

# Ngata chasing down place among NFL's elite defensive tackles

Still tough against the run, fifth-year veteran causes havoc for quarterbacks

Don Markus, The Baltimore Sun

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Haloti Ngata celebrates on the field after the Ravens' 17-14 victory over the Steelers in Week 4. (Kenneth K. Lam / Baltimore Sun Phoyo / September 30, 2010)

**Jarret Johnson** senses it from opposing offensive linemen when they see **Haloti Ngata** standing in front of them.

"There are times that you'll hear guys joking during TV timeouts, saying, 'Hey 92, why don't you go to the other side?'" the Ravens linebacker said. "There's a lot of truth to what they're saying. They don't want to deal with the big guy. He's a big, physical presence, and he tosses guys around."

That was obvious Sunday in Pittsburgh.

Coming off his and the defensive line's worst performance of the season against the **Cleveland Browns**, the 6-foot-4, 350-pound defensive tackle sacked **Steelers** quarterback **Charlie Batch** on the game's first series and finished with a career-high 11 tackles, including two for losses, despite often being double-teamed. He also had two quarterback hurries.

"I was able to make some plays," Ngata said in his typical low-key manner after the **Ravens'** 17-14 victory at Heinz Field. "They kept running in my way, and I was able to make those plays."

They were added to a list of key plays Ngata had already made in his fifth season with the Ravens, beginning with a key third-down sack of **New York Jets** quarterback **Mark Sanchez** in the fourth quarter of the season opener to help preserve a one-point win.

With 19 solo tackles this season, Ngata is one behind linebacker **Ray Lewis** for the team lead. And with 26 tackles overall, Ngata is tied with Justin Tuck of the **New York Giants** and former Ravens

teammate Dwan Edwards, now with the **Buffalo Bills**, for the most by a defensive lineman.

Injuries to the Browns' Shaun Rogers and the Jets' Kris Jenkins, along with the controversy that has enveloped Albert Haynesworth with the **Washington Redskins**, has opened the door for someone else to take up the mantle as the best defensive tackle in the league.

Bengals receiver **Chad Ochocinco** threw his support behind Ngata before the game in Cincinnati last month, calling Ngata "the best damn defensive tackle in the league." Denver coach Josh McDaniels, whose Broncos visit M&T Bank Stadium on Sunday, gave a similar endorsement this week.

"Ngata is — I think — playing as good as any defensive lineman in football," McDaniels said Wednesday in a conference call with reporters in Owings Mills. "There's no question about it. We certainly have to be mindful of how we're trying to handle him, how we're trying to block him — not only in the running game, but in pass protection because he's shown to be very disruptive in both phases of his game. So he's tremendously talented. Like I said, one of the best defensive linemen that we're going to play all season, if not the best."

Asked about the number of double-teams Ngata is facing after being held to three tackles against the Browns, Ravens coach John Harbaugh said: "Yeah, they're probably very much concerned with Haloti and where he's at. I'm sure they always know where he's at. You've got to account for him on every play — pass and run. He's still really hard to block. It's not like he's getting blocked that effectively."

Ravens defensive line coach Clarence Brooks can relate to what opponents face in terms of Ngata's sheer strength.

"You'll be clowning around with him sometimes and what to him is a nudge, you'll say 'Oh man,'" Brooks joked, massaging his shoulder for effect. "The first thing I say about him is that he's an outstanding person. He's a joy to be around. On Sunday, between the lines, he's a little different."

Soft-spoken off the field, Ngata acknowledged earlier this season that "when I'm on the field, something does turn on and I don't like people crossing me. I just like to kind of destroy somebody, that's basically what it is. I don't like to do much talking. I just like to go out and help other people make plays."

Or make them himself, as evidenced by what Ngata did Sunday against the Steelers. As he demonstrated on the opening possession, when he pushed his way through a double team to get to Batch, Ngata has improved his technique as a pass rusher.

"I always knew I was good at stopping the run, and I always knew I had to work on rushing the

passer," said Ngata, who averaged 46 tackles his first four seasons and had 6.5 sacks in that span. "I feel like I still need more improvement on that. With my techniques as a pass rusher, I definitely felt more comfortable this year than any other year."

Said Ravens defensive coordinator Greg Mattison: "We've always felt he could be as good a pass rusher as he is against the run. It's just him turning the switch on, saying this is a passing situation. Probably sometimes he's too unselfish. He wants to make sure he does his part on the run and doesn't turn it loose like some guys will."

Lewis has admired Ngata's physical talents since the former Oregon star was drafted in the first round and No. 12 overall in 2006, but he now sees a more complete player emerging.

"He kind of reminds you of **Sam Adams**, that quick explosion and get off the ball and destroy anything in front of him," Lewis said recently. "Their feet are so good. Haloti is taking D-tackle to the next level as far as his athleticism. If he keeps playing the game and keep learning more and more, that's what's going to make him way more dominant."

Ngata is starting to get the respect and recognition that seemed to elude him his first three years in the league. Despite making only 35 tackles, including just one sack, and missing two games because of an ankle injury last season, Ngata was selected by his peers to his first Pro Bowl. Another invitation seems likely this season.

"When teams are game-planning for you, it opens up opportunities for other guys," said Ngata, who is in the final year of his contract and could be courted the way Haynesworth was by the Redskins before signing a seven-year, \$100 million deal in 2009. "It does open up other guys to make plays and get in the backfield. It's a good feeling. It's great to be one of those guys that teams are going to game-plan for."

Brooks, who was on **Brian Billick's** staff when Ngata was drafted, has witnessed Ngata's evolution from a player who had jaw-dropping quickness for a big man — returning one of his three career interceptions 60 yards as a rookie — to one who teams are preparing for as much as they do for Lewis or **Terrell Suggs**, if not more.

"The guy has gotten better just about almost every time he's hit the football field since he's been here," Brooks said.

Asked whether Ngata has become unstoppable, Brooks said: "It's hard to say unstoppable because there's always somebody on the other side who can work at it. He has that potential, he's got the ability to do that."