

LT

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 1999

By Joe Horrigan

"If there ever was a Superman in the NFL," said former Washington Redskins quarterback Joe Theismann, "I think he wore number 56 for the Giants." Although it is high praise to be compared to the fictitious Man of Steel, in Lawrence Taylor's case it is absolutely appropriate.

Taylor, a dominant force in pro football, changed the outside linebacker position from a "read-and-react" posture to an aggressive attack style of play. An intense player, he had the speed to run past offensive linemen and the strength to out-muscle them. He was a major factor in the reversal of fortunes the Giants experienced during the 1980s and early 1990s. Starting in his first season with the team, the Giants began a 10-season streak in which they made the playoffs six times and won two Super Bowls. Prior to his arrival in 1981 as a first-round draft choice from North Carolina, the Giants hadn't been to the playoffs in 17 consecutive years.

During his 13 remarkable seasons in New York, Taylor "officially" recorded 132.5 quarterback sacks, 1,088 tackles, 33 forced fumbles, 10 fumble recoveries, and nine interceptions. Add to that the fact that his sack total does not include the 9.5 he recorded as a rookie, since the quarterback sack did not become an official NFL statistic until 1982.

Although he was a sensational pro player from the start, Taylor was a rather unimpressive participant in the sport as a youngster with a city league football team in his hometown of Williamsburg, Virginia. In fact it wasn't until his junior year in high school, and only after constant coaxing from an assistant football coach, that he even gave high school ball a try.

"He wasn't that good in his junior year," teammate Dean Raynes recalled in a 1984 *New York Times Magazine* article. "We use to push him around. He wasn't real big. He wasn't real strong. We use to get out there and knock him around."

However, during the summer following his junior year, Taylor grew four inches and added 20 pounds. According to Raynes, Taylor's self confidence also seemed to grow that summer. "It was amazing. It was like he was saying 'I'm going to be great,'" Raynes said. "He was so much better than your average high school football player. I don't know what happened to him that summer."

Still, even after earning all-state honors as a linebacker his senior year, only two major colleges, the University of Richmond and the University of North Carolina, made concerted efforts to recruit him. Taylor chose North Carolina. "My mom was always the one who gave me most advice," he said, "but when my pop had an opinion, I listened." "I knew he was very proud that North Carolina, a good football school, had made me an offer -- and he never let me forget what an opportunity that represented. I knew he was right."

Taylor initially played on the defensive line at North Carolina. However, his coaches eventually realized that with his uncommon speed, linebacker was the position that suited him best. Although he was first used on the inside, he was eventually shifted to the outside linebacker position. With an uncanny ability to sense where a play was going and a wildly aggressive, though somewhat undisciplined style of play, Taylor quickly began to draw national attention.

In his junior season he recorded 80 solo tackles, five sacks, and recovered seven fumbles in just an 11-game span. The following season, even though he was already drawing double- and even triple-team coverage, he logged 69 unassisted tackles. Twenty-two of those tackles were losses behind the line of scrimmage and 16 were quarterback sacks. He also recovered three fumbles. His outstanding play earned him All-America honors and was named the Atlantic Coast Conference Player of the Year.

Following the season, then-Giants coach Ray Perkins visited Chapel Hill to meet Taylor and review game films. By the time the young defensive star made his way to the team film room, Perkins, who had been viewing game footage, was already sold. When asked if he should run through some drills for Perkins, the coach told Taylor, "I just saw all I needed to see." Taylor was the first-round draft pick of the Giants and the second player selected overall in the 1981 NFL draft.

The 6-3, 237-pound rookie wasted no time in demonstrating his raw talent. In a rookie scrimmage he recorded four quarterback sacks and a fumble recovery. In his first pre-season game, he logged 10 tackles and two quarterback sacks. By season's end, the phenomenal first-year player recorded a career-high 133 tackles, 9.5 sacks, 8 passes defensed, two forced fumbles, a fumble recovery, and an interception. Named to the first of his nine consecutive first-team All-Pro squads, Taylor earned every rookie and defensive post-season honor possible.

From the start, LT, as he became known, was the consummate team player. "That's what separated him from a lot of players," said former Giants coach Bill Parcells. "Some guys were more 'me' guys, interested in personal things. With Lawrence it was always, 'Did we win and who do we play next?'"

Taylor was without a doubt a tremendous talent, but most observers will agree that it was his desire that set him apart from the pack. "He's a parking lot guy," Parcells once commented. "He'd play in the parking lot without anybody watching him."

His passion for the game was infectious. "He inspires people," Parcells said. "He always has. Ultimately, it's what separates good players from great ones."

Perhaps at no time was Taylor's inspiration more apparent than in a game against the Minnesota Vikings on December 9, 1990. After a 10-0 start to the season, the Giants lost back-to-back games against the Philadelphia Eagles and the San Francisco 49ers. The team desperately needed a win over the Vikings, not only to stop the hemorrhaging, but also to clinch their second-straight NFC East title. "Losing three straight would have been very detrimental," offered linebacker Gary Reasons.

Minnesota, after gaining 175 yards on offense in the first half, maintained a 12-3 lead at the game's halfway mark. The usually tough Giants defense was victimized by poor pass coverage, missed tackles, and virtually no quarterback pressure. At halftime, a visibly annoyed Taylor led the Giants charge to the locker room. There he gave a no-holds-barred accounting of what he thought of the defense's play. When asked later what he said, he simply replied, "I talked, if they listened, they listened." Fellow linebacker Steve DeOssie remembered Taylor's "pep talk." "That's not the way the Giants play defense," he recalled Taylor shouting. "Lawrence said, 'we were going to go out there and do it the way it was supposed to be done.'"

In the second half, the Giants' did exactly that. The defense limited Minnesota quarterback Rich Gannon to just five completions for 45 yards and held running back Herschel Walker to 32 yards. The Vikings' offense gained just 16 yards over the game's final 24 minutes and 50 seconds. Backing up his words with action, Taylor collected 12 tackles, including 9 solo stops, 2.5 sacks, and forced a fumble. He was especially effective in the fourth quarter when he combined with lineman Mike Fox for a sack, forced a fumble, and pressured Gannon into hurrying a pass that was intercepted by Reasons.

"He won't let us lose," Parcells said after the game. "Nothing that guy does surprises me. He's a great, great player -- the best defensive player over the last 10 years and it's not close for second."

Parcell's adulation for LT was sincere. "When I'm done, I'm going to remember a lot of things, because I've seen a lot of things," the Giants coach said. "Mostly," he continued, "I'm going to remember him." When asked in a 1990 interview by sportswriter Mike Lupica what Parcells remembered best about Taylor, he was quick to answer. "Oh, the New Orleans game two years ago," he said. "Oh, sure, that was the one."

Most LT observers agree that the November 27, 1988 game against the New Orleans Saints was Taylor's finest performance in a career brimming with outstanding achievements. In that game, the Giants played without quarterback Phil Simms and linebacker Carl Banks who were nursing injuries. Taylor, who was suffering from a detached ligament and a torn muscle in his right shoulder, should have joined them on the sidelines.

Wearing a harness to keep his shoulder in place, a courageous Taylor somehow managed to record an incredible seven tackles, three sacks, and two forced fumbles. Several times during the course of the game, the valiant warrior laid on the turf clutching his injured shoulder. Each time, however, he managed to find enough strength to return to the huddle for one more play.

His first sack and forced fumble came when he wrapped up quarterback Bobby Hebert at the Giants' 24-yard line, stalling a potential scoring drive. With the Giants trailing 9-7 in the third quarter, Taylor added two more sacks and a forced fumble, keeping the Giants' hopes for a victory alive. Finally, with just 21 seconds remaining, kicker Paul McFadden booted a game winning field goal for a 13-12 Giants victory.

"I thought that was his most spectacular game," declared Parcels "I thought it was his finest hour from a courage standpoint."

"I remember going into the training room and wanting to cry because it felt like somebody had torn my shoulder off my body," Taylor later recalled.

As impressive as his performance was, playing with pain was nothing new for LT. In fact, even with his "all-out" style of play, the durable Taylor never missed a game due to injury in high school, college, or the pros, until a hamstring injury caused him to miss a game midway through the 1987 season.

Throughout his career, LT maintained that he played the game because "it was fun." However, quarterbacks who faced the Giants' sack master found playing against him to be anything but fun.

St. Louis Cardinals quarterback Neil Lomax, who came into the league with Taylor in 1981, faced him twice each year until 1989. "We'd run at him. We'd throw at him. We'd have three guys on him. It didn't seem to matter," Lomax recalled. "Problem was if you concentrated on him too much, they always had other great players who would get you. So, even when he wasn't getting a sack he was making an impact."

Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Ron Jaworski was also a frequent target for the hard-charging linebacker. Twelve and a half times Taylor lowered the boom on the "Polish Rifle." "He was simply the most dynamic player I ever faced," Jaworski said. "In 17 years in the game, I faced a lot of great players. But I can't think of anyone else where you could think of nothing but him. The Giants had so many great defensive players, but when you talked about the Giants you were talking about Taylor."

Joe Theismann faced LT for five seasons, until an unfortunate hit by Taylor ended the veteran passer's career. "It's funny," Theismann once said, "everyone calls him the best in the game, but I don't think he ever got the credit he deserves."

Taylor's on-the-field accomplishments were many. However, his finest statistical season came in 1986 when he had a career-high 20.5 sacks, 105 total tackles, five passes defensed and two forced fumbles. Not surprisingly, he was a unanimous choice for the NFL's Most Valuable Player award, becoming the first defensive player to be so recognized since Alan Page in 1976.

Named to 10 Pro Bowls, the NFL's 1980s All-Decade Team, and the NFL's 75th Anniversary Team, Taylor was often referred to as a "prototype." However, as one sportswriter once wrote, "Taylor wasn't just the first to do what he did. Nor was he simply the best. He was the only."

With his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Lawrence Taylor will be forever remembered as one of the game's greatest performers -- a true pro football superman.