

Anthony Munoz

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 1998

By Joe Horrigan

Seventy-two hours after reporting to his first NFL training camp, rookie tackle Anthony Munoz earned a starting job with the Cincinnati Bengals. Projected by many as a “can’t miss” pro, the 6-6, 278-pound offensive tackle was the first lineman and third player selected overall in the 1980 National Football League draft.

Still, some NFL scouts considered the University of Southern California two-time All-America lineman a risky pick. After all, the only full season Munoz played at USC was in 1978, his sophomore year.

As a freshman Anthony tore ligaments in his right knee in the ninth game of the season. As a junior he tore ligaments in the same knee in the seventh game. Then, as a senior he tore ligaments in his left knee in the season opener.

“He’s potentially the most outstanding offensive lineman I ever saw anywhere,” USC coach John Robinson remarked. “He’s one of the greatest players at any position I ever saw.” Yet three knee surgeries in four years was a lot for a then-22-year-old athlete to have already incurred.

Before giving their final evaluation, pro scouts examined and reexamined Munoz’s surgery-scarred knees. As one New York writer put it, he was “patted, prodded, poked, weighed, and measured as if he was a prize steer at a State Fair.” The soft-spoken Munoz, however, took it all in stride. “Considering my situation, they had the right to check me out,” he said.

Munoz’s first two injuries kept him from fulfilling his long-time dream of playing in the Rose Bowl. But the third knee injury was different. “Each time I was hurt, I felt bad because I couldn’t play in the Rose Bowl,” he recalled. “The last time, however, I knew I had the time to come back. No one believed me when I said I would be back for the bowl, but I knew I would be.”

Someone who never doubted him was his wife Dede. “Anthony came home from the hospital and started jumping rope on one leg with the cast still on the other leg,” she remembers. “He started lifting weights before the cast came off, and was running as soon as it came off.” To the amazement of even his coaches, when USC met Ohio State on New Year’s Day 1980 in the Rose Bowl, Munoz - as promised - was in uniform and ready to play.

Determined to make his last college game a memorable one, Munoz absolutely dominated the left side of Ohio State’s defensive line. USC fans still recall how Munoz cut down an Ohio State defender with a devastating block that allowed running back Charles White to score the winning touchdown in USC’s 17-16 come-from-behind victory.

Watching the game with more than a passing interest was Bengals founder and general manager Paul Brown and his sons Mike, the assistant general manager, and Pete, the player personnel director. Their question as to whether or not they should use their first-round draft pick on a player with a history of knee trouble was answered.

“The three of us sat there and laughed out loud,” said Mike Brown. “The guy was so big and so good it was a joke.”

Soon thereafter, Paul Brown dispatched his new head coach Forrest Gregg to USC. Gregg, himself a Hall of Fame tackle, gave Munoz a one-on-one workout. After rushing him a few times, Gregg decided to try a quick move to get past the young lineman.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 4 (1998)

"I rushed like I was going inside and then went outside on him. He reacted like a football player would. He jammed me on the chest with both hands and knocked me on my rear. He was very apologetic and I said, 'no, no, no, you did what you were supposed to do,'" Gregg recalled. "I thought, 'We've got to have this guy.'" On April 29, 1980, the Bengals made him "their guy," by selecting him in the first round of the draft.

Born on August 19, 1958, Munoz grew up in Ontario California, just northeast of Los Angeles. His father left home when he was very young, leaving his mother Esther on her own to raise Anthony and his two brothers and two sisters.

"She did it all," Munoz reflected. "We didn't have a lot, but we had each other; and we were close to each other and happy enough."

As a youngster, Anthony was so big that he wasn't permitted to play Pop Warner Football. Instead, he turned to baseball. His size helped him to become a power-pitcher and a power-hitter and a much-in-demand player in the playgrounds near his home.

"He was on so many teams that when they had to play each other, they would fight over him," said Jim Semon, the director of the summer recreation program in Ontario and later Anthony's baseball coach at Chaffey High School.

An all-around athlete in high school, Munoz played baseball, basketball, and football. It was in football, however, as an offensive and defensive tackle and punter that he gained national attention.

A scholastic All-American, Munoz was heavily recruited by several colleges. He chose USC only after the school agreed that he could skip spring football practice to play for the Trojans' baseball team. Unfortunately, the need to rehabilitate his injured knees kept him from playing baseball except in his sophomore year.

Although injuries prevented Munoz from having an extensive career at USC, that was not to be the case in the pros. Always in top physical condition, the Bengals' lineman missed only three games due to injury during his 13-year pro career. His rigorous conditioning routine included working out in the weight room he had installed in his home and running from two to four miles every day.

From his first day in Bengals' training camp, the physically fit "man mountain" from USC impressed not only his teammates, but his coaches.

"I'd just been hired, so he didn't know me and I didn't know him," former Bengals' offensive line coach Jim McNally said. "He started out on the second team, but after a while, it was apparent to everyone he was so dominant we had to move him up."

He reinforced his coach's confidence during his first preseason game when he faced Denver Broncos veteran defensive end Brison Manor. On one particular play Munoz not only blocked Manor, he blocked him all the way over to the sidelines and off the field. "I had never seen a guy block anybody that far - he put him on a subway," McNally recalled.

Munoz, who was a consensus All-Rookie choice, wasn't without his problems that first year. Like most rookies he had his share of bad games. However, McNally admits that some of those problems were his fault. "That first year, I had him messed up," he said. "I had him in a right handed stance."

Before the start of his second season McNally switched Munoz to a more natural and efficient left-handed stance. From there he quickly developed better balance and explosiveness off the line. A diligent student of the game, Munoz also began to master the pass-protection techniques a lineman must learn.

"They'll talk about Anthony Munoz one day just like they talk about John Hannah now," McNally said in reference to the New England Patriots guard who at the time was generally regarded as the best offensive lineman of his day.

In 1981, the 12-4 Bengals experienced a huge turnaround from their 6-10 record of a year prior. The team had or shared the AFC Central lead the entire season and went on to represent the AFC in Super Bowl XVI.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 4 (1998)

One of the Bengals' main strengths that year was the play of quarterback Ken Anderson who led the league with a 98.5 passer rating. Key to Anderson's success was the pass protection he received from the Bengals' offensive line anchored by Munoz. Anderson was sacked 63 times in 1979, compared to just 37 in 1980, Munoz's rookie year, and 35 in 1981.

Following the 1981 season, nine NFL assistant coaches combined to select the NFL Lineman of the Year Award. All of the coaches listed Munoz on their ballots, and six of them gave their first-place vote to the second-year lineman. "I can't believe how good this kid is at this stage," one coach wrote on his ballot.

Anderson wasn't the only Bengals quarterback to benefit from Munoz's superb pass blocking. Boomer Esiason, who took over as the Cincinnati signal caller in 1985 also benefited. For Esiason, a southpaw, it was a perfect fit. The Bengals were a left-handed team. Not because Boomer was left-handed, but because Munoz was the left tackle.

"We are protecting our quarterback from the most dangerous rush in the game with one of the best players in the game," former Bengals coach Sam Wyche remarked. Wyche, who replaced Gregg following the 1983 season went further: "Anthony is the greatest offensive tackle the game has ever known."

While Munoz excelled at pass blocking, he was also an outstanding run blocker. Bengals running backs have rushed for 1,000 yards only eight times. That milestone was reached six times during Munoz's tenure. He was also the offensive line's anchor in 1988 and 1989 when the Bengals led the NFL in rushing.

According to former teammates, the near-perfect Munoz practiced and played like a man who had something to prove. "That's the way he played for 13 years, like he was trying to work his way into a starting slot," said former guard Max Montoya, himself an outstanding Bengal from 1979 through 1989.

A superb athlete, Munoz was even utilized occasionally as a receiver. The agile lineman caught seven passes on tackle-eligible plays during his career. Four of his catches resulted in touchdowns. One writer referred to Munoz as a "modern-day Marion Motley," referring to the former Cleveland Browns fullback who along with quarterback Otto Graham perfected the trap play.

Munoz's consistently fine play didn't go unnoticed. During his career, he was the recipient of virtually every possible honor. He was named NFL Offensive Lineman of the Year again in 1987 and 1988, and was awarded the NFL Players Association Lineman of the Year honors in 1981, 1985, 1988, and 1989. He was a Pro Bowl selection 11 consecutive years (1982-1992) and was named All-Pro eleven straight times (1981-1991).

The NFL Alumni Association voted Munoz the Offensive Lineman of the Year four times (1987, 1989-1991). His 1989 citation reads: "The NFL has three levels of offensive linemen. The bottom rung is for players aspiring to make the Pro Bowl. The next step is for those who have earned all-star status. Then there's Anthony Munoz. He's alone at the top."

Munoz's vast array of awards includes many commendations for his off-the-field charitable activities as well. A very visible part of his community, Munoz was active in a variety of charitable causes, mostly helping children, ranging from Cystic Fibrosis to the Salvation Army.

"I think it's important to give back," he once said. "Youth is my heartbeat. Making someone smile off the field feels as good as making a perfect block on the field." Although he is still active in charitable efforts yet today, chronic shoulder problems and another torn knee ligament forced the likable lineman to retire at the end of the 1992 season.

"Anthony Munoz is one of those rare athletes you wish could go on playing forever," wrote Ritter Collett of the Dayton Daily News. "Not just because he may be as fine a tackle as ever played in the NFL. Tackles come and go. Quality human beings who put more back into society than they take out are something else."

On December 27, 1992, Munoz played his final NFL game. A special halftime ceremony was held to recognize his 13 years of outstanding play for the Bengals. Fans' banners that hung throughout Riverfront

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 4 (1998)

Stadium thanked and paid tribute to the popular lineman. One banner near the Bengals' locker room prophesied, "Munoz: Next Stop Canton."

On August 1, 1998, in Canton, Ohio, Anthony Munoz will be accorded the game's highest form of recognition when he is formally inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Anthony Michael Munoz
Offensive Tackle. 6'6", 278. USC.
Chaffey High School, Ontario, California.
Born August 19, 1958, Ontario, California.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Gm</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Gm</u>
1980	Cin	16	1987	Cin	11
1981	Cin	16	1988	Cin	16
1982	Cin	9	1989	Cin	16
1983	Cin	16	1990	Cin	16
1984	Cin	16	1991	Cin	13
1985	Cin	16	<u>1992</u>	<u>Cin</u>	<u>8</u>
1986	Cin	16	13 years		185