

• Lilja

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The only time they get the spotlight is when the referee whistles holding. Their stories rarely get told.

But without Lilja in the picture, you wouldn't see Indianapolis running back Joseph Addai sauntering untouched into the end zone against New England some 10 days ago for the touchdown that earned the Colts this Super Bowl trip.

Freeze the frame just before the score and check out the block on Patriots linebacker Eric Alexander that cleared Addai's path.

Then argue Lilja's comeback story isn't worth knowing.

Jake Scott, who knows the tale and fills the guard spot on the right side of the line, marvels at Lilja's capacity for hard work. So does tight end Dallas Clark, who occasionally lines up a few spots down from Lilja and is even more impressed "that the guy's always fun to be around, always in good spirits."

Both qualities were tested in ways kids never think about when somebody hands them a beer at a party.

Lilja was wowing college scouts with his play at Shawnee Mission Northwest High School in Kansas and had Kansas State lined up for a scholarship. He wasn't the only player on the team drinking that night, just the only one turned in.

Tossed off the team, Lilja took a detour through a community college in nearby Coffeyville — "keeping my nose clean and busting my butt for three semesters," Lilja recalled — and while that stint landed him back at K-State, it didn't bring any guarantees.

Lilja played nine games as a backup his junior year, then claimed the starting spot his senior year.

Considering how tough the preceding steps had been, heading into the Kansas City Chiefs' camp as an undrafted rookie was a breeze.

Lilja didn't put much faith in serendipity, but he was due a break. He spent exactly one day on the Chiefs' practice squad when the Colts swooped in and claimed him off waivers.

"A lot of people think we're small across the line," longtime Indianapolis offensive coordinator Tom Moore said, "but we get by with smart guys who've got good technique and know how to get leverage."

"And considering all the things we ask our guys to do — keep the quarterback clean, open holes for Joe and Dominic Rhodes, adjust on the fly — it's as tough a position as there is in this game. ...

"But because you've got Peyton Manning working behind you," Moore added, "those guys are never going to get the recognition they deserve."

More than most NFL quarterbacks, Manning understands that.

That explains why, barely two hours after the Colts landed, he took the offensive line, Clark and a few select defenders to a pricey restaurant in Fort Lauderdale.

"The place didn't even have a menu so that should give you some idea of what it cost. Seven courses — meatballs, calamari, pasta, Philly cheesesteaks even — and the guardian angel picked up the bill.

"Not bad," Lilja said, "considering how much of an uphill climb it's been at times."

Colts center Jeff Saturday argues that overcoming adversity is part of every lineman's makeup.

"It's a lesson you learn early if you're ever going to be any good at it. We start out like everybody else, thinking we're going to be carrying the ball, catching it or throwing it forever," he said.

"Then we get to college or high school, sometimes it happens as early as pee-wee football, and we see the true athletes and realize if we're going to stick around in this game, we better learn to do the heavy lifting, and like it."

Some, like Lilja, just learn the lesson sooner than others.

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Colts' success creates football fans

Coaches: 'Basketball state' no longer home to only Hoosier hoops hysteria

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Indiana a football state?

To the outside world, Indiana has long been a place enamored with basketball and always will be considered a hoops-crazed state.

There's the movie "Hoosiers," Indiana University's basketball tradition, the Indiana Pacers and the lore of the high school state game.

But with the Indianapolis Colts' run to the Super Bowl, could the tide be turning the Hoosier State into football-happy territory?

"I think this gets us over the hump as far as us being a football town, no question," Indian Creek coach Mike Gillin said.

Center Grove coach Eric Moore has been around football his entire life and said it was only a matter of time before the sport's appeal infiltrated the state's basketball-first psyche.



"I think there has been a slow turn. Football worldwide is huge, and because in football you only get one shot a week, it becomes addicting."

Eric Moore
Center Grove High School football coach

"I think there has been a slow turn," Moore said. "Football worldwide is huge, and because in football you only get one shot a week, it becomes addicting, almost like a drug."

When the Colts relocated to Indianapolis from Baltimore in 1984, the team received 143,000 requests for season tickets in two weeks.

The Colts' first few seasons in the Circle City went off without a hitch. Fans cared, the teams were moderately successful, and they were establishing a tradition.

But after winning the AFC

East title in 1987, it was 12 years before the Colts won another division crown. There were some lean years for Colts fans. Losses led to a drop in interest. Sellouts became scarce, and local television blackouts became commonplace.

The drafting of Peyton Manning in 1998 was the catalyst for a Colts' renaissance, and the team slowly turned into a perennial playoff contender.

Greenwood coach Mike Campbell said the team's latest success will be a boon for youth football in the area.

"For kids in middle school, the

Colts have always been pretty successful, and they've grown up with teams making the playoffs," Campbell said. "It's good to see people are excited about it and kids want to talk about it and kids want to talk about football, I'm OK with that, even with different view points. It's always fun to talk about football."

Franklin College coach Mike Leonard remembers growing up a Packers fan. He wasn't given much of a choice. He was born into it.

Leonard points to other franchises like the Cleveland Browns and Pittsburgh Steelers, where fans are groomed from a young age to be fans of the family's favorite team. Leonard's grandparents passed their support for the Packers along to his parents, and they passed it to him.

Leonard said he believes he's starting to see some of that with the Colts.

"Now we have a generation that has come around with Colts," he said. "It's big to get to

the Super Bowl. It's just going to stick it into fast-forward.

"We've been here 23 years. That's enough time for a full generation to come around and kind of brainwash 6-, 7- and 8-year-olds to have to be Colts fans. It's definitely good for football in the area."

Prior to 1984, Indianapolis football fans adopted other regional teams, with many fans split between the Chicago Bears and the Cincinnati Bengals.

But with a generation of children and young adults growing up with a professional team in their own backyard, the Colts are developing the tradition and fan loyalty seen with other franchises.

"We're just starting to get to that point," Gillin said. "It took 23 years to get that, but it's exactly what we needed. I remember going to (Colts) games where there were just as many other color jerseys."

"This got us over the hump to be a true backer of an NFL team."

• Coaches

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"I kind of wish I had them now," he said.

"I would've had a chance to go to the Super Bowl. I remember there were times when you couldn't give tickets away. It's crazy now."

Center Grove coach Eric Moore has two good reasons to root for Chicago. He grew up a Bears fan, and he is close to Chicago quarterback Rex Grossman.

In fact, the Bears' signal-caller sent Moore an autographed Bears hat following last month's collegiate national championship game in which Grossman's alma mater, the University of Florida, won the national title.

"It's OK; the hat is in Florida orange, not any of that dark Bear blue," Moore joked.

Grossman and Moore's relationship dates to Moore's coaching days in Florida.

Despite his affinity for Grossman, he still can't pull himself to root for the Bears on Sunday.

Instead, he's cheering for the Colts, and not because he's a Colts fan or because they are the hometown team.

He is pulling for former Center Grove standout Aaron Halterman, a member of the Colts' practice squad, to pick up a Super Bowl ring.

"I'd say Rex has a few more

"Besides (Brian) Urlacher, I don't know too many names on that defense. The last time they had guys like (Richard) Dent, (William) 'The Fridge' Perry, Mike Singletary and Leslie Frazier, guys I can rattle off."

Mike Leonard
Franklin College football coach

chances in the next few years than Aaron does," Moore said. "So I'm going to go with Aaron on this one."

Knowing whom the coaches are pulling for is one thing. But if given the chance to draw up a game plan, how would they attack Chicago?

It's been almost three months since the area's football coaches have had to devise a game plan. But their answers are nearly identical: exploit the middle of the field.

"I think the Colts are tailor-made for the Cover-2 defense because they send three and four people vertical and put the safeties under pressure," Gillin said.

"Play-action is going to be key, and Peyton is probably the best in the NFL at it."

Chicago's defense ranked tops in the NFC in yards and points allowed and has often been compared to the terrorizing 1985 Bears' defensive unit that helped Chicago win the 1986 Super Bowl.

"They are facing arguably the best defense in the league, and that always worries you a little bit," Wheeler said.

"Defenses win championships, and it's always concerning when

you face such a good defense."

Mention of the '85 Bears evokes memories of some of the most feared defenders in the game.

Leonard isn't sure the current edition ranks with the Super Bowl shuffling Bears.

"Besides (Brian) Urlacher, I don't know too many names on that defense," Leonard said. "The last time they were in the Super Bowl they had guys like (Richard) Dent, (William) 'The Fridge' Perry, Mike Singletary and Leslie Frazier, guys I can rattle off."

"I can't do that with this year's team, which shows they are playing solid as a team."

Whiteland coach Darrin Fisher thinks the Colts are going to win but in a closer game than most people are predicting.

His guess of the Colts winning 21-17 comes with a disclaimer: the Colts have to win the battle of special teams.

"The kicking game is going to be critical," Fisher said. "The biggest thing is the Colts coverage teams vs. the Bears return game. The Colts better do some directional kicking."

On offense, most of the coach-

es agree that if the Bears are able to run the ball on the Colts' defense, things might get sticky for Indianapolis.

Chicago's running-back duo of Thomas Jones and Cedric Benson has been more than effective during the playoffs and helps keep opposing offenses off the field.

"When Chicago runs the ball, they are dangerous," McClure said. "But the Colts have done so much better in the playoffs stopping the run and need to keep that up."

"If Chicago is able to run the ball, their passing game is going to be good enough to cause problems. If they have to rely on the passing game, I think the Colts have an advantage."

Grossman has been the subject of great discussion in recent weeks. Only one quarterback in the league has had more games with a 100 or better quarterback rating this season (St. Louis' Marc Bulger), but Grossman has been something of a feast-or-

famine quarterback.

In some games during the regular season, Grossman's play was downright horrendous, as he committed turnover after turnover. But in the postseason, Grossman has been steady, and his quarterback rating of 75.4 is better than Peyton Manning's (66.8).

Moore said he believes Manning is under more pressure than Grossman to perform.

Chicago likes to take deep shots down the field with speedy wide receiver Bernard Berrian.

Gillin said he believes the Colts' defense is built to stop a deep passing attack like that of the Bears.

"The Colts' two-deep safety look is designed to not give up the big bomb," he said. "That's where the Bears can hurt you with the skinny deep post. It the safeties keep everything in front of them, Rex will be kept in check."

"But then again, on any given day, anyone can have a great game."

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