

MERLIN OLSEN: GENTLEMANLY GIANT

By Michael Gershman

Before he was forty, Merlin Olsen had won the Outland Trophy, been named NFL Player of the Year, earned a Master's degree in Economics, won acclaim as "TV's best color football man, and starred in his own TV series.

Even more noteworthy, he missed just two games in twenty-two years of high school, college, and pro ball. Or twenty-three. As he points out, "Going to the Pro Bowl 14 times adds up to an entire extra season of play."

Olsen grew up the first son of nine kids in Logan, Utah, and told Sports Illustrated, "Everything was planned ... We'd drive a truck up into Idaho and haul back a ton of potatoes. We'd can 1,600 quarts of peaches a season, buy 100 chickens at a time."

He played football and ran the hurdles at Logan High School, attending Utah State on scholarship. Dubbed the Gentle Giant (6'4", 285) for his personal warmth, he was the Aggies' first consensus All-America selection in 1961 and part of the reason the Utags won and tied for the Skyline 8 conference title in both 1960 and 1961. A First Team Academic All-America, he graduated summa cum laude and made Phi Beta Kappa.

A first-round draft choice of the Rams, he arrived when Lamar Lundy was entrenched at right end, and left end David "Deacon" Jones was the most feared defender in football. Playing both offense and defense, he was named rookie of the year in 1962; when the Rams traded John Lovetere to the Giants for Roosevelt Grier, Rams publicist Jack Teele termed the defensive line "The Fearsome Foursome."

The Fearsome Foursome changed the way football was played and watched. They invented stunting and looping techniques, coined the term "sack," and made defense a focal point of football. Olsen said, "We were innovators ... It was fun knowing every time we went on the field we were the guys who were gonna make something happen."

He was voted into a record fourteen consecutive Pro Bowls, played in 198 consecutive games, and was honored as Player of the Year in 1974. Elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility, he was named to the AFL-NFL 1960-1984 All-Star Team, and is also a member of the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame.

After retiring, he became an NBC sportscaster and won plaudits for his insight and precision. He later made a more difficult transition to acting and became an audience favorite as Jonathan Garvey on Little House on the Prairie. He has since starred on both Father Murphy and Aaron's Law.