

Ngata has become big deal for Ravens

Defensive lineman ranks fifth on the team with 34 tackles

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To truly understand how special Haloti Ngata is at stopping ball carriers, it's necessary to watch when the Ravens defensive tackle was once one himself.

His teammates saw a video of Ngata playing for his high school rugby team, a collection of jaw-dropping highlights that makes everyone appreciate his rare combination of power and agility.

One clip shows Ngata plowing his way upfield with the ball, carrying four players on his shoulders and back.

In another one, he is weaving his way around opponents, acting as if he is Jim Brown. Some try to tackle him by diving low, but their helmet-less heads just end up bouncing off Ngata's knees.

"I would sometimes turn around and see two or three guys down on the ground holding their head," Ngata said. "It's always fun after you hit guys to see that look like, 'I just got ran over by something I shouldn't have run in front of.'"

The 345-pound anchor for the NFL's top-ranked run defense, Ngata has been giving the same headaches to teams around the league, especially tomorrow's AFC North rival.

It was in 2006 when the Cleveland Browns had their chance to draft Ngata with the 12th overall pick, but they chose to swap spots with the Ravens to slide back to No. 13 and also get the Ravens' sixth-round selection.

Ngata has since blossomed into one of the best defensive tackles in the NFL, turning a strong run defense into a superior one.

In the three seasons before Ngata's arrival (2003 to 2005), the Ravens never ranked higher than sixth against the run. In the three seasons with Ngata, their run defense has never dropped lower than No. 2.

"He was a once-every-10-year type of a guy coming through the draft," defensive coordinator Rex Ryan said. "It was a no-brainer for us. We wouldn't trade our guy, that's for sure."

One of the staples of the Ravens' great defenses of the past has been the big men up front, from Tony Siragusa eating up space to Sam Adams blasting up the middle.

What places Ngata in the elite class are his unusual feet, and it has nothing to do with his size 16EEEEEE shoes -- which are so huge they come shipped one to a box.

While most behemoth tackles plug gaps, Ngata is so light on his feet that it seems as if he glides down the line of scrimmage to chase down running backs. This athleticism has led Ryan to use Ngata as a linebacker at times in the past.

He is fifth on the Ravens with 34 tackles, which is tops among their defensive linemen.

"I know Haloti can't beat me in a foot race," defensive end Trevor Pryce said. "But the fact that he could even

try at 345 pounds is pretty amazing."

Before he can turn on his quickness, Ngata has to turn offensive linemen aside.

When Pryce watched Ngata flip around blockers with one arm, he thought it was because Ngata was just bigger than everybody else.

But Ngata explained how he used his lower-body strength as leverage. His thighs measure between 32 and 34 inches, the size of many people's waists.

"As big and strong as he is, he knows how to use it," Pryce said. "That's what makes him a specimen like he is. That's what makes him special. Real special."

When Ngata reaches running backs, the collisions are usually devastating.

It's like the ball carrier bounces off a 6-foot-4 wall.

"That's why I play football. I just love to hit," the soft-spoken Ngata said with a smile. "I just love that feeling of that loud crack. It's kind of like a drug. I want to keep doing it over and over."

It finally seems Ngata is becoming a hit in the NFL. After falling short of the Pro Bowl in his first two seasons, he is generating more buzz this year.

He has even won over the Browns, who eventually took pass rusher Kamerion Wimbley (17 sacks in 39 career games) with their first-round pick in the 2006 draft.

"I'm really impressed with how Ngata has done," Cleveland coach Romeo Crennel said. "I liked him coming out [of Oregon], and ever since he has been with [the Ravens], I've seen him make progress as a player. He is a tremendous force."

In the Ravens' eyes, Ngata has surpassed the likes of Shaun Rogers, Casey Hampton and Vince Wilfork.

"You hear about the all-hype team with Vince Wilfork," Ryan said. "You watch the tape and you throw up compared to watching Haloti. To me, we'll take this guy over anyone."

Said middle linebacker Ray Lewis, who roams free because Ngata draws double teams: "Haloti is one of those special ones. He has the perfect size; he has the perfect ability. I just think his upside is way bigger than anything he's done so far."

It'll be interesting to see where Ngata goes from here.

The Ravens used Ngata as a blocking tight end on their goal-line offense last Sunday. The move worked, as Willis McGahee cut inside Ngata's block for a 1-yard touchdown run.

So, could Ngata shift to the backfield? Could he eventually get the ball?

"He's about as good a big man as I have been around," offensive coordinator Cam Cameron said.

To make his case, Ngata might even take his rugby video to Cameron. But whether he gets the ball or not, Ngata knows this is the place where he was meant to be.

"I feel like I fit here so well," Ngata said. "I wouldn't be the same player [in Cleveland]. I'm just happy I am here. Everything just fell in place for me."

Sun reporter Edward Lee contributed to this article.