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Ngata chance

HE MAY NOT BE A HOUSEHOLD NAME, BUT GETTING PAST MASSIVE RAVENS DL HALOTI NGATA IS ANYTHING BUT EASY

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"OK, here's a deal," Ravens DL coach Clarence Brooks was saying recently. The subject was DT Haloti Ngata, one of Brooks' favorite topics.

"We're fooling around in pre-practice a couple weeks ago," Brooks said of the 6-4, 350-pound Ngata, the Ravens' most impactful defensive player. "... So the punter (Sam Koch) is out there warming up. So (Ngata) comes out and says, 'Hey, kick one.' The punter just kind of lazily punts the ball, and Haloti just kind of settles under it and catches the punt. And looks very natural doing it."

The notion of a 350-pound punt returner is surprising ... except when it's Ngata who's returning the punts.

This is someone whom the Ravens have used on offense. This is someone who drops into coverage with the fluidity of a linebacker.

This is Haloti Ngata, the most unique — and perhaps most dominant — interior lineman in the game.

Immensely athletic and strong, Ngata, 26, has 46 tackles and five sacks in nine games this season. He has taken a major step forward as a pass rusher, already exceeding his career high in sacks. With the ability to play several spots along the line, Ngata, a fifth-year pro from Oregon, is a vital part of a traditionally stout Ravens defense known for varying its looks.

"He's playing at another level," Ravens NT Kelly Gregg says of Ngata, a unanimous selection to PFW's Midseason All-Pro team and a likely shooin for his second trip to the Pro Bowl at season's end. Ngata, who earned AFC Defensive Player of the Week honors with a four-tackle, one-sack performance vs. Miami in Week Nine, was credited with three tackles in Baltimore's 26-21 loss at Atlanta on Nov. 11.

To hear it from him, Ngata believes this has been his finest season, citing experience and greater comfort in the defense. Having rare ability helps, too. Ngata can engulf ballcarriers, and he can run them down. He can beat offensive linemen with his quickness or his might. And on the rare occasion when he's in coverage, you better keep your eye on him. He has three career interceptions, the most memorable coming vs. Houston in 2008 when he leaped, deflected a pass and caught it in the endzone, to halt a Texans scoring threat.

For opponents, he is the definition of a matchup problem.

"Size and speed — that's the worst combo," Browns C Alex Mack says of Ngata's rare skill set. "Because if you get a big guy who can't move very well, you just run around him and kind of keep him where he is and (there is a) limit to what he can do. If you have a really fast guy, you play big and you move him around, and you just kind of grab him and hope you don't miss."

"Big and fast, it's tough to do that. It's a tough combo to play with."

Brooks wonders if we have yet to see the best of Ngata. "The thing about Haloti that I really believe, which is really scary, is that this guy is improving," he says. "To me, he almost improves by the day. He works tremendously hard. He's a heck of a run player, but I think as much as anything, he has improved tremendously in the pass-rush end of it."

"When you put those two talents together, he has a chance to really be something."

Ngata, who credits better recognition of the play-action pass for some of his improvement as a pass rusher and praises defensive coordinator Greg Mattison for giving him some latitude in this regard, gives the impression of being able to do most anything he sets his mind to do in the trenches.

With 4½ years of his career in the books, Ngata was asked about his goals. His answer reflected a healthy fear of plateau-

ing — squandering what he has been given.

"I don't want to be one of those guys that just kind of gets good at one thing and just stays there," he says.

That hasn't been a problem for Ngata throughout his athletic career. In addition to being a decorated football star at Highland High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, he was an exceptional rugby player. For the record, he played the lock position.

"You're one of the big guys of the team — *obviously*," Ngata says lightheartedly, as he tries to explain his role in layperson's terms.

"Damnedest thing you've ever seen," says Brooks, thinking of Ngata in a rugby uniform.

At Oregon, Ngata earned freshman All-America honors in 2002. He suffered a setback as a sophomore, suffering a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee in the season opener. However, he returned in 2004, eventually rounded back into form, and by the end of the '05 season, the red-shirt junior was one of the more highly regarded prospects at his position.

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AP (ARLETT) / SPORTSPICS (RIGHT)

Not long after he declared for the '06 draft, he suffered an unimaginable loss — his mother, Olga, died of an apparent heart attack while undergoing dialysis. Her battle with diabetes and kidney problems had played a major role in Ngata leaving school early. A little more than two years prior, Ngata had lost his father, Solomone, in a truck accident.

His father, Ngata said, worked three jobs; his mother kept the children on task. They taught him much.

"The hard work comes out of that," says Ngata, who has a son, Sam, with his wife, Christine, and who is involved in raising diabetes awareness, "and the humility that they instilled in me. I think it shows today how well they raised me. And that's what I try to do every day — is show them through me, and how good of a job they did at raising me."

The Ravens wanted Ngata so much on Draft Day 2006 that they traded up one spot with Cleveland to select him with the No. 12 overall pick. He became an immediate starter and quickly garnered notice as one of the top young players at his position, but he was far from a complete product, and his responsibilities in the defense were clearly defined.

By his third season, he had emerged as one of the AFC's top defensive tackles, garnering widespread acclaim for his work on a defense that helped lead Baltimore to the AFC championship game. By then, he had earned greater freedom from the coaches. Then, last season, when he made the Pro Bowl for the first time, he says he felt like he had come into his own.

Opponents can't always be sure where Ngata will line up. He's most likely to play in between the offensive tackles, either at his preferred three-technique defensive tackle spot, or over the center at nose tackle. But he also is capable of playing defensive end, and he believes he might be most valuable there, particularly against a team like the Steelers, "because they like to run outside of the tackle or in between the tackle and the guard," he noted. Playing all three spots at Pittsburgh in Week Four, Ngata notched a career-high 11 tackles in a 17-14 Baltimore victory. Such versatility allows the Ravens to move Ngata around to keep opponents from being able to "gang up on him," Brooks says.

In addition to his physical attributes, Ngata's intelligence garners high marks. Brooks calls him a great "problem solver" who can transfer what he sees on the field into adjustments.

"What I don't think people realize, or it's hard to see, is what kind of a heady player he is — how much he knows the game, and how much he knows how to execute a defense," says Broncos DE Justin Bannan, Ngata's former teammate.

There is something else that stands out about Ngata — those who know him speak in glowing terms about his likeability hand-in-hand with his playing ability.

"I gush when I talk about this guy," Brooks says. "As good a player as he is, as great a player as he is, he might be a better person."

"He's just a good dude," Gregg says.

"I was with him since Day One — not only played with him, but sat next to him every day for four years straight," Bannan says. "He's everything you'd look for in a big defensive tackle and then some. Not only that, he's probably the best human being I've ever been around. He's just a great guy. I'm pretty proud to call him my friend."

Ngata, who's in the final year of his contract, says he would prefer to remain in Baltimore for the long term, but for now, he's focused on this season. Which, to date, has gone very well for him.

Even when he's back in punt-return formation.

"I'd probably get too nervous if I actually had to do that," he admits.

It tells you all you need to know about Haloti Ngata that he would have jitters — and the Ravens probably wouldn't.