

The Book on Jim Flanigan

The Big Man in the Trenches Is Also a Man of Letters

BY SCOTT JONES

For Jim Flanigan, success is not just about reading his opponents. It's about reading period.

Flanigan has always loved books. His parents taught him at an early age that reading opens the doors to new adventures, experiences, and knowledge.

Since 1996, through the James Flanigan Foundation, the defensive tackle has helped open doors for young people across the country through programs designed to encourage reading.

"Reading a book gives you something that the Internet and video games can't," says Flanigan, who joined the Packers in 2001 after seven seasons with the Bears. "Books transcend time and space. They can take you to different places and open your eyes to new experiences."

The foundation's efforts have included sponsoring the Great American Book Drive, which delivered more than 700,000 books to half a million youngsters from Chicago to Detroit. Currently, with help from the Walt Disney Company, the foundation is working with the University of Chicago Children's Hospital program to give a new book to every child who comes through the facility.

"We're trying to make reading an essential part of children's lives," says Flanigan, a graduate of Notre Dame. "Reading and imagination go hand in hand and imagination inspires hopes, dreams, and determination."

Along with inspiring young people to dream, Flanigan hopes his foundation will help society battle illiteracy. "It's a huge problem, but if we can help people learn to read, they can learn to help themselves and find solutions to bigger problems we all face daily," he says.

Flanigan's contributions through the foundation—which include speaking engagements, school visits, and hosting an annual fund-raising golf tournament—are consistent with his desire to be a leader on and off the field. "You can't tell me that after you're on TV each week and kids watch you play that you're not a role model," Flanigan says. "You are and you have to take that seriously. When I was at Notre Dame, we were taught to be part of the community and to give something back. It's a wonderful feeling being in a position to do that."

Flanigan has had somewhat of a storybook NFL career that has included 108 games and even a few touchdown receptions, but he'd much rather talk about the stories he's heard from young people. "I've received thousands of letters from kids telling me about what they've read and the discoveries they've made just by picking up a book. For me, that's exciting."

For his efforts, Flanigan was honored, along with Tampa Bay linebacker Derrick Brooks, as the co-winners of the 2000 Walter



NFLP, KEVIN TERRELL

Payton NFL Man of the Year Award.

Flanigan said he was especially honored to receive the award named for legendary Bears running back Walter Payton. "Walter had a strong influence on my life and career," Flanigan says. "Growing up in the heart of Packer country, I was able to watch him play and learn from his work ethic. Later, when I joined the Bears, I was proud to have been able to meet and talk with him."

The Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year Award is presented annually. It is the only award to recognize players for their performances on and off the field. This was the first time that there have been co-recipients. ■

Defensive tackle JIM FLANIGAN gets a special thrill from helping children learn how to read. Flanigan, who was taught to help his community and give something back while attending Notre Dame, was a co-winner last year of the Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year Award.