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For someone who'll wind up in a couple of years among the NFL's all-time greats in the Pro Football Hall of Fame as a three-time All-Pro and 11-time Pro Bowler, William Roaf's career got off to a rather inauspicious start.

By his recollection, Roaf weighed about 80 or 90 pounds when he started playing organized football at age 10 in his hometown of Pine Bluff, Ark.

In high school, he played basketball and didn't get to start in football until his junior year at Pine Bluff High, then received a scholarship to Louisiana Tech -- where the 220-pound tackle was promptly redshirted.

But there were other reasons for his slow start.

As the son of an Arkansas Supreme Court justice and a dentist, who also was a member of the School Board, Roaf's first priority as a youngster was school.

"They made sure that I took care of my schoolwork first," recalled Roaf, one of eight new inductees into the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame on June 27 in Natchitoches. "They would rather have me apply myself more to academics."

He found that out in his junior year when he was forced to sit out the entire basketball season to get his grades in order.

"He was a good solid student all through junior high, but when he got to high school he was playing football and basketball and one year he didn't do too well in school," said his mother, Andree Layton Roaf. "He had to sit out of basketball one year, but he brought his grades back up.

"We never thought at that point that (sports) was anything he could make a living on," she added, "or anything he could count on in the future."

More on that later.

Back then, there were some good athletes at Pine Bluff High, which kept him out of the starting lineup until his junior season. There also was his love of basketball, which he was good enough at -- because of his quickness and agility -- to receive a scholarship offer from Southeast Missouri State.

Still, by the time he graduated, Roaf was an All-Conference and All-Super Team football selection who was discovered by Louisiana Tech coaches when they traveled to his school to take a look at two of his all-state teammates -- Trey Reid and Elshon Richmond.

Andree Roaf credits then-Tech coach Joe Raymond Peace and offensive line coach Petey Perot with seeing something in her son, who by then was just shy of 6 feet, 5 inches tall.

“The coaches from Tech, they’re the ones who spotted his potential,” she said. “He wasn’t on the radar screen for a lot of schools, but they saw his agility and his speed.

“They told us what his future would be if he worked hard. They told us he had tremendous potential, and they were right on the money. He really wanted to hold out for basketball, but he never got real tall.”

Forget basketball. As it turned out, Roaf was made to play football and he showed it as a four-year starter who made numerous All-America teams.

Off the field, he resembled a gentle giant. On the field, he was a man mountain in engulfing defenders and protecting his quarterback.

As a Tech senior, he allowed just one sack, which helped him become a finalist for the Outland Trophy as the nation’s top lineman. He also earned invites to the Hula Bowl and the East-West Shrine game, enhancing his NFL draft prospects.

But it didn’t start too well, according to Roaf.

“It was a little rocky in the beginning,” he said. “We went to play Akron (in the fifth game) and Coach Perot really got on me after that game. I knew that I had to play more consistently and I had to play better. I had the potential, so that turned on the switch and I pretty much got better after that.”

After that, there was no stopping him.

One of the highlights of his career was a highly-anticipated matchup with Alabama All-America defensive end Eric Curry in 1992. The Crimson Tide won the game, 13-0, but Roaf turned a lot of heads when he dominated Curry, whose stat line that day showed no sacks and no tackles.

The next spring, Curry went to the Tampa Bay Bucs as the sixth pick in the 1993 draft. The 310-pound Roaf, who had remarkable 4.82 speed in the 40, was snapped up by the New Orleans Saints just two picks later.

Then-Saints coach Jim Mora admitted the team was eyeing Curry or his teammate, defensive end John Copeland, with the eighth pick. But when both were gone, the Saints had to choose between Lincoln Kennedy and Roaf, the two highest-rated tackles on their board.

“We got a great one,” Mora said recently. “The thing about Willie is I can’t think of any area that he needed to get better at.”

Mora couldn’t help but chuckle at his first in-person look at Roaf, whom he had only seen on tape before he was drafted. When the pigeon-toed Roaf walked out of the locker room and passed Mora on his way to his first minicamp practice, the coach did a double-take.

“He walks kind of funny, and when I saw him I was concerned we had drafted a guy with some kind of a problem,” Mora said with a laugh.

Of course, he didn’t know then what he knows now -- that Roaf was the best offensive lineman he’d ever been around in all his years as an NFL assistant and highly-successful USFL and NFL head coach.

“Watching him in that first minicamp, I saw the moves and the quickness he had,” Mora said. “A lot of offensive linemen are fat. Willie wasn’t fat ... he was just a physically imposing guy. He had big shoulders and long arms, he was just a big man.

“The way he moved, that quickness and athletic ability and skill -- that’s what impressed me the most,” he said. “That’s what made him such a great player. If I were starting a team right now, I’d take Willie.”

Roaf, who played for Mora for four years, went on to play nine seasons with the Saints. He was voted to a club-record seven consecutive Pro Bowls and twice was a first-team All-Pro selection, making him the most decorated player in the franchise’s 43-year history.

Switched from right tackle to the left after his rookie season so he could protect the quarterback’s blind side, he quickly settled in and went on to earn a spot on the NFL’s All-Decade team of the 1990s.

After helping the Saints to a long-awaited playoff win in 2000, Roaf missed the second half of the ’01 season with a torn ACL in his right knee, then had a falling out with the team that resulted in a trade to the Kansas City Chiefs.

“I look back on the memories and realize that I achieved a lot,” said Roaf, who noted that he’ll always consider himself a Saint. “We didn’t have a lot of great years, so I knew I had to perform at a high level regardless of what was going on with the team. Guys were coming after us and we had to play hard, so I’m proud of that.”

He played four years with Kansas City, earning Pro Bowl invites each season and adding another first-team All-Pro honor to his Hall of Fame resume before retiring in September 2006. Roaf started all 189 games he played in, including

131 with the Saints.

“When you start talking about the quality left tackles that have played in this league, you have to include Willie in the conversation right off the bat,” said former Chiefs coach Dick Vermeil. “You’ve got to put him in the upper echelon of the top four or five guys that ever played the position.”