

NEAL OLKEWICZ

By Michael Richman, Redskins Insider Correspondent

The trend was so familiar in coach Joe Gibbs' era. The Redskins roster was dotted with names of late draft picks and unheralded free agents other teams didn't want. Even so, such players as Jeff Bostic, Joe Jacoby, Mel Kaufman, Monte Coleman, Gary Clark, Clint Didier and Darryl Grant made seismic impacts for one of the NFL's elite squads.

So did Neal Olkewicz.

Signed as a free agent in 1979, Olkewicz was a Redskins middle linebacker for 11 seasons, resembling an immovable object. He started 135 of 140 games from 1980 to 1988, including 14 starts in post-season games, and posted nearly 1,500 career tackles. He retired after the 1989 season, but not before contributing to Redskins teams that won two of three trips to the Super Bowl, three NFC championships and four NFC East titles.

During that glory period, what the Redskins lacked in blue-chip stars they replaced with less-touted players who exerted a powerful work ethic and will to win. The starting linebacking corps was one unit personifying that attitude. In addition to Olkewicz, the Redskins acquired Kaufman as a free agent and chose Coleman in the 11th round and Rich Milot in the seventh.

Those players relished being overachievers.

"We kind of fed off of each other," Olkewicz told *Redskins Insider*. "It was kind of neat to have that many guys who made it the hard way. It was part of the personality of our team. We had a lot of guys like that. We were a bunch of fighters who worked hard and didn't give in. A lot of it showed up in the way we won games."

The Redskins got their first true look at Olkewicz when he was a senior at the University of Maryland, where scout Mike Allman evaluated players at the behest of general Manager Bobby Beathard. Although Olkewicz would set a Terrapins single-season record for tackles (188), the 6-foot, 213-pounder was small and slow compared with the average NFL linebacker. He was told he might be a late-round draft pick.

Olkewicz wasn't even that optimistic.

"I was not waiting to be drafted," he said. "I knew if I had a chance it would be as a free agent. I basically expected to be a special teams player for my career."

Olkewicz evolved into much more than that. He credits Beathard, who had a knack for sensing talent in players who were long shots to make it in pro football, for having faith in his ability.

"He looked past a lot of the straight numbers and was a good judge of football players," Olkewicz said. "Sometimes, speed, height and other requirements played such a big part that people just looked at that. He looked at lots of other things."

Olkewicz beat out veterans Harold McClinton and Mike Curtis in 1979 to win a roster spot. He moved into the starting lineup six games into the season. He collected a career-high 187.5 tackles in 1981, and one of his plays that season stands out.

Washington began the year 0-5, and there were rumblings about the job security of Gibbs, a first-year coach. Olkewicz helped silence the pessimists, intercepting a pass and returning it 10 yards for a touchdown in the Redskins 24-7 victory over the Chicago Bears. It was one of his seven career interceptions, and his only touchdown.

"That was really the turnaround in all of our careers, but Gibbs, especially, because he was feeling the heat," Olkewicz said. "A lot of people thought we weren't going to win a game, and then everything kind of turned around."

It was like a 180-degree flip. The Redskins won seven of their next 10 games to finish 8-8. They then reached two straight Super Bowls, beating Miami, 27-17, in Super Bowl XVII and losing to the Los Angeles Raiders, 38-9, in Super Bowl XVIII. Washington returned to the NFL championship game in the 1987 season, routing Denver, 42-10, in Super Bowl XXII.

Although Olkewicz gained about 15 pounds in the NFL, he was still considered small for his position, and he never became any quicker. But he compensated for his deficiencies with savvy. He finished first or second on the team in tackles in eight of his 11 seasons.

"When you draw up Neil physically, he's not your typical middle linebacker," Gibbs once said. "He's not a giant and doesn't run super fast. But he gets the most out of his ability. He's a good, instinctive player. He gets the job done."

Year after year, No. 52 could be seen starting at middle linebacker for the Washington Redskins. It was virtually impossible for rookies and veterans to beat him out in training camp.

"You've heard of the road to the Final Four? Well, the road to middle linebacker starts in Carlisle and goes right through Neil

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Olkewicz, not around him, before you get to RFK [Stadium]," former Redskins defensive coordinator Larry Peccatiello said.

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"You've got to beat the guy out. He's the incumbent and you've got to knock him out. Nobody's done that."

By the 1989 season, Olkewicz knew his career was nearly over. The Redskins were phasing him out in favor of second-year player Greg Manusky, and Olkewicz accepted the demotion with dignity. Today, he sounds like a man privileged to have played for the 1980s Redskins.

"It was hard to realize it at the time, but football was still football, it wasn't quite as much a business as today," he said. "We had a good group of guys who really liked each other and really liked to play football. The money just started getting good. But even with the money players make today, I'm glad I played when I did. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Since retirement, Olkewicz, 45, has pursued a number of business ventures. He now operates Olkewicz Vending, which services businesses and schools in the Washington metro area with snack and soda machines. He lives in Brookeville, Md.

NEAL OLKEWICZ	LB
Olkewicz, Neal	6-0, 230
Maryland	HS: Phoenixville [PA]
<u>B: 1 / 30 / 1957, Phoenixville, PA</u>	

1979 Was 16	1983 Was 16	1987 Was 10
1980 Was 12	1984 Was 16	1988 Was 16
1981 Was 14	1985 Was 16	1989 Was 9
1982 Was 9	1986 Was 16	