

# DENNIS GAUBATZ:

## Tough Middle Linebacker for the Baltimore Colts in Late 1960s

By Jim Sargent

After two years as a reserve linebacker and a fill-in starter for the Detroit Lions, Dennis Gaubatz came into his own as the top linebacker and defensive signal-caller for the Baltimore Colts in 1965. For five stellar seasons with the Colts, Gaubatz proved to be one of the toughest, smartest, and most effective linebackers in the National Football League.

During Gaubatz's tenure the Don Shula-coached Colts fielded consistently first-rate teams, as indicated by Baltimore's records in the late 1960s:

**1965** – The Colts, with Johnny Unitas at quarterback, tied powerful Green Bay for the Western Conference title as both teams produced 10-3-1 records. But Vince Lombardi's Packers won the playoff in overtime, 13-10, on a Don Chandler field goal. Green Bay then won the last NFL pre-Super Bowl Championship by defeating the Cleveland Browns, 23-12

**1966** – The Colts finished at 9-5, losing twice to the Packers (12-2), and placed second in the Western Conference to Green Bay. The Packers won the NFL Title by stopping the Dallas Cowboys, 34-27, and Green Bay won the first Super Bowl, 35-10, over the AFL Champion Kansas City Chiefs

**1967** – The Colts improved to 11-1-2 and tied the Los Angeles Rams for first in the Western Conference's new Coastal Division, but the Rams won the division by outscoring the Colts in their two games. The Packers won the Western Conference over the Rams, 28-7, Green Bay won the NFL Title over the Cowboys at home in the "ice bowl," 21-17, and the Packers won Super Bowl II over the Oakland Raiders, 33-14

**1968** – The Colts, led by quarterback Earl Morrall, won the Coastal Division with a 13-1 mark over the Rams (10-3-1). Baltimore won the Western Conference by beating the Minnesota Vikings, 24-14, the Colts won the NFL Title by blanking the Browns, 34-0, but the New York Jets won Super Bowl III over the Colts, 16-7

**1969** – The Colts, with a few key players retiring after the Super Bowl loss and with several others having subpar seasons, went 8-5-1 and finished second to the Rams (11-3)

Although he loved the camaraderie with his Colt teammates, Gaubatz was upset when he lost his starting position midway through the 1969 campaign. In January 1970 the Colts traded the big linebacker to the Redskins, now coached by Vince Lombardi. In the end, Gaubatz retired after Lombardi contracted cancer (he died on September 4, 1970) and turned the club over to Bill Austin for the 1970 season.

While his pro football career was filled with highlights such as twice appearing on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, Gaubatz never won Pro Bowl or All Pro honors. An underrated defensive standout and a dedicated team player, he made it in the NFL the hard way. Working for everything he earned, he proved to be an excellent middle linebacker, he played injured when necessary, and he succeeded in his post-football business interests.

Born on February 11, 1940, on a farm near the small town of Needville, Texas, Dennis grew up, played sports, and attended high school in nearby West Columbia. He still lives in the town where, as a 195-pound senior, he led his high school team to a three-way tie for first place in the district. After beating the other two teams, West Columbia, blessed with several good athletes, reached the semifinal game of the state championship.

A good hunter, Dennis recalled working ten 10-hour days at \$2.50 a day for a local grocery store in order to earn the money for his first rifle. By the time he entered junior high school, his father, a night watchman for a sulphur company, had moved his family to West Columbia. During high school Dennis worked to pay for clothes, books, and more guns. By the time he turned fourteen, the young man was raising rabbits, maybe 500-600 at a time, and selling them skinned for a dollar apiece.

The all-around athlete played inside linebacker for West Columbia, although at first the coach didn't think he was tough enough. But as a senior Dennis won All-District, All-County, and All-State honors as a center and linebacker. Not only did the versatile

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young man prove himself in football, but he also made it to the state track meet as the school's high jumper and part of the mile relay team in his senior year.

Graduating in 1958, Dennis received scholarship offers from most teams in the Southwest Conference, except Texas. He decided to attend Texas A&M. When he didn't find the new coach's policies to his liking, he transferred to Louisiana State University in January 1959. LSU, which had touted Gaubatz when he starred at West Columbia, gave him a scholarship for room, board, and books, but he paid tuition.

Gaubatz proved himself in LSU's football camp that spring. After he married Carolyn, his high school sweetheart, in August 1959, Dennis received a "married scholarship." That gave the redshirt freshman an additional \$75 month for housing. "Dennis was the team leader with over 100 tackles our last year at LSU," recalled teammate and defensive tackle Fred Miller in 2002. "He was a competitor on the field."

Drafted in the eighth round by Detroit in 1963, Gaubatz, who was named second-team All-American as a LSU senior, made it with the Lions in the preseason. Two linebackers, Hall of Famer Joe Schmidt and Carl Brettschneider, were nearing the end of their careers. The Lions saw Gaubatz as a capable replacement.

Dennis played all 14 games for the Lions in both 1963 and 1964. During his rookie season he backed up the three linebacking positions and started on special teams. In 1964 he started at left linebacker ahead of Brettschneider. After Schmidt was hurt midway through the '64 season, Dennis started at middle linebacker. Only Wayne Walker logged more playing time at linebacker, but the hard-hitting Gaubatz was not asked to call defensive signals.

After finishing second behind Green Bay in 1960, 1961, and 1962, Detroit was no longer a contender. In 1963 the Lions finished with a 5-8-1 record and placed fourth in the NFL's seven-team Western Division. In 1964, during George Wilson's last year as coach, the Lions improved to 7-5-2 but still finished in fourth place.

Gaubatz rented a house in Detroit. After completing his Bachelor's of Industrial Technology Degree in 1965, he bought a house. With Schmidt in his final year, Dennis figured he would be the regular middle linebacker. Shortly after he and Carolyn bought their home, Dennis—who was working in the offseason at a Ford plant—received a call from Baltimore's Don Shula asking if he would like to play in Baltimore.

"I was planning on playing in Detroit," Gaubatz recalled in a 2002 interview. "I'd just bought a home.

"Don Shula said, 'Well, let me rephrase that. *Would* you play for me in Baltimore?'

"I said, 'Heck, yeah!'

"The next thing I knew, the moving van was there moving us to Baltimore. The team took care of selling my house. As soon as I got through Baltimore's training camp and we figured out where we wanted to live, we bought a home in Baltimore. The team helped me with all that. Carroll Rosenbloom, the owner, was one *fine* person.

"In Baltimore we had a lot of camaraderie. It was a whole different atmosphere. Lots of the players would get together at one place or another after a game. In the offseason, most of us would go to team events, like golf tournaments or dinners.

"J.D. Smith was a good friend in Detroit, and he's also from Texas. In Baltimore I had a lot of friends, guys like Johnny Unitas, Fred Miller, who I played with at LSU, Ron Porter, Bobby Boyd, Lenny Lyles, Rick Volk, Bob Vogel, Bubba Smith. We were all friends in Baltimore."

Before the 1965 regular season, Don Shula gave Gaubatz a crash course in how to play the middle linebacker position for the Colts. Intelligent, confident, and eager to learn, Dennis absorbed Shula's complex system.

"Dennis came to us in 1965," Fred Miller reflected, "and he stepped in and did a good job at middle linebacker."

In the 1960s NFL teams did not have defensive coordinators like they have today. Teams had a head coach who called the shots. He was assisted by a handful of coaches who worked with offensive and defensive players. For example, after Shula came to Baltimore, Charles Winner worked with defensive backs from 1963 to 1965.

Gaubatz, who stood 6'2" and played at 232 pounds, called the defensive signals for Baltimore from the first game of the 1965 season until game seven against Washington on November 2, 1969, when Mike Curtis was given the job.

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"Not only was Dennis our MLB," said Rick Volk in 2002, "but he was one of the last players to call defensive signals during the game. No defenses were signaled in from the sideline at that time!

"Obviously Dennis was a student of the game and a great asset to what I think was one of the best defenses of all time in 1968."

In a 1965 interview with Tex Maule, Gaubatz explained, "The defensive coaches analyze the movies and the scout reports on Monday. Then they give us the defenses on Tuesday. Charley Winner will give me a chart of what the quarterback is liable to call in any situation on any part of the field, and I study that.

"I know, for instance, that you've got to be careful when Green Bay has third and short yardage in its own end of the field. Third and two or three, you figure Bart Starr will send Jim Taylor into the line for the first down and you got to respect Taylor....

"But to go back to third and two or three, I'm Taylor-conscious and I know that Starr, in the last couple years, has thrown maybe 10 or 15 long passes from there and a lot of them worked. He fakes Taylor in the line, you come up fast, and then he throws deep and it's six points. So when is he going to do that? I don't know yet. I just got to hope. I just got to believe in me."

Charley Wimmer said Gaubatz didn't have the experience of retired Colt defensive signal caller Bill Pellington. But Wimmer called Dennis more of a gambler who called more blitzes, because he was quicker at getting into the backfield and better able to shed blockers.

Gaubatz, whose stellar game helped contain scrambling quarterback Fran Tarkenton and the Minnesota Vikings, 41-21, on November 14, 1965, said: "We hide the zone. Any defense has weaknesses, and the various zones have them, too. You got to figure out what the quarterback will call and set a defense that will match your strength with his point of attack. If he comes out in a set that's obviously going to hit our defense where it's weak, I change off at the line. Then he changes and I change, and we're in a guessing game. So far this year we have guessed right pretty good."

In 1965 Baltimore and Green Bay finished in a first place tie in the Western Conference with 10-3-1 records. Quarterbacks Johnny Unitas (knee) and Gary Cuozzo (dislocated shoulder) of the Colts were injured and missed the defensive struggle their teams played at Lambeau Field on December 26. The Packers finally prevailed in sudden-death overtime, 13-10. Baltimore scored first when linebacker Don Shinnick scooped up a fumble with 21 second played and rumbled 25 yards for a touchdown. Bart Starr hurt his ribs on the play, and Zeke Bratkowski replaced him. Tom Matte quarterbacked the Colts, rushing for 57 yards but passing for only 40.

The Packers, led by Bratkowski, ran more plays than the Colts, 80-60, and led in first downs, 23-9. The Packers finally tied the game on a 22-yard field goal by Don Chandler with 1:58 remaining. In overtime Green Bay won with a 25-yard Chandler field goal after 13:39 had been played.

Most of the Colts and many fans thought Chandler's first kick missed. Recalled Gaubatz in 2002, "That kick went 8-10 feet wide to the right. We saw it on the films. But that's the breaks of the game."

Finishing the season at the NFL's Playoff Bowl in Miami, a game matching divisional runner-ups during the 1960s, the Colts thumped the Cowboys, 35-3. That year the only Baltimore defensive player to make the Pro Bowl was left safety Jerry Logan.

In 1966 the Colts, behind a healthy Unitas, produced a 9-5 record and finished second to the powerhouse Packers—the eventual winner of Super Bowl I. After outscoring opponents 389-284 in 1965 and ranking first against the run, Baltimore outscored opponents in 1966 by a margin of 314-226. Again the Colts defense proved tough.

But Baltimore lost to Green Bay twice (24-3 in the season's opener and 14-10 in December), and once to the Chicago Bears (27-17), the Detroit Lions (20-14), and the LA Rams (23-7). In the end, Baltimore made another trip to the Runner-Up Bowl, defeating the Philadelphia Eagles, 20-14, on January 8, 1967. The Colts did place two defensive stars in the Pro Bowl, right end Ordell Braase and right cornerback Lenny Lyles.

Gaubatz's play in a 37-10 Baltimore win over Washington on November 6, 1966, reflects his stellar season. In the first quarter with the Redskins at the Colts 15 yard line in a third-and-one, Gaubatz tackled Joe Don Looney (for whom Gaubatz was traded in 1965), causing a fumble that the Colts recovered. In the second quarter with Washington on the Baltimore 30, Gaubatz again dumped Looney, this time for a one-yard loss—which led to a missed field goal attempt by Washington.

In the fourth period another hard Gaubatz hit caused another Looney fumble, this time at the Baltimore 12. Dennis also intercepted a Sonny Jurgenson aerial on the Colts 30 to stop another Washington drive. For his efforts, Gaubatz was voted the NFL's Defensive Player of the Week.

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In 1967 the Colts, playing in the Coastal Division, came through with an 11-1-2 record and tied the Rams. The two teams played to a 24-24 deadlock on October 15, but Los Angeles won the division title by outscoring Baltimore for the year in the season finale, 34-10.

Gaubatz got off to a slow start in 1967 after suffering a pinched nerve in his neck during a scrimmage in Baltimore's training camp. Still, the hard-nosed Texan played every game while wearing a padded neck collar. In game eight against Green Bay on November 5, Gaubatz, finally healed, returned to form.

Leading a blitzing Colt defense which harassed Bart Starr all afternoon, Gaubatz made 10 solo tackles. Left tackle Fred Miller led a strong rush by the defensive line as the Colts stopped the Packers on 11 third down situations, including four sacks of Starr. Right tackle Billy Ray Smith contributed seven tackles and safety Rick Volk made six.

Two weeks later, following wins of 49-7 over the Atlanta Falcons and 41-7 over the Lions, Gaubatz commented on the injury:

"It really makes a difference when you can stick your head in there and hit somebody," he told the *Baltimore Sun*. "Until the Green Bay game I had to absorb the man coming at me and go down backwards. But when you can get that initial pop, it makes them think a little."

Gaubatz, who liked to wear every pad that could help protect him, said his major asset was the ability to stay on his feet and help with tackles: "Let's face it, if I get knocked down and a runner gets through a hole in the line, he's going to gain some yardage. My job is to stay on my feet, get near every play."

Despite a strong team effort and only two losses, the Colts missed the playoffs again in 1967. Ordell Braase and Fred Miller represented Baltimore's defense in the Pro Bowl.

In 1968 Baltimore put everything together except a Super Bowl Championship, even though Johnny Unitas missed nine games with a sore elbow. In August, with Unitas ailing, Don Shula engineered a trade with the New York Giants for quarterback Earl Morrall. Morrall, whose previous best years came with the Lions, enjoyed a career year, completing 182 of 317 passes for a 57.4% average, including 26 for touchdowns. His pinpoint passing led the Colts to Super Bowl III, but in that game he faltered.

With Gaubatz and the defense having a sterling season, Baltimore won 13 games and lost once, a surprising 30-20 loss to the Browns in Cleveland on October 20. But the "magnificent defense" of the Colts, wrote Tex Maule in *Sports Illustrated*, eclipsed the once dominant Packers in a 16-3 Baltimore victory at Green Bay on December 7. That victory made four straight games in which Baltimore yielded no touchdowns. Also, that win signaled the end of the Green Bay dynasty of the 1960s.

In the Western Conference playoff, Baltimore stopped Minnesota, 24-14. Morrall threw TD passes to tight ends Tom Mitchell and John Mackey, and linebacker Mike Curtis returned a fumble recovery 60 yards to score, lifting the Colts to a 21-0 lead in the third quarter. Viking quarterback Joe Kapp made the game look close with two fourth-quarter TD passes, but Baltimore's defense prevented a comeback.

One week later, on December 29 in Cleveland Stadium, the Colts blanked the Browns, 34-0. Tom Matte scored two of his three touchdowns in the second quarter as his team built up a 17-0 lead. With Baltimore's aggressive defense forcing quarterback Bill Nelsen to pass hurriedly and holding star back Leroy Kelly to 28 yards on 13 carries, Cleveland seldom made it into Baltimore territory.

The shutout moved the Colts into Super Bowl III against the AFL Champion New York Jets, quarterbacked by "Broadway Joe" Namath, the man with the mink coat, the white shoes, and the quick release. For the widely hailed encounter, Namath gave reporters his "guarantee" of a Jets victory over a Baltimore team that many experts were calling one of the greatest ever. The Colts were rated at least 18-point favorites.

In the Orange Bowl in Miami on January 12, 1969, the Jets pulled off a 16-7 upset. With all AFL teams used to playing a zone pass defense much like the zone used by the Colts, New York's coach Weeb Ewbank devised a conservative game plan. The Jets would have receivers flood Baltimore's zone, and Namath would throw mostly short slants over the middle or into the flats. Wide receiver Don Maynard had a bad ankle and could not go deep effectively.

But Namath sent Maynard deep early in the first quarter (after Lou Michaels missed a field goal). Joe threw the pigskin out of the end zone, but the play made it look like the Jets could throw downfield at will. For most of the game, Maynard attracted double coverage but caught no passes, while George Sauer caught eight passes for 133 yards.

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From the outset New York established a strong running game behind 220-pound fullback Matt Snell, who rushed for 121 yards on 30 carries, scored the game's only touchdown, and caught four passes. Enjoying a good day, Namath completed 17 of 28 passes, including four for 43 yards on New York's 80-yard TD drive in the second quarter.

But Morrall, the NFL's 1968 MVP, suffered his worst day of the season, completing only six of 17 passes and throwing three interceptions. For example, Baltimore wide receiver Willie Richardson, who was wide open, dropped a Morrall pass in the end zone in the first quarter. Morrall then overthrew end Tom Mitchell, also wide open. On a day of swirling winds, Colt kicker Lou Michaels missed a 27-yard field goal.

Later in the period, after recovering end George Sauer's fumble, the Colts drove inside the Jets 10-yard line. Linebacker Al Atkinson tipped Morrall's pass to Tom Mitchell, who lost the ball, and cornerback Randy Beverly made a diving interception. New York then countered with the 80-yard drive, and Snell ran the last four yards for a 7-0 lead.

After the teams both missed field goals in the second quarter, Baltimore launched another drive, featuring a 58-yard run by Matte to the Jets' 16. But ex-Colt cornerback Johnny Sample intercepted another Morrall pass. Later, Baltimore drove into New York's end of the Orange Bowl. With 25 seconds left in the half, Morrall called a "flea-flicker." He handed off to Matte, who flipped the ball back to him. Morrall didn't see flanker Jimmy Orr, wide open and waving his arms in the end zone. Instead, Morrall threw to fullback Jerry Hill. But safety Jim Hudson intercepted—leaving the Colts behind at the half, 7-0.

Having failed on four scoring opportunities in the first half, it seemed like Baltimore could get no breaks. Shula's talk at halftime emphasized: "We're making stupid mistakes. You've got them believing in themselves. You've got them believing that they're better than we are."

But on the first offensive play of the third quarter, Morrall fumbled a handoff to Matte on the Colt 33, and the Jets recovered. A few plays later Jim Turner kicked a 32-yard field goal for a 10-0 New York lead. Namath continued to mix short runs with timely passes, producing two more Turner field goals, a 30-yarder in the third quarter and a 9-yarder early in the fourth quarter.

When Johnny Unitas replaced Earl Morrall later in the third quarter and the Jets ahead, 13-0, it looked like Baltimore would come back. But with his elbow not fully healed, Unitas soon threw an interception in the end zone from the 25-yard line. In the final period the longtime Baltimore hero led the Colts on a drive capped by Jerry Hill's one-yard touchdown run, making the score 16-7. After recovering the onside kick with 3:19 left, the Colts began another drive. But the team's last hope ended when linebacker Larry Grantham batted away Unitas' fourth down pass in the end zone.

Gaubatz, who couldn't stop Snell short of the end zone in the first quarter, still wonders why the Jets won.

"Don't get me wrong," Dennis recently observed, "They had some good ballplayers. But there's no way we should have lost that game."

Retired *Baltimore Sun* sportswriter Seymour Smith, who saw the game on TV, recently observed, "If that Colts team could have played the Jets ten times, Baltimore probably would have won nine. But that Super Bowl Sunday just wasn't the Colts' day."

In some ways, the upstart Jets victory over the blue-collar Colts typified the changing of the old order of the NFL, a league built on the values of men like George Halas of the Bears, Art Rooney of the Steelers, Vince Lombardi of the Packers, and Dennis Gaubatz.

One year later the NFL and AFL, as planned, merged into a 26-team league. The groundwork was laid to expand and change pro football beyond anyone's expectations.

Did the victory help the merger? "I don't believe," Gaubatz reflected, "that the American League would have lasted if we had beat the Jets."

The loss to the Jets hurt the Colts in many ways. Carroll Rosenbloom reportedly had a falling out with Don Shula after the game. In 1970 Shula moved to Miami to coach the Dolphins. In 1972 Rosenbloom traded his Colts for the Los Angeles Rams.

But in 1969 the Colts slipped to 8-5-1 and finished second behind the Rams. Two key veterans retired after the Super Bowl loss, cornerback Bobby Boyd and defensive end Ordell Braase, while another, linebacker Don Shinnick, played only six games in 1969.

Gaubatz suffered a smashed finger before Baltimore's third game on October 5, 1969, a 21-14 win over Atlanta. He played injured for three weeks until November 2, when Shula switched Mike Curtis to middle linebacker for game seven against the Redskins. Baltimore beat Washington, 41-17, and Curtis remained at middle linebacker.

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After the Colts finished in second place, Fred Miller and Rick Volk represented Baltimore's defense in the Pro Bowl.

When Shula decided to leave Baltimore after the 1969 season, Gaubatz wanted to be traded to the Redskins. A story about the trade in the *Washington Post* in January 1970 confirmed his injury and published his comments about linebacker:

"The job was given away. I hadn't lost it. It was given to Mike Curtis."

Gaubatz said further that Shula "was going to go the way he had it. I said the hell with it. I couldn't play in that type of situation."

Although he wanted to play for Vince Lombardi in Washington, Gaubatz had second thoughts when Lombardi became ill. Also, the Redskins hired Sam Huff to coach the linebackers. Dennis decided to retire from football and take care of his business interests.

Dennis and Carolyn sold their home in Baltimore and moved to Severna Park for three years. Next they bought a home in Salisbury on the Eastern Shore. After Christmas of 1976, they moved back to Texas to Lake Jackson. In 1988 they moved again, home to West Columbia to a house next door to Carolyn's parents. Most of the couple's family members live in Texas, including three of their four children, Dennis Junior, David, and Michelle, while Tynia lives in Georgia. Altogether, Dennis and Carolyn had nine grandchildren, and one passed away.

During his first years in Baltimore Gaubatz sold cement in the offseasons. Starting in 1969, he sold heavy equipment for L.B. Smith. He and a partner also operated a small bar, "The Huddle." In Salisbury he owned a sub sandwich shop. Back in Texas, he sold heavy equipment for a year. After that, he took a construction job as a pipe fitter with Dow. Later, he became a Dow foreman and, even later, worked in contract administration. He retired from that position in 1997.

Except for losing the Super Bowl in 1969, Dennis has no regrets about his football career. He received a good football salary by standards of the 1960s, ranging from \$18,000 in 1965 to \$32,000 in 1969. Along with offseason work, he earned a comfortable living.

But to old-time gridiron heroes like the quiet Texan, the game was never about money or recognition. A hard-hitting, savvy linebacker, a tough team player dedicated to winning, and a modest family man, Dennis Gaubatz symbolized the kind of athlete who made the Baltimore Colts one of the NFL's greatest teams of the 1960s.