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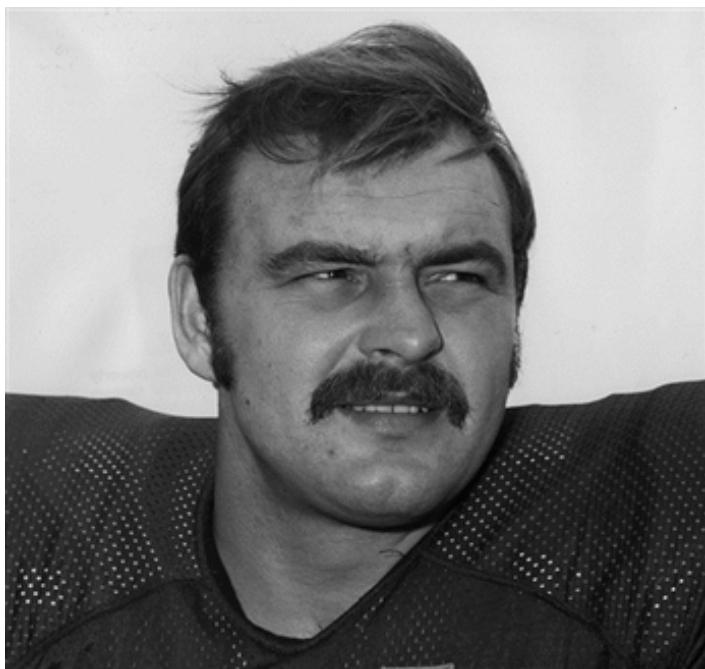
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## INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY®

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# Dick Butkus Terrorized Rivals As Titanic Linebacker

By MIKE RICHMAN  
INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY



Butkus is all about Illinois, growing up in Chicago, playing for the Illini and joining the Bears in 1965 on the way to All Pro and the Hall of Fame.... [View Enlarged Image](#)

Dick Butkus' tackling style was predicated on intimidating rivals. When the Chicago Bears' middle linebacker made one of his jarring hits, he wanted ball carriers to remember who did it.

Many players suffered when crossing his path.

Take when Detroit Lions tight end Charlie Sanders came across the middle with his eyes on a pass.

Butkus, angry that Sanders had hit a Bears player in the face with a forearm on a crack-back block, drilled him square in the chest as the ball arrived and laid him out.

"Cold-cocked me," Sanders once said. "Hardest I was ever hit."

That's how the 6-foot-3, 245-pound Butkus played the game: mean, tough and with sheer passion and ferocity.

He epitomized old-school, hard-nosed football.

Those traits were key to making him a five-time, first-team All-Pro in nine National Football League seasons (1965-73) and an eight-time Pro Bowler.

### Butkus' Keys

- Called by many the greatest middle linebacker in NFL history.
- Overcame: Growing up in a poor part of Chicago.
- Lesson: Remain focused and determined, and you'll realize your goals.
- "You had to be tough to exist, to last, in pro football. I just wanted to play as long as I could, and I really didn't care about anything else. I could have died on the field and been happy. I had that kind of an attitude."

He was a first-ballot Pro Football Hall of Fame inductee in 1979.

He found that intimidating opponents was "one-upmanship."

## Rattle Their Nerves

"If you can get someone who you're competing against either fearful or intimidated, it's going to make my job easier," Butkus, 72, told IBD. "For some reason, I was able to do that. Fear is lacking confidence, and I don't want people who I'm playing against to have confidence that they can beat me. So let me try to make them fearful of me, not confident with me."

Butkus, a master at blowing up rushing plays, was often at the right spot to make tackles.

He attributes that to spending hours in the film room scouting upcoming opponents to nail down their tendencies and strategies.

He studied so he could know everything possible about those he'd face in the next game.

Many of them had certain traits at crunchtime.

"Some of that is the guy is just basically looking at the hole where he's going to run before the play starts, and you look at their eyes and you can see where they're looking," he said. "More times than not, that's where they end up, so I just couldn't believe it. I did that in high school, in college, and I thought for sure in the pros they're going to be different, and it wasn't. There were still guys that gave away what the hell they were going to do."

Butkus excelled using an unconventional tackling style.

Instead of shooting for the legs, he often grabbed ball carriers, picked them up and slammed them on their back. Doing so, he figured, would cause fumbles.



Butkus made tackles all over the field and covered the best tight ends and running backs on pass plays. AP View Enlarged Image

"When they got you in a bearhug, it's hard to get your arms out to break your fall," he said. "And sometimes, you're going to be trying to break your fall with an arm that happens to be carrying the ball, and the ball pops out."

The strategy worked. Butkus recovered 25 fumbles on defense, an NFL record at the time of his retirement.

Butkus learned how to tackle high as a kid, when he rarely missed a chance to play pickup football in his Chicago neighborhood.

A variation of the sport was called goal line stand. Everyone played that game on their knees and could tackle ball carriers only by grabbing them above the waist.

Through it, Butkus mastered the bearhug technique.

Butkus played multiple sports in his youth. But his first love was football, and he dreamed of becoming a pro.

Feeling he'd found his calling, he went to a perennial football winner, Chicago Vocational High School, even though it was much farther away than his local school.

Positioned as a guard in his freshman year, he drove himself hard to improve his blocking.

He reviewed his playbook and instructions every chance he had, whether on the bus, eating dinner or lying in bed.

He studied drills over and over until it was time to go to sleep.

He also worked out regularly with teammates after practice. They bumped pads, critiqued their moves, suggested alternatives and experimented with strategies.

Butkus' obsession with football mushroomed.

"I learned not only what I was supposed to do on every play but what everyone else was supposed to do, too," he wrote in his 1997 autobiography "Butkus: Flesh and Blood." "Playing offensive guard was not exactly the fulfillment of my dream. But I worked hard at it, and over the next summer, as I grew taller and stronger and faster, my dream grew closer to reality."

### **The Hard Work Paid Off**

He made the varsity as a sophomore and began playing nose guard and linebacker on defense.

But he knew that he needed to get stronger to be great. He thus pushed cars with the motor off on a dead-end street in his neighborhood because no opportunities existed for weightlifting at the time.

He carried cases of tile for hours on end in his summer job.

He also ran stairs and did agility drills on his own.

Meanwhile, Butkus gained revenge on an opponent who had spat on him during one of his youth baseball games. He stayed within the rules to do it. This guy was now the quarterback for Fenger High School, a rival of Chicago Vocational. In a 19-0 victory over Fenger, Butkus got to the quarterback often, hitting him hard and causing him to fumble multiple times.

"After the first hit, I noticed something had changed in his eyes," Butkus wrote. "They got a little glassy, and for the rest of the game I could see him looking for me on every play. By then, I was aware of the benefits of intimidation, but in that game against Fenger, I expanded the possibilities of the tactic and turned it into an art form."

Butkus evolved into one of the most highly touted college football prospects in the nation.

He chose to play at the University of Illinois, where he piled up tackles, fumble recoveries and interceptions while drawing huzzahs as the best linebacker in the nation.

### **College And The Pros**

He was named to All-American teams and finished No. 3 in Heisman Trophy balloting as a junior in 1963, which especially back then was a remarkable feat for a defensive player. Today, the Butkus Award goes each year to the best linebacker in the country.

After the Bears drafted Butkus No. 3 overall in 1965, he came in contact with one of the brightest coaching minds, Bears defensive coordinator George Allen. Butkus would spend countless hours with the future Hall of Famer while learning the pro game.

Allen made it clear to Butkus that the pro game is much faster and more precise than college ball and that he could no longer rely on instincts as he did at Illinois.

Allen, who would build winning teams as head coach of the Los Angeles Rams and Washington Redskins, also quizzed Butkus on the multiple Chicago defenses.

Butkus listened intently and wrote that Allen prepared him for the NFL better than anyone else: "He invaded my brain and emotions with his passion for the game. 'You are the detective,' he would say. 'It's your job to spot the clues, determine the enemy's intentions and make the right calls to your teammates.'"

Butkus intercepted 22 passes in his career, all the while making himself an angry force: "When I went out on the field to warm up, I would manufacture things to make me mad. If someone on the other team was laughing, I'd pretend he was laughing at me or the Bears. It always worked for me."

Opponents quivered in his presence. "He was the meanest (S.O.B.) I've ever seen in my life who played professional football," Packers Hall of Fame running back Paul Hornung said. "He didn't like anybody with a different-color jersey. I mean, he really disliked you. He went after you like he hated you from his old neighborhood."



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