



The True Test of Courage

Defensive tackle Haloti Ngata is the Ravens' representative of courage for the Week 1 game against the Kansas City Chiefs. by Patrick Gleason
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The most intense battles on a football field take place in the trenches. In order to survive, linemen must be tough, they must be powerful, and they must be bold.

As unbridled force erupts at the line of scrimmage, players try to impose their will, all while demonstrating what may be the most important characteristic of all – courage.

[Haloti Ngata](#) is one of these players. Not a single person questions his durability, brute strength and brazen desire on the gridiron. Certainly, to coaches, teammates and opponents alike, he is someone who exemplifies NFL courage.

There is also another side to the mammoth warrior that very few know about, one that has nothing to do with football. In what was a measure of courage he possessed at a very young age, Ngata fought a battle that quickly revealed the type of man he was destined to become.

Born in Los Angeles, he spent the early part of his childhood living in the Hawthorne area with his parents, two older brothers and a younger sister and brother.

Around the age of 8, just prior to his family's move to Salt Lake City, Ngata witnessed his older brothers, Finau and Solomon Jr., become interested in Los Angeles' gang culture. Several of Haloti's cousins were members of the Tongan Crip Gang – more commonly known as the TCG – and they began to expose Finau and "Junior" to deviant and dangerous behavior.

“They were 12 and 10 when we moved to Utah,” Haloti recalls about his older brothers’ initial involvement in the gang. “It all started in L.A. because they were hanging with my cousins, and they wanted that lifestyle that they thought was so great. When we moved to Utah, they found some other guys who were involved in the same thing, and it carried on from there.”

After the Ngatas settled into their new home, Finau and Junior firmly planted themselves within Salt Lake City’s TCG. Though they played sports in their early teenage years, neither ended up graduating from high school. Instead, the two focused on gang life, regularly tagging graffiti, committing robberies and doing other crimes that to this day, Haloti believes he doesn’t know all about.

“It was tough for my parents,” he explains, noting that his father, Solomon Sr., worked the night shift as a security guard, and his mother, Olga, stayed at home to help the children with school and sports activities. “My parents tried so hard to pull them away from it. There were daily arguments about what they should do and how they’d discipline them. Being from the Polynesian Islands, my dad was more about physical punishment. But my mom, she used emotional discipline and would talk about how much they were hurting the family. Either way, it didn’t seem to work. It hurt our family because it separated us.”

However, Haloti didn’t let his brothers’ damaging actions affect him. Even as Finau and Junior attempted to recruit him into gang activities, he wouldn’t allow himself to get caught up with the TCG. Holding true to what he felt was right – and hoping that he could ease his parents’ tensions – Haloti battled against his brothers’ pressure and followed a different route.

“At first, I was more scared of getting involved with it because I didn’t want to be punished by my parents,” he remembers. “Then, I realized how my brothers’ troubles were affecting my parents, and I didn’t want to hurt them that way. I didn’t want them to feel the same way about me, and I didn’t want to lose opportunities that I saw slipping away from my brothers.”

Instead, Haloti focused on his studies and sports. While his brothers continued to have run-ins with the law, Haloti blossomed into a star on the football field. As a senior in 2001, he was named Utah’s Gatorade Player of the Year, and he earned the distinction of the nation’s top defensive recruit.

“I was that kid who stayed in school, played hard in a lot of sports and always worked out,” affirms Haloti, who went on to earn a scholarship to the University of Oregon. “As a teenager, when I went home, I was too tired to do anything else, and I would fall asleep. I forced myself to never have the urge to go out and do that gang stuff.”

After receiving All-American honors for the Ducks and being selected as the Ravens’ first-round pick in 2006, Haloti was able to reflect and feel confident about the choices he made growing up. Quickly, it became clear that his distinct path was limitless, while his

brothers' had come to an abrupt end.

“Finau and Junior were in and out of prison all the time,” he states. “At one point, I don't think they saw each other for seven years. In addition to that being a burden on our family, it's also sad because I believe they are more athletic than I am. They were great players and had potential. They had all the talent, all the strength and all the power. And then, they let it go to waste.”

Nowadays, Haloti speaks with his older brothers frequently. After serving his time, Finau has worked tirelessly to make amends in his life. He currently holds a solid job and is married with one child. Junior was recently released from prison and is finishing his parole. Intent on repairing the damage he's done to himself and his family, he's striving to get on track.

“I am very proud of them now,” Haloti declares. “They are working to clear their names and move their lives along. Everything is different now, because they're taking the right steps to move forward the right way.

“They always say how proud they are of me. They're so happy that I went against what their lifestyle was and did something productive with my life. Really, they're just happy that I can represent the Ngata name in a good way. They feel they embarrassed our name and made the family look bad. That's tough for them.”

As one of the NFL's premier players and someone who enjoys working in the community, Haloti believes he's been given a unique platform to share his story. Often, when he speaks to children, he warns of the dangers gangs present. More importantly, he explains that no matter how difficult a situation may seem – or how tempting it might be to follow the wrong crowd – having the courage to rise above and do what's right always pays off in the end.

“I'm living proof, from what I've seen up close throughout my life, of what gangs can do to you,” Haloti states. “But if you stay away from it, you'll have many opportunities to do positive things. If you don't, your opportunities will start to close.

“My brothers weren't doing the right things. So, I decided to go another way and fight it. At times it was tough, but that's what I had to do. I'm happy I made my decisions, because I see how hard it is for them to get a job now. It's hard for them to have normal lives, and they'll have to work to get that back. Those are the consequences they have to live with.”

As a player, it's apparent that Haloti Ngata has the courage it takes to excel in the NFL. However, early in his life, while standing strong in the face of temptation, he displayed more courage than anyone knew it would take just to have an opportunity to get there.



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