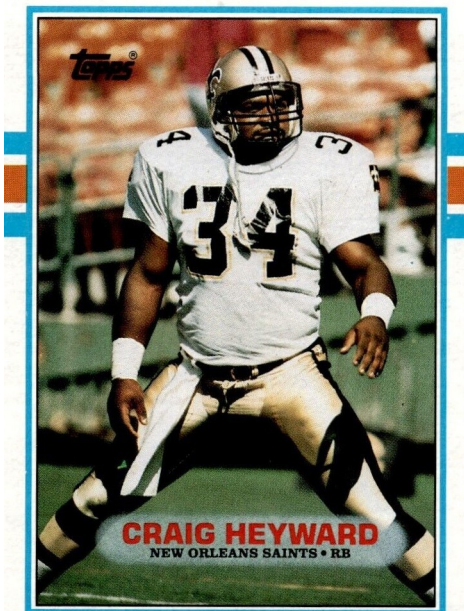


Craig Heyward

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Craig “Ironhead” Heyward always posed a problem for the defense when he stepped onto the football field. His 5’11” and nearly 300 pound stature was misleading because he possessed uncanny speed for his size and a nasty, competitive attitude.¹ ESPN sportswriter Len Pasquarelli described him as, “He was one of the toughest, nastiest SOB’s that I have encountered in 28 years of covering the NFL, a man whose menacing scowl could seemingly strip paint from a wall, and who reveled in his own brute physicality and took glee from imposing his strength on others.”²

Heyward enjoyed a productive, 11-year NFL career that spanned five different clubs: the New Orleans Saints, Atlanta Falcons, Chicago Bears, St. Louis Rams, and Indianapolis Colts. He totaled 4,301 rushing yards and 30 rushing touchdowns, while hauling in 177 passes that yielded 1,559 yards and four touchdowns.³ His versatility was heavily utilized as he rotated between fullback and halfback.



Heyward's professional career began when he was selected by the New Orleans Saints with the 24th pick in the 1988 NFL draft.⁴ New Orleans General Manager Jim Finks labeled him, “the best blocking back in the league.”⁵ As an example, in a game against the Seattle Seahawks, Heyward smashed Brian Bosworth on six consecutive plays that resulted in Bosworth having enough. Saints quarterback Bobby Hebert recalled, “After



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about the third time, Bosworth was crying. Honest. Tears were rolling down his face, because he didn't want Ironhead to hit him anymore. He cried 'Uncle!' for real. Ironhead, he just laughed at him.”⁶

In his first two seasons, Heyward served as the blocking back for Dalton Hilliard, who was the team's leading rusher. Hilliard enjoyed success running behind Heyward, yielding a 1,262 yard output in 1989.⁷ Hilliard led the league in touches and was named to the Pro Bowl and to the second all-pro team by the Associated Press and the *Newspaper Ent Association*.⁸

In 1990, Heyward took over the starting fullback duties. He contributed 720 total yards and four touchdowns, leading the Saints in rushing.⁹ Under Jim Mora, New Orleans enjoyed success, making three playoff appearances in five seasons. New Orleans won double-digit games three times and claimed the 1991 NFC West Division title, turning in an 11-5 record.¹⁰ It was the franchise's first division title since joining the NFL in 1967.

Heyward was released by the team following the 1992 season. He then signed a contract with the Chicago Bears for the 1993 season, blocking for backs Tim Worley and Neal Anderson. The Bears struggled to a 7-9 mark under Dave Wannstedt, losing their final four games.¹¹ Heyward was released by Chicago, then signed with Atlanta for the 1994 campaign, where he would spend his next three years.

¹ “Craig Heyward,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HeywCr00.htm>.

² Spence, Blaine. “Craig Heyward: A Man Called 'Ironhead',” bleacherreport.com, September 26, 2009, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/261862-craig-heyward-a-man-called-ironhead>.

³ “Craig Heyward,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HeywCr00.htm>.

⁴ “Craig Heyward,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HeywCr00.htm>.

⁵ Spence, Blaine. “Craig Heyward: A Man Called 'Ironhead',” bleacherreport.com, September 26, 2009, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/261862-craig-heyward-a-man-called-ironhead>.

⁶ Spence, Blaine. “Craig Heyward: A Man Called 'Ironhead',” bleacherreport.com, September 26, 2009, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/261862-craig-heyward-a-man-called-ironhead>.

⁷ “Dalton Hilliard,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HillDa00.htm>.

⁸ “Dalton Hilliard,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HillDa00.htm>.

⁹ “Craig Heyward,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HeywCr00.htm>.

¹⁰ “New Orleans Saints Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/nor/>.

¹¹ “1993 Chicago Bears Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/chi/1993.htm>.



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In Atlanta, he reunited with New Orleans teammate Bobby Hebert.¹² Under June Jones' offense, Atlanta ranked in the top 10 in yards gained. Heyward starred as the feature back, leading the team in rushing with 779 yards, gaining over 1,000 total yards in 1994.¹³ The Falcons improved from 7-9 to 9-7 in 1995, qualifying for the playoffs for the first time in four seasons, behind Heyward's stellar, 1,000 yard rushing season.¹⁴ Unfortunately for Atlanta, they met the Green Bay Packers in the playoffs who beat them, 37-20. The Packers eventually advanced to the NFC Championship Game against the Super Bowl Champion Dallas Cowboys.

The Falcons regressed to a morbid 3-13 record in 1996, releasing Heyward following the season.¹⁵ He then moved on to St. Louis, starting in 12 of 16 contests the following season. His production declined because head coach Dick Vermeil favored a pass heavy offense. St. Louis struggled to a 5-11 mark and Heyward moved on to Indianapolis for his final season in 1998.¹⁶ He played in just four contests due to medical reasons.

Heyward complained about blurred vision. Doctors discovered a large, malignant tumor on his brain stem. Forced to retire, he underwent surgery that mostly removed the tumor.¹⁷ Nearly a decade later in 2005, he suffered a stroke that paralyzed him and caused partial blindness. Sadly, the next year Heyward passed away from cancer at the age of 39.¹⁸ He played in 149 career games, making 107 starts and averaged 4.2 yards per rush.¹⁹

Heyward was an outstanding back in college at the University of Pittsburgh, where he played three seasons. His senior season in 1987 was monumental. He was the nation's leading rusher, accounting for 1,791 rushing yards and 12 touchdowns for an average of 4.6 yards per carry.²⁰ The Panthers turned in an 8-3 regular season, their best mark since 1983, losing to Texas in the Bluebonnet Bowl, 32-27. As a result, Heyward earned first-

¹ 2 “Craig Heyward,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HeywCr00.htm>.

¹ 3 “1994 Atlanta Falcons Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/at/1994.htm>.

¹ 4 “Atlanta Falcons Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/at/>.

¹ 5 “Atlanta Falcons Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/at/>.

¹ 6 “1997 St. Louis Rams Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/ram/1997.htm>.

¹ 7 Spence, Blaine. “Craig Heyward: A Man Called 'Ironhead',” bleacherreport.com, September 26, 2009, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/261862-craig-heyward-a-man-called-ironhead>.

¹ 8 Spence, Blaine. “Craig Heyward: A Man Called 'Ironhead',” bleacherreport.com, September 26, 2009, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/261862-craig-heyward-a-man-called-ironhead>.

¹ 9 “Craig Heyward,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HeywCr00.htm>.



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team All-American honors and he finished fifth in the Heisman trophy balloting.²¹ He decided to turn pro with one year of eligibility remaining.

For his college career, Heyward amassed 3,086 rushing yards and 24 touchdowns. He was one of seven Panthers drafted in the 1988 NFL draft, the team's only first round selection.²² The 1987 season was memorable for Pitt and for Heyward. The opening game, a 27-17 win over BYU, exacted revenge from a defeat in 1984 that saw Heyward run for 133 yards and toss a 17-yard touchdown pass.²³ Pitt also won close games against rivals West Virginia (6-3), Penn State (10-0), and No. 4 Notre Dame (30-22).²⁴ Head coach Mike Gottfried pleaded for Heyward to stay at school for his senior season, but he was granted eligibility for the draft.

Craig William Heyward was born on September 26, 1966 in Passaic, New Jersey. He attended Passaic High School prior to the University of Pittsburgh.²⁵ Growing up, he earned the nickname “Ironhead” from his middle school days. One day, he spent time at the local Boys & Girls Club when a fight broke out between him and another kid that saw the kid break a pool cue over his head.²⁶ Craig felt no effects. After hearing of the story, his grandmother dubbed him, “Ironhead.” The nickname stuck with Craig through high school and into college.²⁷ His size coupled with the nickname was intimidating, however, on the inside, Ironhead had a soft spot. He thoroughly enjoyed being the center of attention.

Sports were big to him, thus encouraging his four sons - Craig Jr., Cameron, Corey, and Connor – all who played sports at the collegiate or professional levels.²⁸ Cameron and Connor play defensive end and tight end, respectively, for the Pittsburgh Steelers. Cameron wrote regarding the topic, “My dad loved it – every minute of it. He ate it up.

² 0 “Craig Heyward,” SportsReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/players/craig-heyward-2.html>.

² 1 “Craig Heyward,” SportsReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/players/craig-heyward-2.html>.

² 2 “Craig Heyward,” SportsReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/players/craig-heyward-2.html>.

² 3 Spence, Blaine. “Craig Heyward: A Man Called 'Ironhead',” bleacherreport.com, September 26, 2009, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/261862-craig-heyward-a-man-called-ironhead>.

² 4 “1987 Pitt Panthers Scheduled and Results,” SportsReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/pittsburgh/1987-schedule.html>.

² 5 “Craig Heyward,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/H/HeywCr00.htm>.

² 6 Heyward, Cameron. “For Ironhead,” theplayertribune.com, August 11, 2016, <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/cameron-heyward-steelers-tribute-ironhead>.

² 7 Heyward, Cameron. “For Ironhead,” theplayertribune.com, August 11, 2016, <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/cameron-heyward-steelers-tribute-ironhead>.

² 8 Heyward, Cameron. “For Ironhead,” theplayertribune.com, August 11, 2016, <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/cameron-heyward-steelers-tribute-ironhead>.



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And because he was so popular, and people paid so much attention to him, he always wanted to be the life of the party. He was always trying to do the unexpected, just to make those around him smile and laugh.”²⁹ Cameron also recalls a time during middle school when he received an award at an assembly. Craig showed up, creating a sight to behold. Cameron said, “So I’m sitting there waiting to get the award, and I look over and see my dad roll up wearing – I kid you not – an all-gold satin suit. ... In front of all my friends, my teachers, everybody. ... It was ridiculous. I mean, who does that? And, like ... why? But that was my dad. And, looking back on it, I can’t say I was all that surprised at the time. Dad wore that suit just to be different – to turn heads.”³⁰ Of course, Cameron has no regrets. He remembers, “It was a huge hit, of course. The kids loved it. And that experience was exactly in line with the man I grew up loving. He did stuff like that every single day, just to make things interesting. That’s the quality in my dad that I remember most.”³¹

Craig’s soft spot extended beyond his family, to the public, that originated during his college days. Cameron said, “And one thing about my dad is that he always showed love in return. It wasn’t a one-way thing. When he was playing at Pitt, he really enjoyed visiting patients at Children’s Hospital. He always looked forward to those trips. He genuinely cared about those kids, and those experiences were important to him.”³² Cameron also recalled his father participating in volunteer work at the local Goodwill in Pittsburgh, giving pointers on how the workers can increase the efficiency of their processes.³³

² 9 Heyward, Cameron. “For Ironhead,” theplayertribune.com, August 11, 2016, <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/cameron-heyward-steelers-tribute-ironhead>.

³ 0 Heyward, Cameron. “For Ironhead,” theplayertribune.com, August 11, 2016, <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/cameron-heyward-steelers-tribute-ironhead>.

³ 1 Heyward, Cameron. “For Ironhead,” theplayertribune.com, August 11, 2016, <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/cameron-heyward-steelers-tribute-ironhead>.

³ 2 Heyward, Cameron. “For Ironhead,” theplayertribune.com, August 11, 2016, <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/cameron-heyward-steelers-tribute-ironhead>.

³ 3 Heyward, Cameron. “For Ironhead,” theplayertribune.com, August 11, 2016, <https://www.theplayertribune.com/articles/cameron-heyward-steelers-tribute-ironhead>.