

Shhh! Movie's Started

Ravens rookie **Michael Oher** only skimmed the book about him and won't see the new Hollywood film—his focus is to build on his awesome NFL potential | **BY ANDREW LAWRENCE**

At a far corner of the locker room at the Ravens' Owings Mills, Md., practice facility, Michael Oher is intent on setting the record straight. At issue is a comment about Baltimore's rookie tackle made by Houston Nutt, his coach at Ole Miss last season. When Nutt was asked by a reporter two weeks ago to identify the aspect of the game in which Oher improved the most under his tutelage, the Rebels' coach cited toughness. "I don't know if *timid* is the right word," Nutt told SI, "but he seemed like he could be more aggressive. We wanted to pull that out of him." ¶ Oher has often heard that assessment—people seem inclined to draw their own conclusion about the hulking 23-year-old—but he's having none of it these days. "That's the one thing I *hate*, because I've always had the same mentality," says Oher, his 6' 4", 309-pound frame stiffening and his brown eyes gleaming with intensity. "You can't get a person to be tough. You either are or you aren't, and I always have been."

For the past three years Oher has seemed like a secondary character in his own life story. He was introduced to the world through the 2006 best seller *The Blind Side*, which mostly cast him as an Algernon-like exhibit in a wider study on the evolution of the left tackle, a position for which author Michael Lewis posits Oher was biologically fated. Now Oher is being reintroduced to the masses in the movie adaptation. The film touches on his rise from poverty-stricken beginnings in Memphis—his father was murdered, his mother was a drug addict, and he was virtually homeless by age 16—but its most prominent story line belongs to Leigh Anne Tuohy, the sympathetic white Ole Miss booster who saved Oher from the streets

BOFFO WEEKEND

While his life story opened to packed theaters, Oher (right) was studying up on, and then shutting down, the Indy rush.



and helped tap his enormous potential.

The film makes Oher out to be an improbable success story—the 23rd pick in the 2009 draft, he was a Day One starter for the Ravens—but the NFL is loaded with similar Hollywood tales. Titans Pro Bowl linebacker Keith Bulluck, Cowboys defensive end Marcus Dixon and Eagles rookie wideout Jeremy Maclin are three other players who owe their pro careers in part to white families who provided them havens from adverse circumstances, and Oher wishes his story were just as under-

Oher's confidence and pride in his craft. That season he gave up just one sack, which came after the Rebels had sealed a 47–34 Cotton Bowl win over Texas Tech.

Once he joined the Ravens, Oher leaned on his study habits to find his footing, impressing offensive line coach John Matsko with his ability to learn quickly. On the eve of the season opener against Kansas City, the two sat in a dark meeting room for an hour and a half while Oher charted 90 pass rushes by Chiefs sack specialist Tamba Hali. The following Sunday, Oher held Hali in check as

MMA brawler's nastiness. "We really had a lot of respect the second game we played him," says Cincy defensive coordinator Mike Zimmer, whose rushers fared better against Oher when he returned to the right side in their Nov. 8 rematch—one of Cincy's four sacks of Flacco came from Oher's side. Still, adds Zimmer, "he's more advanced than most rookies I've seen."

Ravens defensive end Trevor Pryce goes a step further, calling Oher the team's smartest player (with apologies to Harvard-educated center Matt Birk). "There's [always] some joke that you don't catch," says Pryce of Oher. "He goes way over everybody's head."

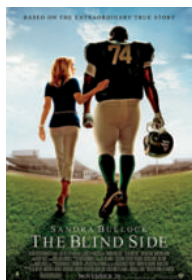
But it's Oher's mean streak that has truly endeared him to the Ravens' locker room—the defense in particular. "It's good to have a bully on that side of the ball," says linebacker Jarret Johnson. "He always seems to be pissing defenders off."

Says Johnson, a linebacker, of Oher, "It's good to have a bully on that side of the ball."

reported as theirs. He's generally loath to discuss that difficult period in his life, and says he only flipped through the book and has no plans to see the movie.

But when it comes to characterizations of his football ability, he retakes control of the narrative. Yes, his quick feet, massive thighs, large butt and long arms portended an NFL career—or so goes the script—but it's his singular focus, studiousness and sweat equity that ultimately made him into one of the game's most promising young tackles (albeit for the time being on the right side rather than the left). He proved as much in Baltimore's 17–15 loss to Indianapolis on Sunday, helping hold the Colts' line sackless for the first time in 12 games. "You read this book or see this movie and think, Aw, he has all this and all that," Oher says. "People don't realize I had to work extremely hard to get where I am, and I'm working even harder to get better."

The really hard work began in mid-January 2008, when Oher—who had declared for the NFL draft but was deemed a later-round prospect—swallowed his frustration with a college career that had yielded an average of three wins and no bowl appearances and decided to return to Ole Miss for his senior season. He embraced the weight room and dedicated himself to fortifying his upper body, which coaches had considered relatively weak. After seven weeks of intense lifting, Oher had raised his regular bench-press weight from 315 pounds to 385. The bigger gains came in



REALITY SHOW
Tuohy (played by Bulluck in the movie) was on hand to see Oher drafted in the first round last April.

Baltimore gained 198 rushing yards. "Some guys you gotta keep reteaching," Matsko says. "But him, you just gotta tell once."

Oher's quick mind and feet saved the Ravens from near disaster three weeks later against the Patriots, when starting left tackle Jared Gaither was carried off the field after injuring his neck in a collision with quarterback Joe Flacco. Oher, who'd taken all of four reps on the left side in practice that week, slid seamlessly into Gaither's spot, a switch Matsko compares to "a righthanded golfer all of a sudden having to play lefthanded." He followed with two more starts on the left, successfully protecting Flacco's blind side from a pair of the NFL's top sack specialists, Cincinnati's Antwan Odom and Minnesota's Jared Allen. Oher offers few insights as to how he shut down the two beyond "trusting my technique and using my ability."

The fact is, he combines balletic fluidity with an

Oher started out the Indy game intent on rattling the Colts' pass rushers, holding his blocks on Robert Mathis and Raheem Brock to the whistle and frequently engaging in trash talk. As the game wore on and Mathis and Brock dialed up their pressure—sending Baltimore scrambling for backs and tight ends to reinforce its protection—Oher's appetite for gamesmanship diminished. "You can't talk trash when you got help," Brock said after the game.

But the most compelling matchup was with Dwight Freeney, who turns up in an anecdote in *The Blind Side* in which Oher anticipates facing the Colts' All-Pro end. Oher got two cracks at Freeney midway through the third quarter when he lined up outside Gaither on an overloaded left side. The rookie held his ground on a run (though it resulted in a one-yard loss) and kept Freeney off Flacco on a 10-yard pass completion. "Very rarely do you get [a one-on-one matchup for a whole game]," said Freeney, who was impressed with Oher's energy. "The last time I did was probably [against] Jonathan Ogden, way back in the day."

Asked whether Oher could someday challenge him the way Ogden, the Ravens' Hall of Fame-bound former left tackle, had, Freeney drew his own line. "There's only one *that man*," he said, "but I think Oher's effort can take him a long way." Hard work, and that nasty streak, will take him the rest. □

Now on SI.com

Peter King previews the Week 12 matchups in the Game Plan at SI.com/bonus