



AP PHOTO

Bears linebacker Brian Urlacher was named to the Pro Bowl in each of his first four NFL seasons.

Man in the middle

Bears' Urlacher forces foes to take notice

STORY BY RICK MORWICK,
DAILY JOURNAL SPORTS EDITOR

MIAMI
In many ways, Brian Urlacher is the Peyton Manning of the Chicago Bears.

Regarded by many as the best in the business at his position, he's their centerpiece, their star attraction, the heart that pumps their lifeblood.

He's also the one player the Indianapolis Colts' offense has to account for on every play.

Arguably the NFL's most disruptive middle linebacker, Urlacher has a way of single-handedly deciding outcomes, much the way Manning does on the other side of the ball.

"You have to know where No. 54 is at all times on the field because he makes a play every game," Colts running back Dominic Rhodes said. "He's the guy that charges their defense and gets them ready to go."

"It's one thing to know that a guy is good, but when you know that a guy is going to be good everywhere on the field ... He's just there all the time."

Which makes the six-time Pro Bowler and rangy 6-foot-4, 258-pound playmaker all the tougher to track.

But the Colts know they have to do their best to try.

"You have to account for him because you have to know where the guy is," Colts center Jeff Saturday said. "He'll make plays on the ball, does a good job of getting his hands on it, picking it off, stripping the ball. And the other part about him is, he just motivates his teammates."

"You see the type of energy he brings to the rest of the defense. There are special players throughout the league like that, and he does a good job for the Bears."

And he's been doing it for seven seasons.

Selected to the Pro Bowl in each of his first four seasons, Urlacher has been among the league's top defensive players since his rookie year in 2000. Only the fifth player in NFL history to be selected Defensive Rookie of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year in the same season, he's only gotten better with time.

Compared favorably to former Bears middle linebacker greats Bill George, Dick Butkus and Mike Singletary, Urlacher already is among Chicago's career leaders in a variety of categories, including sacks and fumble-return yards.

Moreover, he's been the leader of a defense that has allowed the fewest points in the NFL twice in the past six seasons.

"He's a great player," Colts coach Tony Dungy said. "He has mobility, and he has striking ability. He's a smart player, and the system is really built for him."

Yet for all his production, Urlacher, like Manning, is annoyed when too much praise or, in rare instances, criticism is centered on him.

And he is especially uncomfortable being compared to former Bears greats who played his position. He doesn't think he stacks up.

At least not yet.

"People compare me to them all the time, and it's not fair for me to be compared to them because they are in the Hall of Fame," Urlacher said. "Maybe when I'm done, I'll be there. Who knows? Hopefully, that's a few years still to come."

For the moment, he has a Super Bowl to prepare for. And the Colts have to figure out a way to counter his preparedness.

They know it won't be easy. "The guy is so instinctive; the guy can play football," Rhodes said. "It's not about the schemes they draw up or anything. He just knows how to get to the football. And when he gets there, he's bringing everything he's got."

"He makes great tackles, he's a great player, and he just knows how to play the game and is a special player."

Colts backups catching on

More than Marvin: Indy spreading the ball around to different players

STORY BY JASON MARTIN, DAILY JOURNAL SPORTS CORRESPONDENT ■ PHOTO BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

Indianapolis tight end Ben Utecht has caught only four passes for 33 yards in the Colts' three playoff games.

Yet the way this postseason is going, don't be surprised if he makes the game-changing play Sunday or scores a crucial touchdown.

Indianapolis has made an unlikely march to the NFL's championship game as an underdog after three years as an underachieving favorite.

And no part of that success has been more improbable than the numerous key plays made by the Colts' supporting cast of pass catchers.

In the past few weeks, the highlight clips have been just as full of the names Klecko, Fletcher and Moorehead as they have Harrison or Wayne.

"We always talk about any play could be the winning play," Utecht said. "When my hand goes down in the dirt every time, I tell myself this could be the play that does it."

Utecht, who caught 41 passes for 410 yards in the regular season as a part-time starter filling in while Dallas Clark missed four games with an injury, has been a relative underachiever among the Colts' receiving reserves.

Consider: Defensive lineman Dan Klecko has caught two touchdowns as an eligible blocking back during these playoffs.

He's also caught praise from Peyton Manning and grief from Clark for his newfound skills.

"Did I think he would have two touchdowns at this point? Probably not, but they couldn't have come at two bigger times," Manning said.



Colts defensive tackle Dan Klecko, who was an eligible receiver on the play, scores on a 1-yard touchdown reception during the AFC Championship Game on Jan. 21 in Indianapolis. The Patriots' Mike Vrabel defends.

Clark took time last week to rib Klecko for his recent popularity.

"You kind of hold your breath and say, 'Please catch the ball,'" Clark said. "It's either wide open or it's not going to happen. And both times, it's been wide open."

"He's got some stubby fingers, but when he catches the ball, it sticks to them."

Even the conventional backup receivers have ratcheted up their production.

Aaron Moorehead, the team's fourth receiver, has caught five playoff passes, including a couple of crucial ones in the fourth quarter of the AFC Championship

Game defeat of New England.

He caught only eight passes during the regular season and didn't even play in four games.

"Toward the end of the year, I've been getting a little better, getting more balls and more reps, and it's nice," Moorehead said. "I know I've had the ability to do this for four years, but it's nice that they have the confidence in me now to get the ball in pressure situations in big games."

Moorehead played a key role in the AFC Championship Game that was larger than the three passes he caught.

When the Colts trailed by nine

at halftime, they inserted Moorehead at split end and moved Reggie Wayne into the slot position to open up the offense and help aid the comeback.

"Peyton's the type of quarterback that you never know when he'll throw you the ball," Moorehead said. "It could be a route you've run 300 times and he's never thrown it to you, and all of a sudden, he sees something and he throws it to you."

"You have to run every route as hard as you can because it could be the play that could pop the game open or you could score a touchdown."

The most visible example of the backup receivers coming through in the clutch is tight end Bryan Fletcher's 32-yard catch on the game-winning drive in the fourth quarter against New England. Clark and Utecht saw most of the action at tight end during the game, but Fletcher was in the right place at the right time.

"Everyone else out there is in the flow of the game when you come in, already in game tempo, already fully warmed up," Fletcher said. "That first play is challenging, but if you go out with the right mind-set and realize you're going to have to pick it up that much faster, it's not unbearable."

Even the Colts' offensive line is taking part in the unusual big-play action.

Center Jeff Saturday scored on a fumble recovery in the end zone against New England. His glory and subsequent spike left tackle Ryan Diem jealous.

"That's every big guy's dream to land on the ball at the one and get that score," Diem said.

Utecht remains the one Colts receiver still waiting for his time in the spotlight. If it comes in the form of a Super Bowl touchdown, he said he will relish the experience.

But Utecht said he'd also take a couple of simple, short catches if that's what it meant to keep a drive alive and keep the Colts chugging toward a Super Bowl title.

"Peyton always says he'll get the ball to whoever's open, and he's done that," Utecht said. "If we're getting the 5-yard pass consistently, we'll take that, because it's all about just getting first downs."

STORY BY MATTHEW
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INDY'S PRO TEAMS

Baseball

Indians: NL, 1887-89; Western League, 1892-99, 1901; AL, 1900; American Association, 1902-1962, 1969-97; Pacific Coast League, 1964-68; International League, 1963, 1998-current

Basketball

Jets: NBA, 1948-49. **Olympians:** NBA, 1949-53. **Pacers:** ABA, 1967-76; NBA, 1976-current. **Legends:** ABA, 2000-02. **Fever:** WNBA, 2000-current

Football

Warriors: United Football League, 1961-64. **Capitals:** Continental Football League, 1968-69. **Colts:** NFL, 1984-current. **Firebirds:** Arena Football League, 2001-04. **Vipers:** Women's Football Association, 2002-03

Hockey

Capitals: American Hockey League, 1939-55. **Chiefs:** International Hockey League, 1955-62. **Racers:** World Hockey Association, 1974-79. **Checkers:** Central Hockey League, 1979-84; International Hockey League, 1984-87. **Ice:** International Hockey League, 1988-99; Central Hockey League, 1999-2004

Soccer

Blast: United Soccer Leagues, 1997-2004. **Blaze:** Women's W-League, 1997-2001

Pacers know about breakthroughs

Today, Indianapolis is blue and white. But there was a time when the city was blue and gold.

Sunday's Super Bowl isn't Indianapolis' first taste of a championship atmosphere.

In the early 1970s, the Indiana Pacers won three American Basketball Association titles.

But it took another 27 years until the city would get another sniff of a professional sports championship.

In 2000, the Pacers, led by head coach Larry Bird and All-Star guard Reggie Miller, sent the Circle City into a tizzy with the franchise's first trip to the NBA Finals.

Pacers President and CEO Donnie Walsh has watched the city's response to the Colts' run to Super Bowl XLII and said it reminds him of how Indianapolis rallied around the Pacers seven years ago.

"It is exactly the same reaction with the excitement that it brings," Walsh said. "Sports should bring a city together in a very positive way, and I know that this has done that. I know what an accomplishment it is for the Colts because I know how



"Sports should bring a city together in a very positive way."

Donnie Walsh,
Indiana Pacers president and CEO

much hard work goes into to get to the level they are at.

"You get a lot of those going-up-the-ladder moments, only to get knocked off, but you have to get back on and finally get to this point. I understand how Bill Polian, Tony Dungy, Peyton Manning and the rest of the players feel. It's a big deal."

There are parallels in the rise of the Colts and Pacers to the championship stage.

Both teams overcame a nemesis responsible for playoff frustrations to reach their sport's pinnacle stage.

For the Colts, it was New England. For the Pacers, it was the New York Knicks.

"I think that inevitably you have to do that," Walsh said. "It just seems like most teams that make it to the Super Bowl or NBA Finals have to beat a team that's been beating them."

"It's just that final step that you have to make, and it certainly was

for us. The Knicks were the team that knocked us out and caused us a lot of grief on the way up."

Indiana broke through in 2000, and Walsh said that after past disappointments he wasn't sure if the Pacers could take the next step.

That was until he saw Reggie Miller walking around Madison Square Garden before tipoff of Game 6 of the Eastern Conference Finals.

"I saw Reggie walking in the arena, and I remember feeling like we were going to do it," Walsh said.

Miller did his part, scoring 34 points, including 17 in the fourth quarter, to catapult the Pacers to a 4-2 series win and their first trip to the NBA Finals.

"It was the culmination of an awful lot of work, and it was a great feeling getting that cap and then looking forward to playing in the finals," Walsh said.

"I'm sure it's the same feeling

the Colts are feeling after reaching the Super Bowl."

The Pacers lost to the Los Angeles Lakers in the NBA Finals in six games and have struggled to replicate the success of the 2000 season.

"It's hard. Everything has to fall into place just to get to where they are now," Walsh said. "There are no guarantees you'll get there again. The stars almost have to align the right way."

Despite falling short in the NBA Finals, Walsh said that when the team returned to Indianapolis the reception from the fans was warm and gracious.

"Their response was great. The fans really appreciated our season," he said. "They wanted us to win, and we wanted to win, but they felt like the team gave everything they could, and they were excited about how the season went."

And Walsh's advice to the Colts: "It's always better to win, though."

Character

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE E3)

he's the chief unifying figure that players and the front office rally behind.

"First of all, he is so honest and has such a great feeling for people that anybody who works with him responds to that," Colts general manager Bill Polian said. "And secondly, he treats players as men and gives them the responsibility to conduct themselves on and off the field in a manner that is appropriate."

"By and large, when you ask good people to accept responsibility, they will, and they will respond. They respond to his character, his personality, his care for them, which they return."

The most recent example of Dungy putting players first was his decision to have the team arrive in Miami on Monday evening instead of Sunday afternoon, like the Chicago Bears did.

The decision drew the ire of the national media, which wanted to get a head start on Super Bowl hype but were frustrated by the late arrival.

But Dungy had his reasons, which, not surprisingly, were driven by faith.

He wanted players to spend the weekend with their families

before getting down to the serious business of preparing for the Super Bowl. And he makes no apologies for his decision.

"My Christian faith, that's who I am. That's never going to change," Dungy said. "That's always going to be first place, and it's going to determine how I do everything. ... To have that Sunday with their families was more important to me, frankly, than having the team come down here and meet the media. That's just the bottom line."

"That's the way I operate, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that, and I'm not going to apologize for it."

He didn't raise his voice to make the point, but he drove it home, which was perhaps the keenest insight into a unique-but-effective coaching style that certainly clicks with the Colts.

It has, after all, taken them to the cusp of a championship.

"It's great to see that his style has gotten us to the Super Bowl," tight end Dallas Clark said.

"When you think of coaching, you think of yelling, you think of cussing, you think of belittling people and breaking players down and building them up, that type of mentality. Coach Dungy is the total opposite."

"I can't imagine playing for anyone else. He's just a great man and a great coach."

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