. When God calls, he calls. And he's calling. More importantly, he calls me to be a father. It's OK to be Daddy. Yes, this chapter is closing, but the chapter that's opening is overwhelming. That's what excites me the most."

Lewis could have made the announcement during the offseason.

"I think my fans, my city, I think they deserved for me to just not walk away," he said. "We all get to enjoy what Sunday will feel like, knowing that this will be the last time 52 plays in a uniform in Ravens stadium."