

## **DICK BUTKUS: BORN TO PLAY FOOTBALL**

By Michael Gershman

Dick Butkus never met a challenge he didn't like.

Off the field, Butkus has hurled himself into a moving car, dived into shark-infested waters on *The American Sportsman* wearing a soft cast, and caught crocodiles for a Nautilus TV commercial. On it, he became a two-time All-America center and the only double winner of the Knute Rockne Memorial Trophy, given to the outstanding college lineman.

A six-time All-Pro linebacker, he set the standard for the position in the NFL. Gale Sayers called him "the fiercest tackler of his time. When he first hits you he jars you. Then, a second or two later, here comes his body - his knees, his feet, his arms. It's like that Slinky toy." Running back Alex Hawkins figured out why Butkus was so rarely honored, with the game ball: "Whenever they gave it to him, he ate it."

He was born in Chicago and born to play football. "I didn't have any identity crisis. In the fifth grade, I knew I was going to be a professional football player ... I can remember watching the College All-Star Game. 'I'll be playing in that some day,' I told my parents. My mother knew it too. Really knew it." (He was defensive captain in 1965 and, in his first meeting with another NFL legend, stopped Jim Brown cold early in the game.)

Butkus never relied just on ability. To build up his legs in high school, he would move a car into a dead-end street and push it back and forth "as a spur, a whip against myself." A fullback-linebacker at Chicago Vocational High School, Butkus was the Chicago Sun-Times Player of the Year in 1959 and AP's Prep Player of the Year in 1960.

Pete Elliot, his coach at Illinois, said, "From the first practice I could tell he was something special. He never dogged anything. I never saw him take a lazy step. He was always the first guy out and the last to leave."

As a sophomore, Butkus made 97 tackles in seven games and upped that to 145 tackles in ten games as a junior in 1963. Illinois won the Big Ten championship and beat Washington in the Rose Bowl, 17-7. In 1964, he finished third in Heisman Trophy voting to Notre Dame's John Huarte.

A number one pick of the AFL Kansas City Chiefs, he signed a \$200,000 contract with the Bears to become, at the time, the NFL's most highly paid defensive rookie. He justified it by playing in eight Pro Bowls in his nine-year career, which was foreshortened by a succession of knee injuries.