



JUST WHAT DOES THE O.L. DO?

They definitely are the most invisible players on the field.

Offensive linemen are *big*. But other than that, most fans cannot tell you what they actually do.

That's why **BRIAN BALDINGER**, a 12-year veteran NFL offensive lineman who played center, tackle and guard in his career and is now a FOX NFL and NFL Europe League analyst, was enlisted to break down each position and explain just what those big behemoths are doing.

"Linemen are naturally aggressive players, but they can't try to knock somebody down every play," says Baldinger, who knows discipline is the most important asset any lineman can possess. "The defense is constantly bringing the fight to them, and they need to keep their aggressiveness in check or people will use it against them. The really good linemen have unbelievable restraint."

"They can still beat their opponents in a dogfight, but they know they can't knock the heck out of somebody all the time without getting overextended."

Here is Baldinger's positional breakdown of the offensive line, which details some of the important traits and skills of each spot and identifies some of the best players in the business:

CENTERS

"The center is a guy that has to be a natural leader. He essentially becomes the 'traffic cop' or quarterback of the line, because he has to bark the orders if they change the play or if it's a 'check with me' adjustment. They need to be strong, very gregarious and outgoing. Centers also have to be able to work with their guards. Effective centers makes guards better by setting the trap blocks and double-teams properly. It's important to build it from the "inside out," which starts with a good center. Solidification of the running game as well as establishing a pocket for the quarterback starts with the center."

- **MATT BIRK, Minnesota Vikings:** *"Very smart. He could coach the 'O' line. Matt is such a good athlete, he could actually start at guard, center or tackle and still be a Pro Bowl player. He's bigger than most at centers at 6-5, but he might be the most athletic center in the league."*
- **OLIN KREUTZ, Chicago Bears:** *"Compact, strong and smart. Kreutz isn't flamboyant or flashy, but you never see Olin get beat. He reminds me a lot of Mark Stepnoski because of his very quick first step. I bet he's an awesome racket ball player."*

GUARDS

"Guards need to have great eyes and see so much. People can come from outside or inside, so they need to see very well – have that field vision. They need to see twists, stunts and read stances on the spot every play. Guards must be strong enough to stop power rushers but athletic enough to block guys like **WARREN SAPP**. Like centers, guards must be smart and able to think on their feet – got to have a high football IQ. Guard assignments are constantly changing right up until the snap of the ball. The best guards can pull at full speed and not slow down in space."

- **WILL SHIELDS, Kansas City Chiefs:** *"He pulls so much he'd almost be better off wearing track shoes for games. He is the lead dog for Priest Holmes on the corner, setting up a lot of the big runs he breaks to the outside. His quickness really sets him apart."*
- **MARCO RIVERA, Green Bay Packers:** *"Just an outstanding guard. He's a big guy at 6-5, 315, but he's very athletic. Most of Ahman Green's biggest runs start with Rivera pulling left. He's great at recognizing which type of block is appropriate depending on the defense."*

TACKLES

"Tackles are basically in their own world – one guy to block on most plays. They have a one-on-one battle with the 'D' end or an outside backer. When you go out there to play that position, you have to think 'my man is the best pass rusher and he's mine.' Tackles have to have incredible skill, because half the games are on the road when then can't hear the QB. They need to be able to see the football out of the corner of their eye and trust that. It's very difficult for a lot of players. There's no excuse for offsides. The need to be big enough, have long enough arms to pass protect anybody, and nimble enough to block a 250-pound backer coming full speed. If a quarterback even sees a different color jersey coming off the side, he's pulling it down and running, so tackles can't even give the *impression* that they are getting beat."

- **JONATHAN OGDEN, Baltimore Ravens:** *"He's so good he doesn't even need a coach. He knows exactly why he gets beat, which is almost never, and knows immediately how to correct it. He's amazingly consistent. Of the 30 or so pass plays in a game, he will hit the same spot with his hands on the guy he is blocking at least 20 of those plays. He's an incredible technician."*
- **ORLANDO PACE, St. Louis Rams:** *"Because he is so dominant, Pace never needs any help. He does things that most teams use two players to accomplish. Just like Ogden, he's an amazing technician. His technique is flawless."*