

# You play what? Defense?

by Dean Bennett

Quick, give me the names of the starting five members of the Golden Bears offensive line? Too difficult? How about the Eskimos? Still too tough? How about the Chicago Bears? Dallas Cowboys?

Fear not if you failed the above quiz. You've just been placed in a class that excludes only the most ardent football enthusiasts in North America.

The offensive line is without a doubt the most anonymous position on a football team, and arguably the most anonymous position in all of organized sport. Every other player on the team gets tangible recognition in one form or another: quarterbacks for TD passes, running backs for TD runs, defensive linemen for sacks and tackles and defensive backfield players for interceptions.

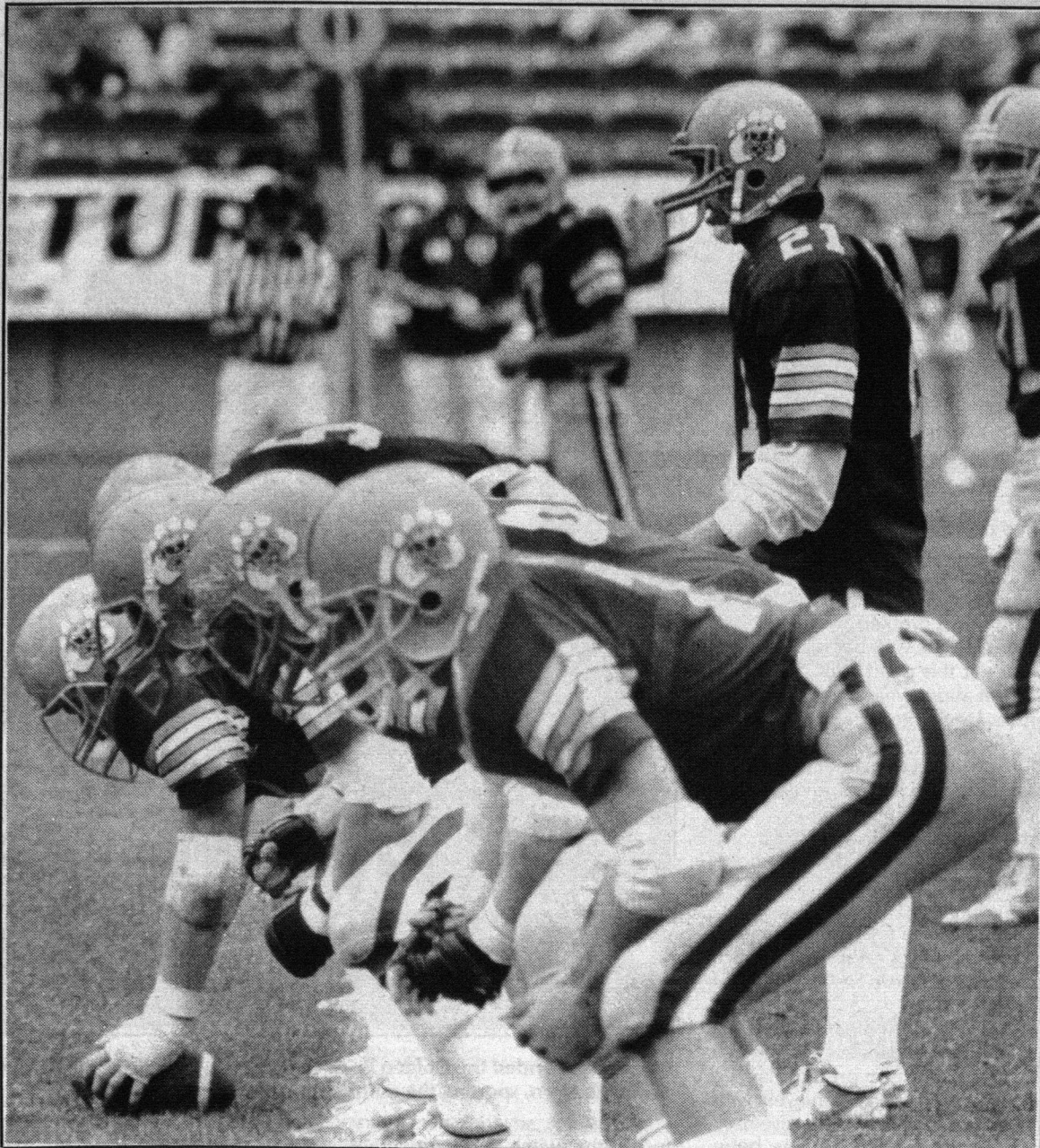
The only time you notice an offensive lineman is when his number gets announced in connection with a holding call or an illegal procedure infraction.

Just who are these men who toil in obscurity in 'the pit'? What job responsibilities do they have? How important are they to the overall performance of the offense? The answer to the last question is easy.

"You can't run the ball if nobody opens the holes. You can't throw the ball unless people are keeping those defensive guys out of there ('there' being the quarterback's face)," said Bears' offensive line coach Brian Dickinson. "You can have the best quarterback, the best running backs and receivers in the league, but if your offensive line can't run or pass block, you're in trouble."

Contrary to popular belief, the key to being a good offensive lineman is not to totally destroy your counterpart on the opposite line of scrimmage. Rather, it's a matter of physics, of surface area.

"When you block a man you want to get your surface area on his surface area," said fourth year centre Blair Wood. "You want to keep the defensive lineman away from the hole because when he sees the ball carrier (or the quarterback in passing situations), he wants to shed you and get to him. Basically the rule for the O-line is to not let the



The offensive line — life is (in) the pits.

photo Alex Miller

D-lineman get surface area on you or your beat.

"It's a matter of physics. The more surface area you can get on a player, the more mass you have to absorb the power of his blow. The more of me I can get in his way, the better I'm doing. That's why you have big men on the offensive line."

The guards and centre basically work together as a unit. It's their

responsibility to handle all traffic that comes through the middle of the line. The tackles, however, are a different story. Their primary responsibility is the defensive ends — a difficult job at the best of times.

"They (the tackles) have to be big and they have to be strong because when they pass protect they're out on what we call 'the island'. Whereas the guards and centres help each other out, the tackle is on his own," said Dickinson. "He also needs some reach so that he can keep the defender away from his body and block him by himself."

The guards, while they should be big, don't have to be as large as the tackles. They do, however, have to be quick because they're the ones who have to pull, say, on end runs.

The centre is the key member of the line. Besides being a good

blocker and pass protector, he must call the blocking signals for the line. This means he has to be able to read defenses and react accordingly. In addition to that he has to do something nobody else has to: snap the football.

"The centre has to snap the ball and take a step towards the defensive line at the same time," said Dickinson. "It's got to be all in one motion and it takes a very good athlete to do that. Plus, he's got to be good on both sides of his body. He doesn't know whether the rush is coming from his left or right."

For Wood, snapping the ball does not seem to be too much of a distraction.

"It's not that difficult once you get used to it," he said. "It takes timing and skill. But once you've got it down it becomes natural and

you don't have to think about it. Also, it helps you a bit. Only I know the exact moment when I'm going to snap it. Everybody else knows the (snap) count, but because I deliver it I have that tenth of a second edge."

Offensive lines will employ different blocking schemes, usually dependent upon the personnel they're working with.

"You work with the people you have," said Wood. "We're not too big in the middle so we've got to pull and trap block to be effective. If we get too predictable and block man on man straight up, we could be in for a lot of trouble."

An offensive line will use traps and stunts if they can't handle the defense man on man, and also because it confuses the defense. A trap, for example, may have the tackle bypass the defensive end. Then, while the defensive end charges into the space left by the tackle, he will be taken out from the side by a pulling guard. This is done primarily for two reasons: it's easier to block a man if you have an angle on him instead of having to move him out straight up. Also, traps make the defense think about where the blocks are coming from.

"The traps give you an element of surprise," said Wood. "We pull and stunt and this makes the D-lineman think a bit. He's hesitating and therefore he's not as effective."

A good offensive lineman almost has to be a Jekyll and Hyde type ballplayer: an all-out charge on run blocking and a sit back and wait posture on pass protection. This contrasts sharply to the defensive line where every play is a straight ahead rush.

"The responsibilities (between offensive and defensive line) are quite different," said Bears' tackle Peter Onofrechuk. "Part of your job is to wait on him. You don't have to be more aggressive; just smarter."

"The offensive line has a passive kind of personality," said guard Dave McKinnon. "The D-line are hitters. It's just the nature of the position. If you're too aggressive on pass protection, the guy's gonna beat you. The anonymity of the position brings the line closer together, sort of a unit pride. It only takes one guy to make a sack, but it takes the whole offensive unit to protect the quarterback."

"Offensive line is an aggressive, but a quick thinking position," said guard Andrew Stephen. "You have to take into account blitzes and stunts. We like to consider ourselves the cultural spot on the team."

## S.O.S.

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Pat Perron  
M W - 9-12  
F - 9-11

Shawna Stonehouse  
M - 3:30-6:00  
T R - 6-7  
W - 2-5

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