

Ngata a force to be reckoned with

Raven has a craving for ball carriers and making himself the NFL's best defensive tackle



- [Sun archives: Sense of loss drives Ngata](#)

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Like most [NFL](#) defensive tackles, [Haloti Ngata](#) has an insatiable appetite.

The 6-foot-4, 345-pound Ravens lineman loves to devour Italian food (except during the season when he tries to keep healthy), anything with curry and his latest favorite - Maryland steamed crabs.

At Glen Burnie's Seaside Restaurant, Ngata will go through a dozen of the largest crabs without breaking a sweat. If you try to interrupt him, the affable Ngata has been known to strike a glare that would make [Kansas City Chiefs](#) running back [Larry Johnson](#) shudder, showing he has become a true Baltimore guy.

"When he's eating crabs, you don't really get many words out of him," said his wife of two years, Christina. "He's pretty serious."

What separates Ngata from most of the elite run stoppers is his hunger for something else. As he prepares for next Sunday's season opener against the Chiefs, Ngata remains driven to learn as much as possible, knowing he can dominate as much with his mind as his muscle.

After practices, he will chat with six-time Pro Bowl center [Matt Birk](#) about the best way to place his hands to shrug off blocks. During film study, he's taking notes on tendencies of offenses so he can anticipate plays before the ball is snapped.

Ravens coaches proudly call Ngata a student of the game. Ngata, though, takes similar pride in being a student in college.

Four years ago, he left the University of Oregon after his junior season to enter the NFL draft because he wanted to help pay for the hospital bills for his mother, who was in the early stages of kidney dialysis. She died a week later.

This offseason, Ngata, 25, returned to school to get his sociology degree. He is 12 credits shy of graduating from the University of Utah, which is close to his offseason home.

"He made his promise to his mom that he would finish school," Christina Ngata said. "I think that has always been in the back of his mind."

Ngata is one of three Ravens to take college classes this year, but he could find himself in a more select company soon. With his contract up after the 2010 season, he might soon

become one of the highest-paid defensive players in the NFL.

Still, as defensive tackle Albert Haynesworth was signing his \$100 million deal with the [Washington Redskins](#), Ngata was stressing over giving an oral report on whether players prefer to play on grass or artificial turf. It was part of a sociology research class, and he got an "A."

So why is Ngata putting himself through this?

"The next contract is never guaranteed," Ngata said. "There are so many things that can happen between now and then. I want to place myself in a good position when football is done. It helps kids in the community to finish school. It's great that I can be a role model that way, too."

Driven to succeed

Ngata's intensity has surprised some NFL observers. Just minutes after he was selected 12th overall by the Ravens in the 2006 draft, [ESPN](#) analyst Mark Schlereth questioned the lineman's effort, saying, "You're going to need a propane torch to light a fire under this guy."

But others never doubted him. One team official said [New England Patriots](#) coach Bill Belichick called [Ozzie Newsome](#) that weekend and told the Ravens' general manager that he secured the best player in the draft (Newsome would neither confirm nor deny this).

After three seasons of controlling the middle, Ngata has few critics now. He is running, shoving and hitting from the time the ball is snapped until the whistle is blown.

When he isn't on the field, Ngata is continuing to work. He likes to pick the brain of Birk, who went against two of the best linemen - Pat and Kevin Williams - in practice with the [Minnesota Vikings](#).

Playing on the interior line, Ngata has to dissect plays quickly or get blindsided by a double team - which would be a 600-pound mistake.

"That's what the great ones do," Birk said. "They're always wanting to learn."

Although he doesn't get as much camera time as [Ray Lewis](#) or [Joe Flacco](#), Ngata often is considered one of the most valuable players on the Ravens. His impact can be measured by the Ravens' run defense.

In 2005, the year before drafting Ngata, the Ravens ranked No. 9 against the run, giving up 99.4 yards per game. In three seasons with the hulking lineman, the Ravens finished second in 2006, second in 2007 and third in 2008. The most rushing yards given up in that span was 81.4 per game (2008).

"He's the most dominant defensive lineman we've had since [Sam Adams](#)," said Lewis, referring to the two-time Pro Bowl lineman who played on the team that won the January 2001 [Super Bowl](#).

Pro Bowl-bound?

Where does Ngata stack up against the rest of the NFL's elite defensive linemen?

He is just as disruptive as Haynesworth. He is just as athletic as the [Cleveland Browns'](#)

Shaun Rogers.

But Ngata has yet to be elected to a Pro Bowl, which Ravens guard Ben Grubbs calls "mind-boggling."

"I might be biased, but he's No. 1 in my book," Grubbs said. "You have to bring your 'A' game every game. He has everything that a good Pro Bowl defensive lineman has to have."

Ngata refuses to complain. He just rolls up his sleeves once again.

"I have to work harder and play harder and make more plays to make people out there believe that I deserve to be in the Pro Bowl," he said. "It's pushing me harder and harder to make plays."

Ngata appears on the verge of breaking out with the national media. Sports Illustrated recently noted that Ngata has a chance to be the best defensive tackle in the NFL.

Daniel Jeremiah, a former scout for the Ravens and Browns who evaluates the NFL on his Web site, movesthesticks.com, said Ngata deserves to be mentioned among the likes of Haynesworth and Rogers. After seeing Ngata receive increased chances to rush the passer in the [preseason](#), Jeremiah predicted the Ravens lineman would be this year's Defensive Player of the Year.

"He is going to have six or seven sacks on one of the top defenses in the league," Jeremiah said. "And Haloti hasn't even become what he is going to be. He's still getting better."

Hard to believe

Few defensive linemen can match Ngata's athleticism or versatility.

In his first game, the 2006 season opener, Ngata returned an interception 60 yards at Tampa Bay only to come up 9 yards short of the goal line. In the second preseason game this year, he returned an interception 25 yards for a touchdown.

Besides those achievements, Ngata lined up as a linebacker, offensive lineman and fullback last season. "Hopefully, I can get the ball on offense this year," Ngata said.

When the Ravens watch film of Ngata, the coaches sometimes shake their heads in disbelief.

"Some of the things he does athletically freak you out," defensive line coach Clarence Brooks said. "That's God-given. But that's not the only thing that carries him. He works at it."

If the Ravens have learned anything about Ngata - whether it's playing the [Pittsburgh Steelers](#) or studying for a sociology class - he will not get outworked.

"I feel like I have a lot to learn," Ngata said. "I feel like if I'm always thinking that way, I'll push myself to the limits to get better and better."

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