

Mike Singletary

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 1998

By Joe Horrigan

Following his outstanding football career at Baylor University, many predicted Mike Singletary would be a first-round choice in the 1981 National Football League draft. After all, the two-time All-America choice averaged 15 tackles a game, and in 1978 established a team record with 232 tackles. He was also the only junior selected to the All-Southwest Conference Team of the 1970s. Nonetheless, at the end of round one, Singletary was still undrafted.

"I remember saying 'Lord, if I can play with anybody, let it be the Chicago Bears,'" Singletary recalled. A few moments later his prayer was answered. After swapping second-round picks with the San Francisco 49ers, the Bears moved up two spots in the draft and selected Singletary with their pick. For Singletary, a lifelong fan of the Bears and Hall of Fame linebacker Dick Butkus, it was a dream come true.

Born the tenth and last child of a Pentecostal pastor, Mike grew up in an atmosphere of strict devotion. "My father was stern," he once told a reporter. "We sometimes spent 12 hours in church on Sundays." Neither Mike nor any of his brothers and sisters were allowed to participate in sports. His father felt it was against the tenets of his faith. Finally, when Mike was 12 years old, his parents had a change of heart and the youngest Singletary joined his junior high school team at the only position he ever wanted to play - linebacker.

About the same time, Mike and his family faced some very trying personal times. First his parents divorced, and in the same summer his 22-year-old brother Brady was killed in an auto accident caused by a drunk driver. "Before he died, my brother told me that whatever I do, to always do my best," Mike recalled. "I took it to heart. I had been something of a clown in the classroom but I began to realize I needed some direction."

Realizing that life is precious short, young Mike followed his brother's advice and began to take a more serious approach to his school work, football, and his Bible studies. Although all were important, the Bible was Mike's source of strength and conviction. "Whatever I do in life, the ministry and the Bible will always be with me," he explains. "The ministry - that is me. The Bible always will be the most important factor in my life."

After graduating from Houston's Evan E. Worthing High School, Singletary went on to Baylor University. At Baylor, he racked up 662 career tackles and in 1980, was a Lombardi Trophy finalist.

Although quiet and thoughtful off the field, Mike was a ferocious player on the field. He truly enjoyed the physical aspects of football and made no secret of the fact that he liked hitting the ball carrier. "I like to hit people," he once said, "but, I don't like to hurt people." Singletary hit with such explosive power that he actually cracked 16 helmets during his four years at Baylor. More importantly, however, his hits stopped opposing ball carriers. In fact, in one game against Arkansas, he was credited with an amazing 33 tackles.

"Corky Nelson was my coach at Baylor," Singletary said. "He taught me how to 'punch' and told me how important it was to have the right form and position. I'm not that tall, but sometimes small things are the most dangerous. It's like a snake when he's coiled. You don't know when it'll strike, and whoosh, it's got you."

NO SHORT CUTS

Whether it was at Baylor or with the Bears, Singletary always played full out. It didn't matter if it was practice or a game, he maintained the same level of intensity. "I don't feel it should be looked upon as

doing something extra," he explained. "I honestly feel that that's my job and that's the way I should be. I refuse to take short cuts."

Singletary's no-nonsense approach to the game was ideally suited for the Chicago Bears and fiery head coach Mike Ditka. "The thing I learned from Coach Ditka," Mike recalls, "is to never say die. Just go out and lay it on the line every play. And when you don't have any more, find some way to find more."

As a rookie, Singletary became a starter in the Bears' lineup in the seventh game. In a game against the Kansas City Chiefs - his third as a starter - he earned his first game ball following a remarkable defensive performance in which he recorded 10 tackles and forced a fumble.

Although his outstanding play in 1981 was enough to earn him near unanimous all-rookie recognition, Bears defensive coordinator Buddy Ryan constantly pushed the young linebacker to do more. Ryan, who was initially displeased with the way Singletary handled himself in the "46" defense, rode the rookie mercilessly. For the first year of their association Ryan never even called Singletary by his name. He referred to him only as "Number 50." For nearly two seasons Ryan refused to let Singletary play on third downs or obvious passing situations.

"I really didn't like Buddy for a long time," Singletary said. "But, he taught me about myself, made me reach for things I thought I never had. I never would have achieved what I have without Buddy."

Singletary's tremendous dedication combined with Ryan's constant pressure pushed Mike to become a complete linebacker. By 1983, Singletary, who was named defensive team captain, was playing on all downs and even the acid-tongued Ryan was singing his praises. "Mike is the best linebacker in pro football," said Ryan, who believed that playing middle linebacker in the "46" was more difficult than playing quarterback. "He is dedicated, fast, has lots of ability, and he's smart."

Mike went on to become the cornerstone of Ryan's "46" defense. For 11 consecutive seasons, beginning in 1982, he finished as the team's first or second leading tackler.

A constant force on defense, "Samurai Mike" as he became known, drew comparisons to other great linebackers. "He's like Butkus and Bill George and Joe Schmidt and guys like that," Ditka once remarked. "Except," he continued, "he has some qualities they didn't have."

Former San Francisco 49ers head coach George Seifert compared the Bears linebacker to yet another Hall of Famer. "Mike is the modern-day Ray Nitschke," he said. "He has set the standard for what coaches and scouts look for in inside linebackers."

One of Mike's other qualities was his preparation for "big" games. No one studied an opponent more thoroughly than did Singletary. In fact, he had a Beta system installed in his home so that he could take game tapes home to study. He was consistently the first to report in the morning and the last to leave in the evening. So intense were his preparation routines that the defensive standout actually had to practice relaxation exercises to keep from hyperventilating.

WHEN HE TALKS ...

As the defensive captain and signal caller, Singletary was the "man" on defense. "On defense he is the glue," said quarterback Jim McMahon. "When he talks, people listen."

Once, in a team meeting prior to the 1985 NFC Championship Game with the Los Angeles Rams, the usually soft-spoken Singletary delivered a pep talk to his defensive teammates. According to Ditka, who was conducting the offensive team meeting in an adjacent room, Mike gave his teammates "a little Knute Rockne talk." Although his impromptu speech began on an even keel, by the time it was over, players were shouting and tossing tables and chairs.

Singletary carried the emotion of the meeting to the playing field the next day. The Rams and their star running back Eric Dickerson were essentially shut down by the Bears "46." On a third-and-one with just over two minutes remaining in the first quarter, Dickerson took a handoff and started for an opening at left guard. When he arrived, he was met by the hard-charging Singletary who dropped the all-pro running back for a one yard loss. "Mike hit Dickerson so hard," recounted fellow Bears' linebacker Wilber

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 4 (1998)

Marshall, "I don't think he knew where he was." Dickerson went on to gain just 46 yards as the Bears defeated the Rams 24-0.

"To me, sacking the quarterback isn't that big a deal," Singletary offered. "When I get to hit a great back in the hole or when I knock down or intercept a pass, that's where I get my thrill."

For his play during the 1985 season - one in which the Bears finished 15-1 - he was named NFL Defensive Player of the Year. That season he had 113 tackles and recorded a career-best 3 sacks in a single game versus the New England Patriots. He was the driving force of a defense that allowed fewer than 11 points per game. In the playoffs leading up to the Bears Super Bowl XX victory over the Patriots, Singletary recorded 13 tackles and a quarterback sack. In the Super Bowl he continued his stalwart defensive play, recovering two New England fumbles, as the Bears held the Patriots to a record low seven yards rushing while coasting to a 46-10 victory.

LIKE WINE

A constant force on defense, Singletary's play seemed to improve with each season. In 1988 he was named NFL Defensive Player of the Year for a second time. He had his best statistical day as a pro in 1990 in a game against the Denver Broncos when he was credited with 20 tackles, 10 of which were solo efforts. "I don't know if Mike ever played a better season for us than he did in 1990," remarked Ditka. "His intensity, his zeal to do everything perfectly, make him our leader by example."

A model of consistency, Singletary actually had the exact number of tackles in 1990 as he did in 1989. Always in peak condition and despite his all-out hard-hitting style of play, the durable linebacker missed just two games during his 12-year career, both in 1986.

"Mike is an extremely focused person," said Bears quarterback Mike Tomczak. "Even when we had that streak in which we were 18-1, Mike was always looking at film, seeing how he could get better."

Throughout all of his successes, Singletary maintained a humble perspective and a willingness to accept criticism and new ideas. "That's what has kept him at a peak," remarked Bears linebackers coach Dave McGinnis during a 1991 interview. "He's still willing to take coaching and listen to new ideas. It's what sets him apart from other guys who reach so-called star quality."

Following the 1992 season, however, Mike decided it was time to call it quits. He retired from pro football with a resume that included being named All-Pro eight times and All-NFC nine times. His 10 Pro Bowl selections was a Bears' record and his 172 career starts was second only to Walter Payton.

His continuous efforts to always be the best he could be, earned him the respect and admiration of his teammates, coaches, and football fans everywhere. And in 1998, in his first year of eligibility, Mike Singletary was rewarded with pro football's ultimate honor, election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Michael Singletary

Linebacker. 6'0", 230. Baylor.

Evan E. Worthing High School, Houston, Texas

Born October 9, 1958, Houston, Texas

<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Gm</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Gm</u>
1981	ChiB	16	1987	ChiB	12
1982	ChiB	9	1988	ChiB	16
1983	ChiB	16	1989	ChiB	16
1984	ChiB	16	1990	ChiB	16
1985	ChiB	16	<u>1991</u>	<u>ChiB</u>	<u>16</u>
1986	ChiB	14	<u>11 years</u>		<u>179</u>