

FOOTBALL  SUPERSTARS

||| BRIAN URLACHER |||



JON STERNGASS

FOOTBALL  *SUPERSTARS*

Brian Urlacher

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Tiki Barber

Tom Brady

Reggie Bush

John Elway

Brett Favre

Eli Manning

Peyton Manning

Dan Marino

Donovan McNabb

Joe Montana

Walter Payton

Adrian Peterson

Jerry Rice

Ben Roethlisberger

Tony Romo

Barry Sanders

LaDainian Tomlinson

Brian Urlacher



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BRIAN URLACHER

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Most Overrated?

When Brian Urlacher was named the National Football League (NFL) Defensive Rookie of the Year in 2000 and the NFL Defensive Player of the Year in 2005, he became only the fifth player in NFL history to win both awards. Yet despite his achievements on the field, many people still found a great deal to criticize. Some detractors cited his lack of ability to take on blocks. A writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times* called him the NFL's most overrated player. When the 2006 season began, analysts noted that Urlacher had never won a play-off game.

In October 2006, a controversial *Sports Illustrated* poll of 361 NFL players voted Urlacher the second-most overrated player in the NFL behind Terrell Owens. Urlacher garnered 8 percent of the vote, which equated to about 29 players.



Reporters asked Urlacher about the poll on October 29 after Chicago had won its seventh straight game by crushing the San Francisco 49ers 41-10. Urlacher gave the only possible answer; he said that how he performed on the field would answer his critics. “Just watch the film,” Urlacher said. “All I can do is go out there and play hard and try and help my team win, and that’s what I’m going to keep doing.”

The film of the San Francisco game was revealing. On a first-quarter blitz, Urlacher deflected a pass up in the air and then made an amazing interception with one hand while falling to the ground with a 300-pound (136-kilogram) San Francisco guard draped all over him. Chicago’s defensive coordinator, Ron Rivera, said that Urlacher’s catch was the type of phenomenal play that just could not be coached. “It’s just being aware—great ball awareness, great athletic ability, and just tremendous effort by him,” Rivera said. “And with his attitude and spirit, he’s going to make plays like that.” That very season, Urlacher would lead the Bears to Super Bowl XLI, their first appearance in the championship game since 1985.

FAN FAVORITE

By the start of the 2011 season, Urlacher had amassed 1,160 tackles, 41.5 sacks, and 18 interceptions while being selected to seven career Pro Bowls. ESPN named him to their All-Decade team in 2009. “At his best,” ESPN wrote, “the 260-pound [118-kilogram] Urlacher was athletic enough to play the deep middle in coverage, yet strong enough to punish receivers and running backs on underneath plays.”

How is it possible that someone with Urlacher’s career accomplishments could be overrated? Perhaps the answer is that Urlacher is more than just a great middle linebacker. For a decade, he has been the symbol of the Chicago Bears. Most NFL teams promote and glorify offensive players like quarterbacks and running backs. In Chicago, Urlacher, a defensive player, is the main star and the face of the franchise. He is

almost worshipped by many of the fans who flock to Soldier Field wearing a jersey or T-shirt with his name on it. Years of ceaseless promotion have led to an inevitable backlash.

THE POLL

An October 2006 *Sports Illustrated* poll asked 361 NFL players, “Who is the NFL’s most overrated player?” The results raised a few eyebrows. Bears linebacker Brian Urlacher was voted second-most overrated, but he was in good company. Linebacker Ray Lewis was a two-time Defensive Player of the Year. Warren Sapp went to the Pro Bowl seven times as a defensive tackle, and Charles Woodson went five times as a cornerback. Quarterbacks Peyton Manning, Eli Manning, and Ben Roethlisberger would all lead their teams to Super Bowl victories. Terrell Owens has 153 receiving touchdowns (as of 2011), second all-time in the NFL. The list seemed to reflect the resentment that many NFL players felt toward the star-making machinery of the league and the media rather than a judgment on the players named.

Here are the results of the poll (showing players with their 2006 teams):

Terrell Owens	Cowboys	10 percent
Brian Urlacher	Bears	8 percent
Ray Lewis	Ravens	7 percent
Michael Vick	Falcons	7 percent
Eli Manning	Giants	4 percent
Keyshawn Johnson	Panthers	4 percent
Peyton Manning	Colts	4 percent
Ben Roethlisberger	Steelers	3 percent
Charles Woodson	Packers	3 percent
Warren Sapp	Raiders	3 percent

Almost as soon as he joined the Bears in 2000, Urlacher became a fan favorite in Chicago. Bears supporters loved the way he closed on a runner or a receiver with his unbelievable speed, slammed him to the ground, and then grinned as he offered a hand to help him up. Urlacher's popularity turned him into as big a force in the marketing arena as he was on the playing field.

In 2002, the Urlacher No. 54 replica jersey was the most popular seller in the NFL, and it has remained one of the biggest sellers for the rest of his career. "We can't keep them in stock," said Carol Langan, the manager of a sports and novelty store in downtown Chicago. "The authentic jersey costs \$200. They come in and buy it without the blink of an eye—two or three times a day." Urlacher jerseys flooded Chicago. "It's just exciting to see all those '54' jerseys out there in the stands," Urlacher said. "It's crazy how people have taken to me."

Urlacher claimed that he did not seek the spotlight and felt uncomfortable doing advertisements. "I just don't like calling attention to myself," he told one reporter. "It's a team sport. I think I've always been brought up to be a humble person, knowing that I can still do things better." There was never any reason to doubt his sincerity.

In his desire to make money from advertisements, however, he seemed to be everywhere to the point of overexposure. He had advertising contracts with Nike, Vitamin Water, Ace Hardware, and AT&T Home Turf. Television viewers saw him on commercials for Campbell's Soup, Old Spice, Domino's Pizza, McDonald's, and MasterCard. He was on the cover of SEGA Sports NFL, and Urlacher bobbleheads were best sellers in Chicago. His picture appeared in every major sports magazine, and he was quoted in countless newspaper and television stories. "He's very quickly becoming like a god in this city," Jay Mariotti, a local sportswriter, marveled.

Urlacher's small-town New Mexico upbringing, his rise to prominence "out of nowhere," and his understated attitude on the field appealed especially to the midwestern Chicago

fans. His easygoing attitude made him extremely marketable in Chicago and throughout the NFL. It was only natural that some NFL players not as fortunately positioned, as well as some football analysts resentful of the unending hype, would decide that Urlacher was overrated.

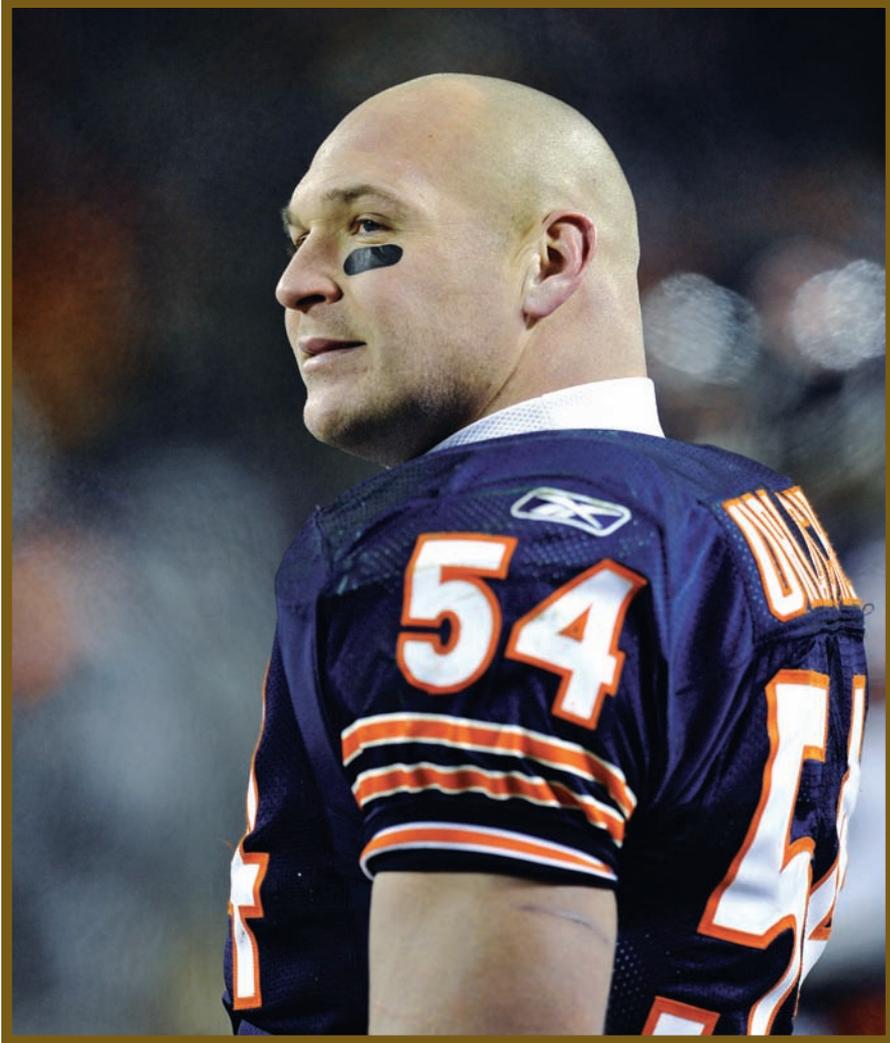
PART OF THE PANTHEON?

How important are postseason accomplishments? The Chicago Bears' Dick Butkus, who played from 1965 to 1973, is widely considered the best middle linebacker of all time. Many people consider his teammate Gale Sayers (1965–1971) the best open-field runner ever. Yet the Bears were mediocre in those years (48–74–4 from 1965 to 1973), and neither superstar ever played in a single postseason game. Should that fact figure into an evaluation of their overall accomplishments?

As of 2011, Urlacher's Bears are 3–4 in the postseason and have played in Super Bowl XLI. (The Bears did not win it, however.) "I want to be remembered as a championship football player," Urlacher said. "But I don't think that, if you don't [win the Super Bowl], you've failed in your career. We've done some good things since I've been here."

None of the media promotion could take away from the fact that Urlacher was a superb football player. His supporters argued that it was not fair to judge him based on the hype he did not create. Instead, all that should count was his performance on the field. That performance, whether measured statistically, by team achievement, or by honors, was quite impressive.

As the Bears' middle linebacker, Urlacher was 6-foot-4 (1.93 meters) and 260 pounds (118 kilograms), with unearthly 4.6-second speed for the 40-yard (36.5-meter) dash. From a town of 10,000 people in New Mexico, Urlacher led his high school to a state championship. He received only two scholarship offers but managed to lead the entire NCAA in tackles as a safety at the University of New Mexico. Chosen by the Chicago



Chicago Bears' defensive linebacker Brian Urlacher is considered one of the best players in the NFL. Some believe he's one of the most overrated. Urlacher, who has been selected to seven Pro Bowls, believes that his performance on the field speaks for itself.

Bears as the ninth pick in the NFL Draft in 2000, he surprised everyone by winning Defensive Rookie of the Year honors.

Since then, Urlacher has been a steady force in his years with the Bears. He recorded more than 100 tackles in seven of

his first eight seasons. In all seven of those years, Urlacher led the Bears in tackles. The only exception was the 2004 season, when injuries prevented him from playing in seven games.

Urlacher had at least four especially great seasons. In 2001, Urlacher led the Bears to the play-offs with 116 tackles and won the *Football Digest* NFL Defensive Player of the Year award. The next year, he had a career-high 151 tackles, the most ever by a Bear since the NFL began recording tackles in 1971.

In 2005, Urlacher led his team to the play-offs again with 121 tackles. For his efforts, he won the Associated Press Defensive Player of the Year award, the highest honor an NFL defensive player can achieve. In 2001 and 2005, Urlacher was the main reason that Chicago allowed the fewest points in the entire NFL. In 2005, the Bears allowed only 202 points in 16 games. The next year, he was the driving force behind the Bears' 13–3 season and their appearance in Super Bowl XLI.

A *pantheon* is a list of all the gods of a particular religion or mythology. Chicago is a football town, and the city's mythology revolves around the fortunes of the Bears. Since the 1950s, Chicago's hard-hitting middle linebackers have defined the team's identity: Bill George, Dick Butkus, and Mike Singletary. All three were NFL Hall of Famers and among the best middle linebackers of all time. Does Brian Urlacher belong with these immortals?

Let's take Urlacher's advice. We can't "look at the film," but we can look back on his life and football career. Then we can judge if Urlacher deserves to join the pantheon of Chicago's middle linebacker demigods.



Early Years

Brian Keith Urlacher was born in Pasco, Washington, on May 25, 1978, to parents Lavoyda and Brad Urlacher. He was a middle child; Sheri was his older sister by a year, and Casey was born 15 months later in 1979. Brian was a plump 11-pound, 8-ounce (5.2-kilogram) baby. Lavoyda Urlacher remembered, “The doctor told me right then, ‘You have a football player on your hands.’”

Lavoyda was only 16 when she married her high school boyfriend, and she had the three children by the time she was 19. The marriage did not last, however, and Lavoyda was divorced by age 25. In 1986, she moved with her children to Lovington, New Mexico, where her family lived. At the time, Brian was eight years old and in second grade.

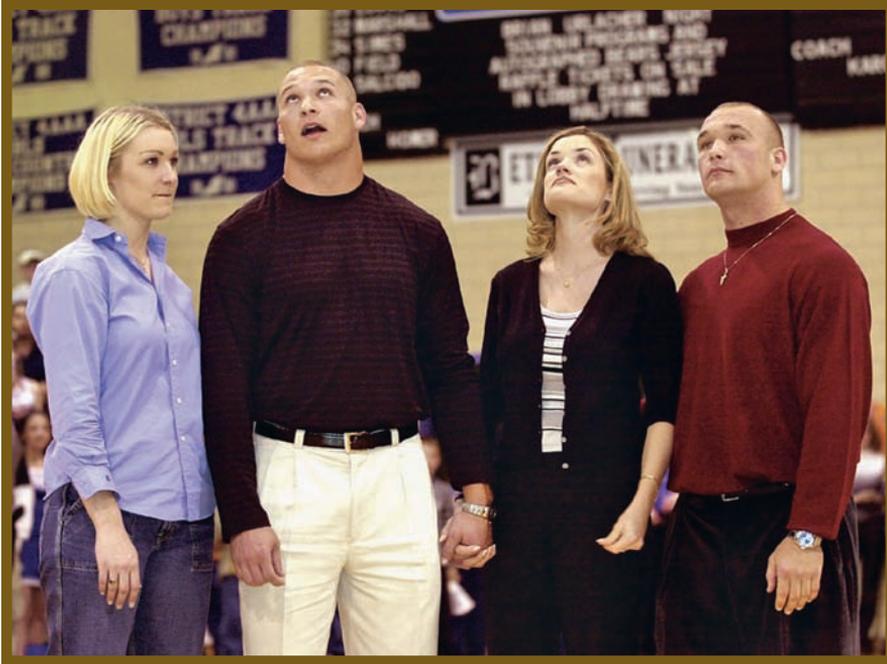


Lavoyda juggled jobs at a laundry, a grocery store, and a convenience store to make ends meet. Sometimes, the children spent more time with their babysitters than with their mother. “We ate a lot of macaroni and cheese during that time,” she said, “but the kids never went without. I had energy and desire, and I swore we were going to make it one way or another.”

Six years after the family moved to Lovington, Lavoyda married Troy Lenard, a part-time cowboy and full-time pipeline worker in the local oil fields. Lenard’s discipline helped add structure that the family needed. “Brian didn’t have much as a kid,” Brandon Ridenour, one of Brian’s childhood friends, said. “His family lived paycheck to paycheck. Every role model he had has been a hardworking type.” Brian once said, “My mom is my heart, but my [step]dad was my role model, the hardest working man I ever knew.”

Urlacher respected his stepfather. “You know, going up in the oil fields, seeing everyone work [there]. . . . My [stepfather] was at work at five in the morning every day. I saw that growing up. That was just the No. 1 thing, just the work ethic.” Brian’s biological father, Brad Urlacher, stayed in Washington, and Brian had almost no contact with him. “I guess it’s good to have a relationship with him,” Brian said, “but he’ll never be considered my real dad as far as I’m concerned.” Urlacher considered Troy Lenard his “real dad.”

As a kid, Brian was especially close to Casey, his younger brother. The boys shared a room with Lenard’s son, David, and the three of them had good times growing up together. Brian and Casey were so competitive that they refused to play baseball on the same team. Brian remembered one incident when “I was pitching and the first time he came up, Casey took me to the fence. Absolutely knocked the crap out of the ball. So the next time up, naturally, I had to bean him. We were always



Urlacher (*second from left*) grew up in a competitive family with hardworking role models. Above, older sister Sheri (*left*) and younger brother Casey (*right*) join Urlacher and his wife, Laurie (*second from right*), in their hometown high school for a ceremony honoring his achievements.

competitive, always wanted to be better than the other guy. We didn't realize how lucky we were to be together."

17,000 OIL RIGS

The place where people grow up influences their character and life choices, and Brian Urlacher was no exception. "I've been brought up that if you want to get something, you're going to have to work for it," Urlacher said. "There's no other way to get it. No one's going to give you anything. That's just the way I live my life." These values partially came from growing up in Lovington, New Mexico, a small town of about 10,000 people. It is tucked in the southeast corner of the state, about 20 miles

(32 kilometers) from the west Texas border. It is so isolated that the nearest major airport is 110 miles (177 kilometers) northeast in Lubbock, Texas.

Lovington is barely more than a few traffic lights surrounded by ranch and farmland and about 17,000 oil rigs. The oil wells date from the 1950s when the Denton oil pool was discovered about nine miles (14 kilometers) northeast of Lovington. The oil industry shaped the economy, labor force, and lifestyle of Lovington. About 2,000 people were living in the town in 1940, but the population increased 500 percent between 1940 and 1960 because of the oil industry. Growth has stagnated since then, and the town has become an oilfield backwater. Just about the only other jobs stem from Lovington's position as the county seat of Lea County. The total population of Lea County could barely fill an average NFL stadium on a Sunday afternoon in the fall.

Opportunities for culture or social life were limited in Lovington. The town was famous in rodeo circles for producing seven world champion calf and team ropers. In general, however, life revolved around the oil wells and the football field. "Here," one teenager, Chantz Clayton, said, "you play football or watch people play football. There's nothing else to do." Since it is so close to Texas, Lovington shared its *Friday Night Lights* culture of high school football. The high school stadium held 6,000 people and was usually full Friday nights during the season.

HIGH SCHOOL CAREER

Because there was not much else to do in Lovington, the Urlacher boys naturally drifted into sports. "We played street football and played basketball, ran track, played baseball, all that good stuff," Urlacher said. He loved football, but he did not particularly excel at it when he was younger. "He was just an average freshman," Jaime Quiñones, his assistant coach, said. "Nothing to indicate what the future would be like."