



Ngata thriving under the radar for Ravens



By Jeffri Chadiha
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Since the voting for this year's Pro Bowl wraps up early next week, it's time to start speculating on who's going to get snubbed. The NFC already looks like it has a logjam at both running back and defensive end, especially since both positions have about six worthy candidates. In the AFC, the biggest question will involve defensive tackle, meaning Baltimore's [Haloti Ngata](#) once again might be ignored. And that literally would be a shame if it happened.

The problem for Ngata is that he's having another great year in a conference that is flush with interior talent. We know former Carolina Panthers Pro Bowler Kris Jenkins has been reborn with the New York Jets. We've seen how motivated Shaun Rogers suddenly has become for a Cleveland Browns team that hasn't had much else to smile about this year. We also realize that Tennessee's Albert Haynesworth will get plenty of votes for Defensive Player of the Year and that San Diego nose tackle Jamal Williams has been to three straight Pro Bowls.

But here's what you have to understand about Ngata: He's every bit as talented and as vital to his team's success as those more recognizable names. This year he has produced strong numbers -- 41 tackles, one sack and two interceptions -- for a defense that ranks second overall in the NFL and third against the run.

"He's been a huge part of our success," said Ravens defensive coordinator Rex Ryan. "He's started from day one and he's only gotten better and better. Now I know there are some great defensive tackles in the league, but I wouldn't trade this guy for anybody."

To his credit, Ngata hasn't let his lack of acclaim bother him. He understands that he toils for a defense with high-profile players (like Ray Lewis, Ed Reed and Terrell Suggs) and that he probably wasn't recognizable enough to earn a trip to Hawaii last year. As he said, "I know it's hard to make it to the Pro Bowl, and that's why I just focus on doing my job to help this team win. But I have been hearing a lot more about my chances this year. So I'm starting to feel like people appreciate what I do."

What Ngata does is essentially a little bit of everything for the Ravens. On some downs he'll be asked to occupy blockers so Lewis and his fellow linebackers can roam free to make tackles. On others Ngata will be told to penetrate gaps and blow up plays. Ryan actually became so enamored with Ngata's athleticism -- and this was after the coach watched film of the 6-foot-4, 345-pound defender bowling over opponents as a high school rugby player -- that Ryan added some sets that allow Ngata to blitz.

All these roles have turned Ngata into a favorite during defensive film sessions, and Ryan often hears his players ask for some of Ngata's highlights to be replayed over and over. In fact, one of Ngata's most notable moments came in a 41-13 win over Houston, when he intercepted a Sage Rosenfels pass after dropping into coverage. It also probably won't take long for the Ravens to have some fun with him now that he's a part of Baltimore's goal-line package as well.

These are some of the reasons why Ryan calls Ngata "the kind of player who comes along once every 10 years." Opponents are just as quick to pass out the compliments.

"The guy really is powerful," said New York Giants left tackle Dave Diehl. "And he knows how to use his hands to create problems for offensive linemen. He's the kind of guy who can disrupt an offensive scheme because you can't take the chance of not double-teaming him. And when you do that, he opens up opportunities for somebody else."

The scary thing about Ngata is that he's improving even faster than the Ravens thought he might when they drafted him 12th overall out of Oregon in the 2006 draft. He admits that he was a little hesitant as a rookie because the game moved so quickly.

"I felt lost at first because everything was happening fast and the coaches expected you to learn the plays fast," he said. But once Ngata hit his stride -- which in his estimation happened in the second half of last season -- he became dominant.

Today, Ryan said that Ngata is so knowledgeable about the Ravens' defense that Ngata probably knows exactly what the cornerbacks are doing on every down. Ngata also has found a comfort zone in a Baltimore locker room filled with outsized personalities. For a low-key, soft-spoken guy from Utah, it wasn't easy to be around so many alpha male types at first. But now he'll joke and poke fun whenever he gets a chance to razz a teammate.

Those same players are also quick to sing Ngata's praises to anybody who will listen. They know he does the dirty work and that few people really get to see how productive he is for this team. So now they're hoping he gets his due for one obvious reason: They know their defense wouldn't be nearly as good if he wasn't a part of that unit.

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