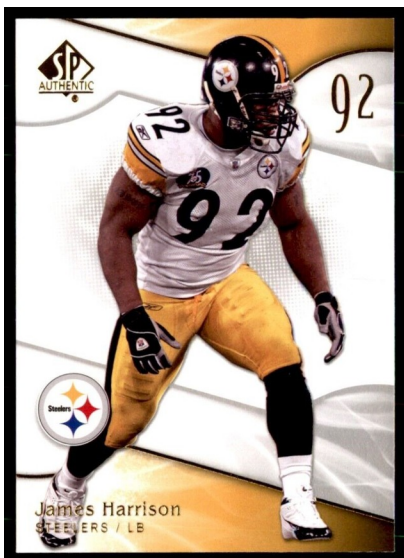


James Harrison

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Notorious for his hard-hitting, intimidating persona on the gridiron, James Henry Harrison Jr. (b. May 4, 1978) lived in the minds of the opposing offense. His 15-year professional career as a member of the Pittsburgh Steelers (2002-2012; 2014-2017), Cincinnati Bengals (2013), and New England Patriots (2017) was decorated with five Pro Bowl selections, four all-pro honors, 84.5 career sacks, and an NFL Defensive Player of the Year award.¹

Harrison's success rode on the values of hard work and dedication. He went from an undrafted rookie who was told he would never make it, to the game's most feared pass rusher. His former conditioning coach Tom Shaw said, "James wasn't supposed to be playing in the NFL. He wasn't drafted, and he bounced around a lot in his early years, but when he had an opportunity, he wanted to make the most of it, and he understood that from day one."² Harrison agrees with the sentiment reflecting, "I basically wanted to prove them wrong. When somebody tells you you can't do something, to sit there and eat it and take it as gospel when you believe in your heart that you can."³



His transformation to a star professional football player included five consecutive seasons (2007 to 2011) when he averaged nearly 11 sacks per year, forced 25 fumbles, and nabbed four interceptions.⁴ His best statistical regular season game occurred on November 5, 2007 on Monday Night Football against the Baltimore Ravens. Harrison



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racked up nine solo tackles, forced three fumbles, recorded an interception, and compiled 3.5 sacks of Baltimore quarterback Steve McNair, en route to a 38-7 victory.⁵

It was just the beginning for Harrison. He was voted to the 2007 Pro Bowl, was named first team all-conference by the Pro Football Writers Association, and second team all-pro by the Associated Press. His 8.5 sacks, seven forced fumbles, and 76 solo tackles were all tops on the league's second ranked defense.⁶ Head coach Mike Tomlin said, "He is a great player, and he has a great work ethic. His stature works in his favor. He is not a small guy; he is a short guy. I think that his advantage is a game of pad level. He can turn the corner, and he has enough power to run through and lean through contact."⁷

Forget that Harrison is only 6-feet tall because his pure strength at 275 pounds was an advantage due to his intense physical training regimen. Former teammate Ike Taylor said, "He [Harrison] figured himself out a long time ago. You have to figure your body out in this sport. He gets up every day at 6am and he has six or seven people on his staff just to look after his body. He keeps to a strict diet, he gets massages and all of that stuff. He's old-school, but he's smart."⁸

Steelers conditioning coordinator Garrett Giemont once said of him, "No one works harder than James. He is one of the most powerful players in the NFL, and much of the credit can be attributed to his legendary workout regimen."⁹ Harrison has been known to hip thrust 675 pounds, bench press over 425 pounds, and sled push nearly 1,800 pounds.

1 "James Harrison," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HarrJa23.htm>.

2 Veness, Simon. "How James Harrison survives the brutality of the NFL at 38," Theguardian.com, January 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2017/jan/19/james-harrison-pittsburgh-veteran-linebacker-nfl>.

3 Merrill, Elizabeth. "Harrison gives Steelers 'scary' presence," ESPN.com, January 23, 2009, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/playoffs2008/news/story?id=3855349>.

4 "James Harrison," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HarrJa23.htm>.

5 "Baltimore Ravens at Pittsburgh Steelers – November 5th, 2007," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/200711050pit.htm>.

6 "James Harrison," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HarrJa23.htm>.

7 Judge, Clark. "D MVP candidates: Awesome Albert has plenty of company," cbssports.com, November 19, 2008, <https://archive.ph/20120918090645/http://www.sportsline.com/nfl/story/11118196>.

8 Veness, Simon. "How James Harrison survives the brutality of the NFL at 38," Theguardian.com, January 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2017/jan/19/james-harrison-pittsburgh-veteran-linebacker-nfl>.

9 Rosenthal, James. "Train to be a powerhouse like James Harrison," muscleandfitness.com, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://www.muscleandfitness.com/athletes-celebrities/pro-tips/train-be-powerhouse-james-harrison/>.



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His training shone brightly in 2008 when he won the NFL Defensive Player of the Year award, beating out favorite and NFL sack leader DeMarcus Ware, all-pro defensive tackle Albert Haynesworth, and ball-hawking safety Ed Reed.¹⁰ He led the NFL with seven forced fumbles, piled up 16 sacks, and recorded 101 combined tackles. He was literally all over the field with his presence strongly felt. Perhaps no greater example of this was in Super Bowl XLIII against the Arizona Cardinals. With the Cardinals set up first-and-goal at the Pittsburgh two-yard line right before the half, Harrison stepped in front of a Kurt Warner pass at the goal line and returned it 100 yards for a touchdown that increased the Steelers' lead to 17-7.¹¹ On the play, Harrison broke at least two tackles, dodged his own teammates, and was finally tackled in the end zone by Arizona receivers Steve Breaston and Larry Fitzgerald. The play is known by many as the greatest play in Super Bowl history.¹² It set the Steelers franchise record for longest interception return and at the time, the longest play in Super Bowl history. Pittsburgh ended up coming from behind to win, 27-23, which notched Harrison's second Super Bowl ring – his first was in 2005 in the Steelers' Super Bowl XL victory.

Harrison followed up the 2008 campaign with two more solid years, totaling 10 sacks and five forced fumbles in 2009. Pittsburgh finished 9-7, missing the playoffs largely due to a five-game losing streak following a 6-2 start.¹³ He earned second team all-pro honors from the Associated Press and the *Sporting News*, including a trip to the Pro Bowl. In 2010, the Steelers made a return to the Super Bowl, but fell to the Green Bay Packers, 31-25. Harrison earned consensus first team all-pro honors, was a first team all-conference choice, finished third in the Defensive Player of the Year race, and earned his fourth consecutive trip to the Pro Bowl.¹⁴ He was also at the center of several questionable hits that drew attention from the league front office. For instance, he knocked out Cleveland Browns' Josh Cribbs and Mohamed Massaquoi with brutal hits commenting, “I don't want to see anyone injured, but I'm not opposed to hurting anyone. There is a difference. When you're injured, you can't play. But when you're hurt, you can shake it off and come back. I try to hurt people.”¹⁵ In total, he was fined approximately \$100,000 throughout the season.¹⁶

He played in 11 games during 2011 and 13 contests during the 2012 season, seeing his sack total drop from nine to six. After the 2012 season, Pittsburgh released him as a result of salary cap considerations. In April 2013, he signed with the Cincinnati Bengals¹⁷

1 0 Judge, Clark. “D MVP candidates: Awesome Albert has plenty of company,” cbssports.com, November 19, 2008, <https://archive.ph/20120918090645/http://www.sportsline.com/nfl/story/11118196>.

1 1 “Super Bowl XLIII – Pittsburgh Steelers vs. Arizona Cardinals – February 1st, 2009,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/200902010crd.htm>.

1 2 “Super Bowl XLIII – Pittsburgh Steelers vs. Arizona Cardinals – February 1st, 2009,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/200902010crd.htm>.



The Bengals called on him for his veteran leadership and ferocious play, but he lasted just one season, recording just 2 sacks in 10 starts. He re-signed with the Steelers in 2014, where he would spend the next three seasons.¹⁸ Mostly used in a reserve role, he averaged over five sacks per season, but the Steelers could not make a return to the Super Bowl.

Harrison's final season, 2017, saw him play in just six games, splitting time between Pittsburgh and the New England Patriots, who he signed with to make another run at a championship.¹⁹ Harrison played in Super Bowl LII, but New England fell to the Philadelphia Eagles, 41-33. In April 2018, he officially retired from the NFL after 15 seasons stating, "I've missed way too much for way too long... I'm done."²⁰ He finished his professional career as the Steelers all-time sacks leader (80.5), playing in 193 career games, making 117 starts. Ryan Clark, who played alongside Harrison for seven seasons praised his game, "You get hit by James, you feel it. It's over. He's not playing around out there. It's no joke to him."²¹ There is no question he wanted to win, learning a competitive edge from his high school football days.

Harrison grew up in Akron, Ohio, the youngest of 14 children. His father, James Sr. worked as a truck driver, while his mom, Mildred, raised the family. James was a gifted athlete in baseball, earning All-Star honors.²² He excelled on the track and field team at Coventry High School at the shot put and high jump, setting personal records of 15.63 m

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- 1 3 "James Harrison," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HarrJa23.htm>.
 - 1 4 "James Harrison," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HarrJa23.htm>.
 - 1 5 Cook, Ron. "Cook: James Harrison is most interesting Steeler ever," yorkdispatch.com, July 5, 2016, <https://www.yorkdispatch.com/story/sports/columnists/2016/07/05/cook-james-harrison-most-interesting-steeler-ever/86709234/>.
 - 1 6 Cook, Ron. "Cook: James Harrison is most interesting Steeler ever," yorkdispatch.com, July 5, 2016, <https://www.yorkdispatch.com/story/sports/columnists/2016/07/05/cook-james-harrison-most-interesting-steeler-ever/86709234/>.
 - 1 7 "James Harrison," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HarrJa23.htm>.
 - 1 8 "James Harrison," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HarrJa23.htm>.
 - 1 9 "James Harrison," ProFootballReference.com, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HarrJa23.htm>.
 - 2 0 Patra, Kevin. "Steelers great James Harrison announces retirement," NFL.com, April 16, 2018, <https://www.nfl.com/news/steelers-great-james-harrison-announces-retirement-0ap3000000926603>.
 - 2 1 Cook, Ron. "Cook: James Harrison is most interesting Steeler ever," yorkdispatch.com, July 5, 2016, <https://www.yorkdispatch.com/story/sports/columnists/2016/07/05/cook-james-harrison-most-interesting-steeler-ever/86709234/>.



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and 1.85 m, respectively.²³ Harrison was an All-State performer in the 4 x 100 m relay, too.

Due to his incredible athleticism, he also picked up football, and was among the star players on the team. His former high school teammates recall, “Oh man, Coach. Remember how he used to beat the hell out of us in practice?”²⁴ He developed his nastiness that festered, but was not the typical trash talker. Instead, James boasted a quiet confidence exhibited through his play, remembered his high school offensive coordinator Gary Hutt, “He was easy to hate. The way he looked, the way he didn't talk. ... He plays the game all the time.”²⁵

Harrison suffered from off-the-field issues that cost him scholarships from major Division 1 programs like Notre Dame, Nebraska, and Ohio State. As a result, he attended nearby Kent State University. Head football coach Dean Pees worked with Harrison off-the-field with academics, that led him to making the Dean's List.²⁶ His senior season in 2001 was by far the team's best in his time, finishing 6-5. On senior day against Miami (OH), he made a pivotal sack on future teammate Ben Roethlisberger to preserve a 24-20 victory. He totaled 98 tackles and led the Mid-American Conference with 15 sacks en route to a first team All-Conference choice.²⁷

In 2010, he was inducted to the school's Varsity K Hall of Fame. On the enshrinement Harrison said, “It's an honor whenever you get an award like that. I didn't look any further than getting the extra opportunity to play football that wasn't high school ball. You graduate (from high school) and move on. I was just looking at another opportunity to do something that I enjoy doing. Any accolades that came along with it were just icing on the cake.”²⁸

2 2 Merrill, Elizabeth. “Harrison gives Steelers 'scary' presence,” ESPN.com, January 23, 2009, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/playoffs2008/news/story?id=3855349>.

2 3 “James Harrison Track & Field Bio,” athletic.net, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://www.athletic.net/TrackAndField/Athlete.aspx?AID=141694>.

2 4 Merrill, Elizabeth. “Harrison gives Steelers 'scary' presence,” ESPN.com, January 23, 2009, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/playoffs2008/news/story?id=3855349>.

2 5 Merrill, Elizabeth. “Harrison gives Steelers 'scary' presence,” ESPN.com, January 23, 2009, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/playoffs2008/news/story?id=3855349>.

2 6 Varley, Teresa. “Kent State to honor Harrison,” steelers.com, February 23, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180126210257/http://www.steelers.com/news/article-1/Kent-State-to-honor-Harrison/6f6996e0-3fd2-4bf6-9861-323f7321905a>.

2 7 Varley, Teresa. “Kent State to honor Harrison,” steelers.com, February 23, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180126210257/http://www.steelers.com/news/article-1/Kent-State-to-honor-Harrison/6f6996e0-3fd2-4bf6-9861-323f7321905a>.

2 8 Varley, Teresa. “Kent State to honor Harrison,” steelers.com, February 23, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180126210257/http://www.steelers.com/news/article-1/Kent-State-to-honor-Harrison/6f6996e0-3fd2-4bf6-9861-323f7321905a>.



Pees credits bringing Harrison on as the pivotal moment in turning the school's football program back on a path for success. He said, "I was starting a program where I needed to have guys doing things the right way, and I needed him to set a good example. It was the same thing in football. I mean, the guy he was playing behind wasn't even close to as good as he was. He knew it. I knew it. He also knew I wasn't going to change. I wasn't going to play him until he gave me what he had. When he buys in, the sky's the limit."²⁹ Harrison thanked his alma mater with a \$100,000 donation. In 2013, the school retired his number 16.³⁰

Harrison's NFL career began in 2002 when he signed with the Steelers as an undrafted free agent. Over the next three seasons, he was cut four times, spent two years on the Steelers' practice squad, and a year overseas in NFL Europe in the Baltimore Ravens organization. He faced much criticism from teammates early on due to his immaturity. Former teammate linebacker James Farrior recalled, "He was just like any other rookie. He really didn't know the D. We'd be in practice, in training camp, and he might not know what he was doing so he'd just stop and throw his hands up and tell them to get him out of there. We thought the guy was crazy."³¹

At a near rock bottom moment, Harrison temporarily pondered other careers such as a truck driver, following in the footsteps of his father, or a veterinarian due to his love for animals. His final shot came in 2004 with Pittsburgh at training camp, where he buckled down, "I wanted to feel like if I did get cut, I gave it everything I could. There was nothing else I could do. It started making sense."³² Harrison stepped in when Clark Haggans suffered a weightlifting accident that year, then in 2007 when Pittsburgh cut Joey Porter, Harrison stepped right in, becoming among the league's best.

For his rough character on the field, Harrison feels they misinterpret it, "You have some people who portray me as a thug."³³ But James has a soft spot, touching the lives of sick patients on his frequent visits to hospitals. Hutt said, "He goes to the children's hospitals

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- 2 9 Varley, Teresa. "Kent State to honor Harrison," steelers.com, February 23, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180126210257/http://www.steelers.com/news/article-1/Kent-State-to-honor-Harrison/6f6996e0-3fd2-4bf6-9861-323f7321905a>.
 - 3 0 Varley, Teresa. "Kent State to honor Harrison," steelers.com, February 23, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180126210257/http://www.steelers.com/news/article-1/Kent-State-to-honor-Harrison/6f6996e0-3fd2-4bf6-9861-323f7321905a>.
 - 3 1 Merrill, Elizabeth. "Harrison gives Steelers 'scary' presence," ESPN.com, January 23, 2009, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/playoffs2008/news/story?id=3855349>.
 - 3 2 Merrill, Elizabeth. "Harrison gives Steelers 'scary' presence," ESPN.com, January 23, 2009, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/playoffs2008/news/story?id=3855349>.



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quite a bit. I know a lot of guys who do that, but he does it on his own. When he walks into a room, he's just really quiet. But there is a softer side of him.”³⁴

End Notes:

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- 3 3 Merrill, Elizabeth. “Harrison gives Steelers 'scary' presence,” ESPN.com, January 23, 2009, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/playoffs2008/news/story?id=3855349>.
- 3 4 Merrill, Elizabeth. “Harrison gives Steelers 'scary' presence,” ESPN.com, January 23, 2009, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/playoffs2008/news/story?id=3855349>.