

HOWIE LONG

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2000

By Joe Horrigan

Players the caliber of Howie Long are supposed to be found in the first round of the National Football League draft after an outstanding career at a major college or university. But when the Oakland Raiders selected the 6-5, 270-pound Long in the second round of the 1981 draft, he was considered a “diamond in the rough.”

The Raiders selected Long following his career at Villanova where his stock rose after being named Most Valuable Player in the 1980 Blue-Gray Game. What the Raiders scouts saw at that time was a young untrained talent with a burning desire to be the best. Still, his future as a pro seemed uncertain.

Determined to succeed, Howie set personal goals and worked hard to achieve them. “My goal as a rookie was simply to make the team,” he said in 1984. “My second year I wanted to be a starter. Then, my third year I wanted to make the Pro Bowl.” Having achieved each of those goals he was asked if he had a new one. Without hesitation the four-year veteran defensive end replied, “I want to be a Hall of Famer. I want it desperately.”

Those who knew Long understood that his desire to be a Hall of Famer, wasn’t just a burst of bravado, but rather a clear objective – one that he would in fact achieve 16 years later as a member of the Hall of Fame Class of 2000.

Howie Long’s rise to pro football stardom and eventual Hall of Fame election was not an easy journey. Raised in the tough, blue-collar town of Charlestown, Massachusetts, outside of Boston, his parents divorced when he was twelve years old. He went to live with his grandmother and then a succession of aunts and uncles.

When he was 14, he moved in with an aunt and uncle in the Boston suburb of Milford and began attending Milford High School.

At Milford, Long turned his sometimes-misdirected energies to sports. He ran track and played football and basketball. “I wasn’t an aggressive kid,” Long said of his youth. “I wasn’t involved in sports when I was younger. The separation in my family and being raised by my grandmother had its positive and negative sides. The positive side was my grandmother brought me up to be a caring individual. I’ve never been the type of person who takes advantage of smaller or weaker people. On the negative side, I was never pushed into anything.”

But once he arrived at Milford High School all that began to change. Football coach Dick Corbin made a real impact on young Howie’s life. When Corbin saw the then 6-3, 220-pound sophomore in the school hallway, he invited him to try out for the football team.

“I was shocked that I was good at it,” Long said. I’d never played on a team until high school. It gave me a sense of belonging, a focus, and helped build my confidence. I never imagined myself going on to anything in football – it wasn’t even a lifetime dream of mine. It was just something that more or less, as time went by, I made a transition to.”

Long’s transition took him to Villanova on an athletic scholarship, where he not only excelled at football, but was also the Northern Collegiate boxing champion. Although he matured considerably at Villanova, leading the team in sacks as a sophomore and senior, his football skills didn’t capture the attention of many pro scouts, since the school was hardly a major college football showcase program.

“Villanova is a terrific school, but its football program had a lot of problems when I was there,” Long stated. But following his MVP performance in the Blue-Gray Game, scouts descended on him “by the paneloads.”

"I had to run for so many scouts, so many more scouts than the average lineman from a big program," he reflected. "I went to a small school and there were doubts about my ability."

THE RAIDERS TAKE A CHANCE

It was the Raiders defensive line coach Earl Leggett, who scouted Long and lobbied hard for him in a heated battle with the team's other coaches during the 1981 draft.

"I think there was a possibility he still would have been around in the third round," Leggett said. "Nobody was really after him. But I didn't want to take a chance. I was pushing him real hard on draft day."

The Raiders took Long after using their two first-round picks on defensive back Ted Watts and tackle Curt Marsh, both of whom were out of pro football after five seasons.

"Earl Leggett is responsible for Howie Long the football player, more than anyone," Long proclaimed. "If it weren't for Earl Leggett, I wouldn't be much, just another Joe Blow. And that's a fact."

Leggett made Howie his personal project. He worked the raw-boned rookie at virtually every line position. "Everyday at practice it was a new position," Long recalled. "I played on the nose. I played right end, left end, left tackle, and right tackle. I couldn't understand what he was doing at the time. A lot of people were questioning it because I wasn't settling in at one position. So how could I grow as a player?"

What Leggett was doing was taking advantage of Long's strength, quickness, and intense desire. "We were just going to try to develop those talents, bring him along slowly, see how he progressed. Luckily, he learned quick." In the process Leggett made Long one of the most versatile defensive linemen in the league.

Although he didn't become an immediate starter his first year in Oakland, Howie's versatility paid off. He led the team in sacks as a rookie playing both end and tackle. Halfway through his second season – first for the Raiders in Los Angeles – Leggett moved him into a starting role. The "diamond in the rough" was about to emerge as a real gem.

In 1983, Long recorded a career high 13 sacks, including five in one game against the Washington Redskins, a team the Raiders would again face in Super Bowl XVIII. In that game, Howie recorded four solo tackles and one assist as Los Angeles trampled the Redskins 38-9. Long was named All-Pro and to the first of his eight Pro Bowls. He became just the second Raider defensive lineman to earn the post-season honor.

"There are guys who are bigger, guys who are stronger, guys who are meaner," said teammate Matt Millen. "But none of them puts it together the way he does. Nobody has his blend. He does everything."

In 1984, Long continued his climb to the upper echelon of the NFL with a season's performance that included 58 tackles, 12 sacks, and nine passes defensed. He was again named All-Pro and selected to play in the Pro Bowl, and the NFL Alumni named him the NFL Defensive Lineman of the Year.

Howie's superlative play not only drew the attention of the public and the media, but more importantly from his peers whom recognized him as a force to be reckoned. Although he consistently ranked near the top in league sack totals, he played the run just as well.

Unfortunately, that meant that on many occasions he would be double and even triple teamed. Teams also found it simply easier to avoid running plays to his side of the line. Still, in 1985 he managed to record 10 quarterback sacks, with at least one in eight games.

"I don't think I had two or three running plays directed at me all year," he said. "On some passing plays, I'd shuck the tackle, get by the tight end, then have the halfback chop me. It was a great compliment, I guess, but it got frustrating."

Frustrating or not, Long was clearly a dominant player who could single-handedly change the course of a game. "To me, Long is the best defensive end in the game," said then-St. Louis Cardinals head coach Jim Hanifan. "He reminds me of a young Randy White."

Always in top condition, Long never missed a game due to injury until midway through the 1986 season when he missed three games, ending a streak of 81 consecutive games played. Nevertheless his outstanding play before and after his injury layoff earned him his fourth straight starting assignment at defensive end in the Pro Bowl. He was also voted the NFL Defensive Player of the Year by fans and a national media panel.

The next two seasons, however, were difficult ones for Long. A strike-shortened 1987 season and an injury plagued 1988 campaign saw Howie's defensive statistics drop. The labor unrest of the 1987 season seemed to affect not just Long, but the entire team. "We're not the same club that went out on strike," said Earl Leggett referring to his defense. "But, they're starting to play harder. All of 'em are playing a hell of a lot harder each week." Howie played well enough to be named to his fifth consecutive Pro Bowl team. Even so, skeptics began to openly suggest that his play was not up to the level it had been and that his career might be headed in the wrong direction.

An injury, originally diagnosed as a calf strain, sidelined Long for the final nine games of the following season. Each week, coaches, teammates, and reporters asked when he might return to play. What no one realized at the time was that the injury, which eventually required surgery, was far more serious than first thought. Long had completely blown his calf and blood was leaking into the cavity of his lower leg.

Incredibly, the cycle almost repeated itself the next season, when Howie ripped the ligaments in his ankle during training camp. Determined, he attempted to play despite the injury.

"The fact is, when you're not healthy, you can't play well," he explained after the season. "It's all a matter of health . . . I take pride in what I do. I work hard. But when your calf blows, when ligaments tear in your ankle, there's nothing you can do."

New head coach Art Shell told his star lineman, friend, and former teammate, to take time to heal. While appreciative of his understanding, an impatient Long was back in the starting lineup after just a two-week layoff. When he returned, albeit still very sore, he played with a vengeance. Almost immediately he began to look like his old self. Although he started just 11 games, he recorded five sacks and generally wreaked havoc on opposing offenses. His resurgence didn't go unnoticed. The nine-year veteran was rewarded with his sixth Pro Bowl selection.

"I'm more proud of that Pro Bowl than any other, after being injured and everyone counting me out," he proudly stated. "I was challenged and accepted the challenge," he said in reference to the earlier speculation that his play had deteriorated.

As if to accentuate the fact that he was all the way back, the once-again-healthy defensive end began the 1990 season with a *Howie Long* game. Against the Denver Broncos, he recorded six solo tackles, one assist, two sacks, a forced fumble and recovery, and applied quarterback pressure that helped produce an interception and a Raiders touchdown.

The next week in Seattle, however, with 4:40 remaining in the third quarter, disaster struck. On a routine play, Howie caught his foot on a seam in the artificial surface under a pile of players. "I just couldn't get my foot out," he said. "It felt like 27 seconds." The result was a sprained right knee, a broken bone in his foot and the injured reserve list. Once again, naysayers speculated that it was the end for the Raiders' defensive star. Projected to be out for at least six weeks, he was back after just four. His return to the lineup was a physical and emotional lift that helped propel the Raiders to the playoffs.

Far from over, his career continued for three more very productive seasons. During that period he added two more Pro Bowl appearances to his resume, tying Art Shell's team record of eight.

Although he had been considering retirement for some time, when he learned he had tied Shell's Pro Bowl mark, he decided it was time to call it quits. "Many things drive you," he said at his retirement announcement. "You want to be the best at what you do. You want to win a world championship and you want to go to the Pro Bowl. I wanted to be the Art Shell of the defensive line for the Raiders."

Howie Long has always been a man with goals and willing to go the extra mile to achieve them. Few would argue with his success.