

CHUCK BEDNARIK

By Don Smith
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In more than 20 years as a football player with Bethlehem Technical High School, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Philadelphia Eagles, Chuck Bednarik had great fun tearing up halfbacks, fullbacks and quarterbacks.

Plus ends, centers, guards, tackles and defensive stalwarts as well.

If you played football and if you wore a different colored jersey, you were fair game for the 235-pound bone-crusher. You couldn't escape by settling on either the offensive or defensive platoon. Chances are that you would catch Chuck on a day that he was going both ways -- which is something he loved to do long after the two-way player in the National Football League had become a subject for the history books.

Fourteen of Bednarik's gridiron years came as a member of the Eagles and it was in Philadelphia that he became known as pro football's "Iron Man," a distinction that, along with his exceptional athletic skills, earned a berth in Pro Football's Hall of Fame just five years after his retirement in 1962. Five years is the minimum waiting time for football's highest honor.

As an offensive center, big Chuck was a bulldozing blocker. On defense, he not only was a true scientist at his job but a bone-jarring tackler who literally could stop even the best enemy runner "on a dime."

It was Bednarik, in fact, who made one of the most famous tackles in NFL history. It was a picture play -- as seen through a defensive man's eyes -- that saved a game, paved the way for a Philadelphia championship and put one of the NFL's greatest stars, Frank Gifford of the New York Giants, out of action for more than a year!

The films confirmed that Gifford had moved ahead of Bednarik but the ever-hustling Eagle was trailing the play closely when Frank cut suddenly to his right.

"I hit Frank head on," Bednarik has explained many times since then. "It was one of the hardest tackles I ever made but it was a clean shot."

Suddenly Bednarik was in the midst of a heated controversy. Gifford fumbled when hit and the Eagles recovered. Philadelphia had the ball and a seven-point lead with less than two minutes to play. An important Eagle victory was seemingly assured. Bednarik, who celebrated just as he played the game -- all-out, went into a wild victory dance. He didn't see the unconscious Gifford on the ground behind him. The crowd, not understanding what Bednarik was celebrating, erupted in violent disapproval.

Bednarik explained the situation the best he could: "I play hard to win -- that's why I show my emotions as I do. I'm very sorry about Frank but not the play. It was a good, clean tackle."

A similar Bednarik super-play provided the turning point in the 1960 NFL title game between the Eagles and the Green Bay Packers. This time it was Paul Hornung, cutting back in front of Bednarik just as Gifford had done, who was sledgehammered out of the game at a time when the Packers were threatening to take charge. Later that day, Bednarik added still another game-saving tackle when he grabbed and held onto piledriving Jimmy Taylor, churning near the Eagles' goal line as time ran out.

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These are perfect examples of the "play-it-for-keeps" performances that permeated Bednarik's career.

"I'd say pursuit to the other side is the most important thing for a linebacker to keep in mind," Bednarik once said. "Even when you cannot possibly make the tackle there are still many things you can do, such as break up the interference. And sometimes you'll wind up making a tackle when you didn't think you had a chance."

As exceptional a gridder as Bednarik was, it is possible he might never have played after high school if World War II had not been in progress. In high school, Bednarik had been considered just OK in football but outstanding in basketball and baseball. In baseball, Chuck, a catcher, could hit the ball a mile.

But Chuck gave up his thoughts of a professional baseball career for a hitch in the U.S. Air Force. He served as waist gunner on a B-24 and, in 30 bombing missions over Nazi Germany, he earned the Air Medal with five oak leaf clusters and five battle stars.

When he returned to civilian life, he wanted to give college football a try and decided on Penn. At first, the Penn coach, George Munger, wasn't too eager about accepting a sixth center candidate. Once he saw Bednarik, who by that time had expanded to 6-3 and 230 pounds, Munger quickly reasoned that somehow Bednarik could fit in.

By the third game of Chuck's first college season, he was the starting center. he was the starting center. In his junior and senior years, he was a consensus All-American. In 1948, he won the Maxwell Trophy as the finest college lineman in the nation.

Ordinarily, Philadelphia, as the 1948 NFL champion, would have had a late first-round pick in the 1949 draft. But the Eagles had won the league's "bonus" choice that year and they quickly selected Bednarik. Chuck accepted the Eagles' offer over the one of the Brooklyn Dodgers of the rival All-America Football Conference.

At first it appeared as if Bednarik would have to beat out veteran Vic Lindscoog for the starting center job but an injury to Lindscoog put Bednarik in the driver's seat. Chuck's attitude toward the challenge he thought he would face tells something of the nature of Bednarik, the football player.

"I always played with a certain amount of cockiness," Bednarik admits. "You must have absolute confidence in football. You must feel that you are the best at your position at all times."

Without a doubt, Bednarik was a trademark of the NFL's Golden Age of the 1950s even though his team, the Eagles, won a championship just before the decade in 1949 and then didn't win again until just after the decade in 1960.

But if the Eagles struggled through the 1950s, Bednarik, their sterling two-way star, did not. Starting in his sophomore campaign in 1950, the big Czech won all-NFL honors seven straight times, the first time as an offensive center and the next six years as a linebacker. During the period, he played and starred in eight Pro Bowl games -- he scored one of the three touchdowns in his career on an interception return in the 1954 Pro Bowl contest.

And through it all, Bednarik not only was brilliant. He was also durable. After missing the first two regular-season games in his rookie season, Bednarik missed only one other game in his 14-year tenure in Philadelphia. Counting pre-season and post-season games, Chuck played in 256 games for the Eagles during that period.

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When he retired after the 1962 season, Bednarik admitted he had been fortunate. "I had the rib cage battered up a few times. But although it hurt like hell, it was an era when you had to play with pain. I was lucky, though. Knees caved in all around me but I never had so much as a stretched tendon. Not even one knee twinge -- in high school, at Penn or with the Eagles."

Chuck was always available to go either way with the Eagles but he gained the most attention as a bone-jarring linebacker who, at one time or another, had a hand in stopping all the great backs of the decade -- Eddie Price, Joe Perry, Ollie Matson, Hugh McElhenny and, later on, Jimmy Brown, Jimmy Taylor, Hornung, Gifford and the list could go on and on.

But he remembers Cleveland's great fullback, Marion Motley, as his toughest personal opponent.

"Motley was 245 pounds, the biggest of them all, and when he gained momentum, he simply carried you with him," Chuck says.

Chuck almost retired twice, the first time in 1956, after the Eagles had suffered through a 3-8-1 season, the second time in 1959. Each time he was talked out of quitting and the second decision to play some more made possible the most thrilling, and also the most satisfying chapter of the Chuck Bednarik story.

Midway through the 1960 campaign, Bednarik responded to an injury-induced emergency and took up two-way playing duties again. Since 1957, he had been more or less confined to the center's job on the offensive platoon, an assignment more suited to an old-timer in his middle 30s.

Bednarik was in action 394 1/2 minutes in a 12-game season that year and then he capped it all off with a sterling 58-minute performance in the championship against Green Bay. The honors and accolades that had deserted Chuck during recent seasons returned in greater volume than ever before. It was a fitting tribute to one of the truly great players of pro football's Golden Age!

CHARLES (Chuck) PHILIP BEDNARIK

Center-Linebacker

Born: May 1, 1925, at Bethlehem, PA

Hgt: 6-3 Wgt: 235

High School: Bethlehem, PA

College: University of Pennsylvania

Consensus College All-American 1947 and 1948

Awarded Knute Rockne Trophy 1947

Awarded Maxwell Trophy 1948

Member of National College Football Hall of Fame

Selected as Bonus Choice by Philadelphia

In 1949 NFL Draft

Pro Bowl following 1950-51-52-53-54-56-57-60 seasons

Named Player of Game in Pro Bowl after 1953 season

All-Pro Selections:

1950 A.P.

1951 A.P., U.P., NY News

1952 A.P., U.P.

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1953 A.P., NY News
1954 A.P., U.P., NY News, Sporting News
1955 U.P.
1956 U.P., N.E.A., NY News
1957 NY News, TSN Western Team
1960 A.P., U.P.I., TSN Western Team
1961 TSN Western Team

Elected to Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1967

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--INTERCEPTIONS--							
Year	Team	Lg	GM	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1949	Phil	N	10	-	-	-	-
1950	Phil	N	12	1	9	9.0	0
1951	Phil	N	12	-	-	-	-
1952	Phil	N	12	2	14	7.0	0
1953	Phil	N	12	6	116	19.3	*1
1954	Phil	N	12	1	9	9.0	0
1955	Phil	N	12	1	36	36.0	0
1956	Phil	N	12	2	0	0.0	0
1957	Phil	N	11	3	51	17.0	0
1958	Phil	N	12	-	-	-	-
1959	Phil	N	12	-	-	-	-
1960	Phil	N	12	2	0	0.0	0
1961	Phil	N	14	2	33	16.5	0
1962	Phil	N	14	-	-	-	-
14 years			169	20	268	13.4	1

Additional statistics: Punted 12 times for 40.3 average in 1953; returned two punts for 26 yards in 1954; returned three kickoffs for 40 yards in 1954 and one for 17 yards in 1956.