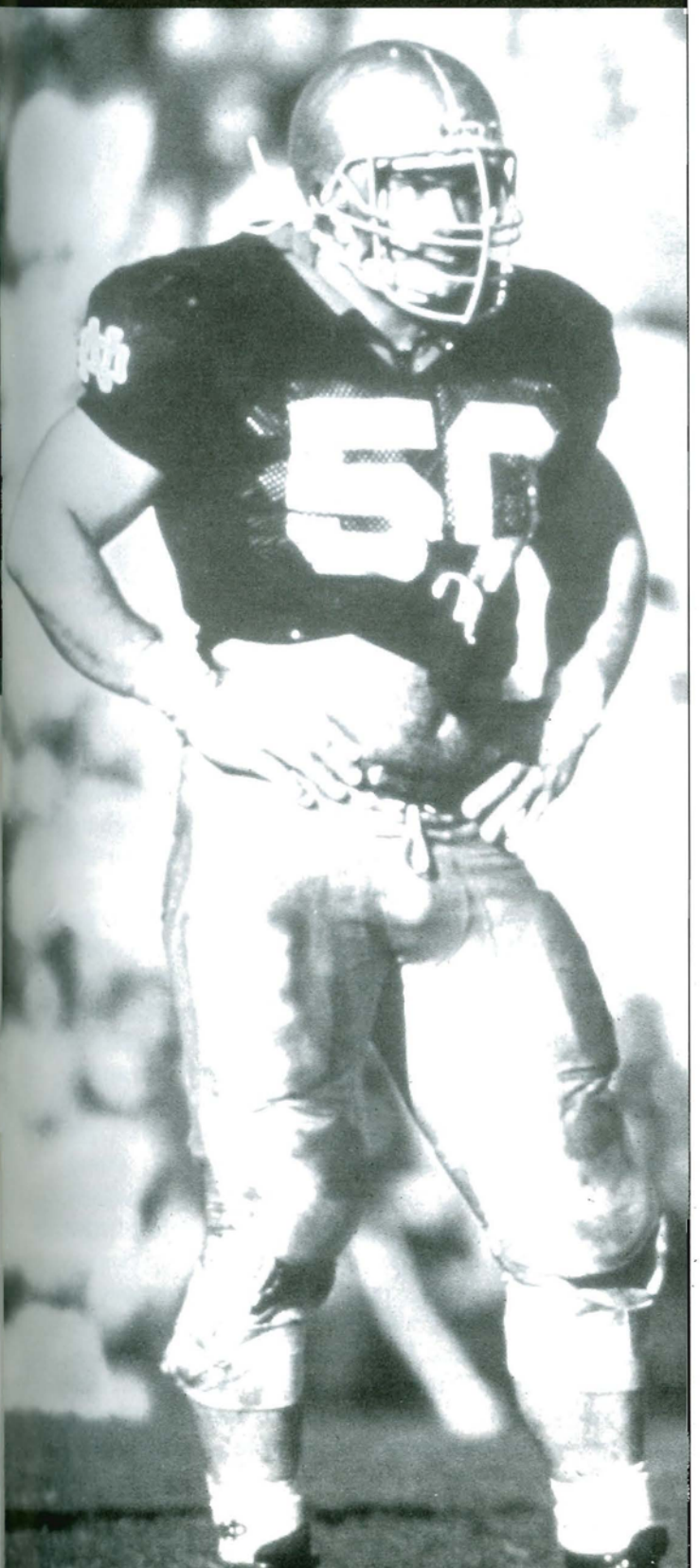
THE MIRACLE OF NOTRE DAME'S CHRIS ZORICH



By Greg Shepard

Some say that Chris Zorich is the toughest and most vicious player in college football. He's even been thrown out of several practices for overly aggressive conduct. What's that you say? Perhaps Chris should not be featured in the BFS Journal because of his viciousness. That's 100% wrong. Please read every word of this article! Chris Zorich is one of the all time great stories in college football!

Chris grew up in an apartment housing project in one of the scariest neighborhoods in the country. This section of Chicago features drug deals, gangs, prostitution and general overall blight. To make matters worse, Chris was at times ridiculed because of being born of racially mixed parents. His father, who was black, left his mother, who is white and from a Yugoslavian heritage. Chris never experienced a father-son relationship because his father left when Chris was quite young.

If ever there was a stacked deck against being successful, this was it, except Chris had on ace in the hole. It was his mother. "If it was not for my mother," asserts Chris, "I would have ended up on drugs and in a gang." Even after going to Notre Dame and being around some of the greatest people in the world, Chris stated steadfastly, "My goal in life is to be a great person

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Chris Zorich is as intense in the weight room as he is on the field. He's very serious about his workouts. Chris was an All-American last year. He could have slacked off but he leaves no stone unturned. If he misses a rep, it's like gettin' beat on a play. Chris really gets upset and he's that way everyday.

Chris never leaves anything undone. Even on the field, he will stay after and work on reaction drills. Chris is never content. He's always trying to get better. Last year he asked, "Coach, what's my weakness?" We decided that he needed more explosiveness so we worked extra hard on Cleans. As a result, Chris went from 295 x 5 to 330 x 5 on the Hang Clean. That's just Chris. He knows his Bench was good but he wants to be good at all things.

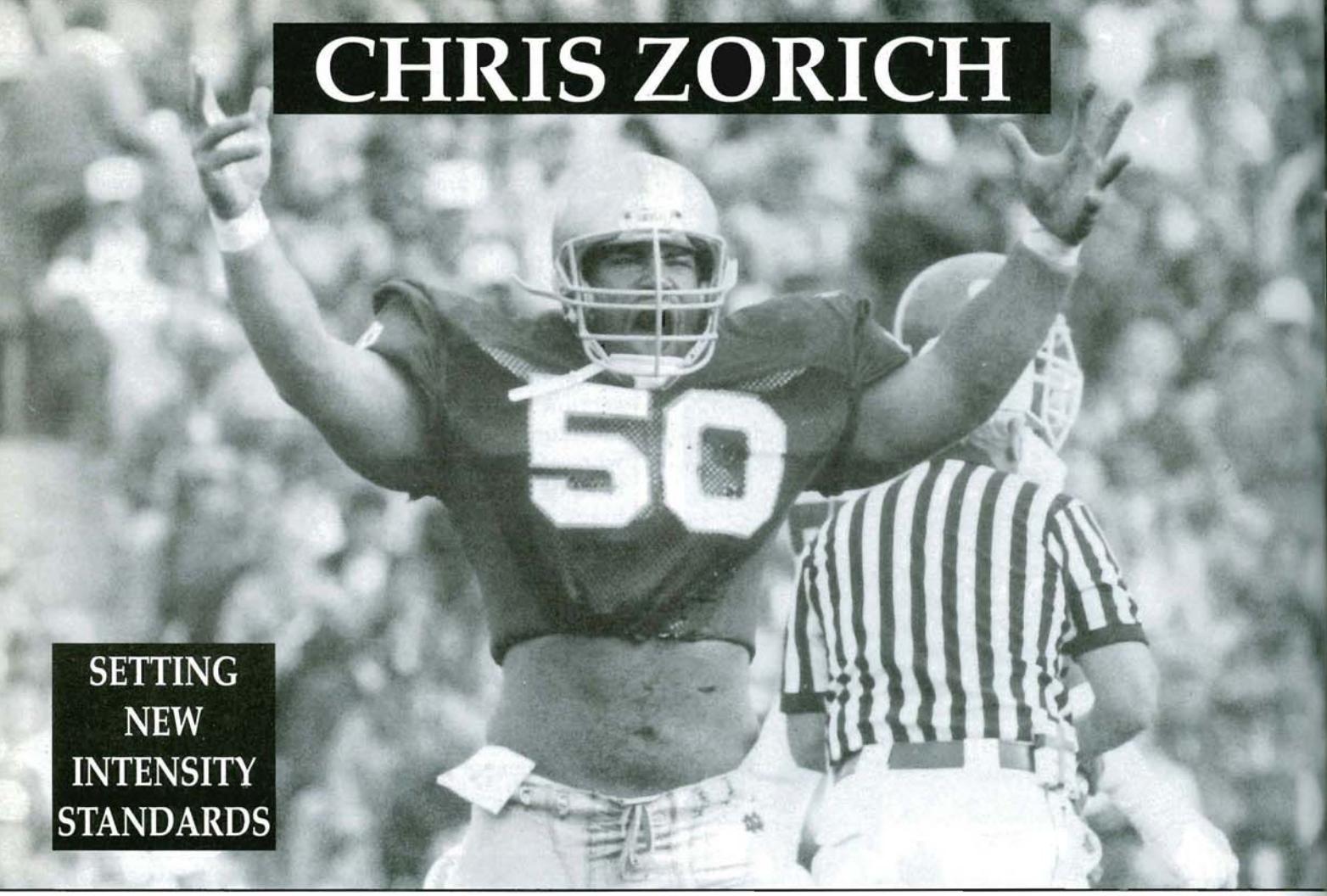
Chris is a leader. He'll get on the players and then help them out. However, when it's his turn to train, it's all business. They follow him.

Chris has legendary intensity, He can't stand getting blocked. I mean he will fight you. But off the field, he's completely different. Chris addresses people by saying "Yes Sir - No Sir." However, going back again to his other side, Chris doesn't like to wear pads. He wants to look tough and has a habit of wearing no shirt in cold weather.

When you look at where Chris Zorich has come from and become aware of all that he has accomplished, you realize that he has set new standards for all future Notre Dame players.

Jerry Schmidt: Notre Dame Head Strength Coach

CHRIS ZORICH



SETTING NEW INTENSITY STANDARDS

like my mother." Chris is always calling to check on her and sends her cards on every possible occasion.

Notre Dame strength coach Jerry Schmidt reports, "Chris has not had one drop of alcohol because of what he's seen." Chris also thought about why he has never been involved in drugs or alcohol, "My only comment is my mother. She's the person I most admire. She's my role model. My mother told me not to use them, and I also saw what happens when you do."

"If Chris Misses A Rep, It's Like Gettin' Beat On A Play."

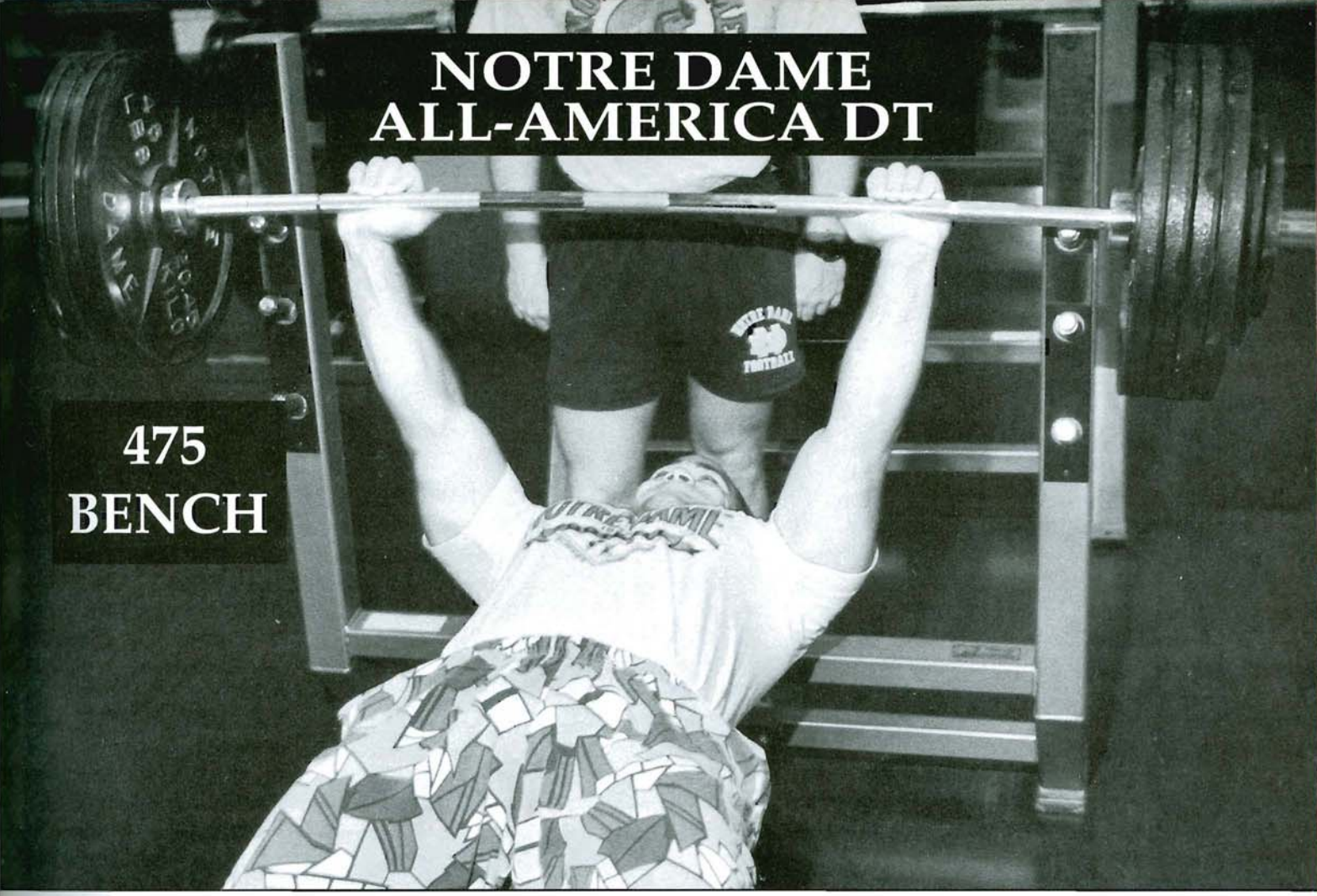
How Chris got involved in football and got to Notre Dame is another miracle. He attended Chicago Vocational High School and as a ninth grader, Chris was a 250 pound fat kid. "I was so bad," remembered Chris, "The kids would tease me." Football coach John Potocki gave Chris a permission slip to play football but Chris' mother wouldn't sign it. She was afraid her only son would get hurt so Chris didn't play. So I just hung around the football players," said Chris. Another minor miracle is that the coaches kept after Chris to play. Chicago Vocational High has 5,000 students so it's not like you have to beg a 250 pound weak-fat kid to play.

Finally, Chris' mother gave him permission to lift weights. "Coach Potocki had to build the weight room from scratch," said Chris. "It was a poor school. Coach Potocki had to scramble to make it happen." Chris' coach wanted to start him out slow, so 115 pounds was put on the Bench. Chris can now laugh about it, "I did three reps and died."

"For my sophomore year, my mom still wouldn't sign my permission slip to play football," explained Chris, "So I forged her signature." Halfway through the season she found out but even by his junior year she only signed the slip reluctantly.

Chris reflected back, "Before my senior year, my coach told me I might have what it takes to play college football. I did everything he told me like jumping crates. I found some old ones from around the neighborhood and jumped on and off those crates on the concrete in the back of our apartment." The team had a 7-win and 3-loss season. Chris was selected as a First Team All-State Linebacker. He had trimmed down to a solid 6-1 225 pound athlete who ran a 4.8 forty.

Now, for another minor miracle. Even though Chris had a 3.0 GPA at Chicago Vocational School, the curriculum consisted of hardly any college prep classes. When Chris' SAT score came to only 740 most people wouldn't have given him a ghost of a chance to succeed at any college let alone Notre Dame where the average SAT score is 1220. "I'm living proof that those tests scores can be overcome," states Chris proudly. "As soon as I found out Notre Dame was interested, I took college



prep classes; two in history and one in math and english." Fortunately, Chris had good school work habits. He had never sluffed a class and had always turned his assignments in on time. Armed with this background and a supportive mother, Chris began his senior year of high school at 7:40am and with no lunch break ended his school day at 4:15pm.

"I chose Notre Dame, " Chris said, "because of it's excellent 98% graduation rate and, of course, there is that very special football tradition." Chris has chosen American Studies as his major and will graduate as a fourth year senior next Spring. Probably the majority of Division I football players are on a five year program, so when you consider Chris' background his progress towards graduation is no small feat. It required going to Summer School every year and a lot of hard, consistent work. "I'm proud of my 2.3 GPA. It's hard to get that here at Notre Dame. I get excited thinking about the future. I'll have a Notre Dame degree and a successful football career behind me."

"I'm Living Proof That Low SAT Scores Can Be Overcome."

Chris kept saying "Yes Sir - No Sir" during our interview. It was extremely unusual. Chris comes from Chicago not Alabama. "Coach Potocki made it mandatory in high school," said Chris. "People looked at me funny sometimes but I really like doing it. It seems to make a good impression."

During the interview, the subject of shortness came up. Chris was challenged that he was too short to play in the pros. Chris just chuckled, "Mike Singletary is my idol. I've read his book nine times. He's had a similar life as me. Now he's got a wonderful family and has had an unbelievable pro career. Mike's only six foot tall." Coach Schmidt revealed, "That's why Chris wears number 50. That's Singletary's number. When he was a freshman, Chris ate only salads so he could keep his bodyweight at 230 and be a linebacker."

Chris came to Notre Dame with a 350 pound Bench. Coach Schmidt has a tremendous off-season program consisting of mostly free weight workouts. Sets and reps are varied to prevent plateaus. Lifting workouts are complimented with sprinting, plyometrics and stretching. Chris also lifts three times per week for in-season workouts. The skill athletes only workout twice per week. As a result, Chris now runs a 4.73 forty, Benches 475, and Hang Cleans 330 pounds for five reps. In addition, Chris can do five Box Jumps at 42 inches and he has a 27 1/2 inch Vertical Jump. Chris has also continued to work hard on his body fat. It's now only 11.9 percent.

Coach Potocki has described Chris as the meanest man in the meanest game and is more intense than Dick

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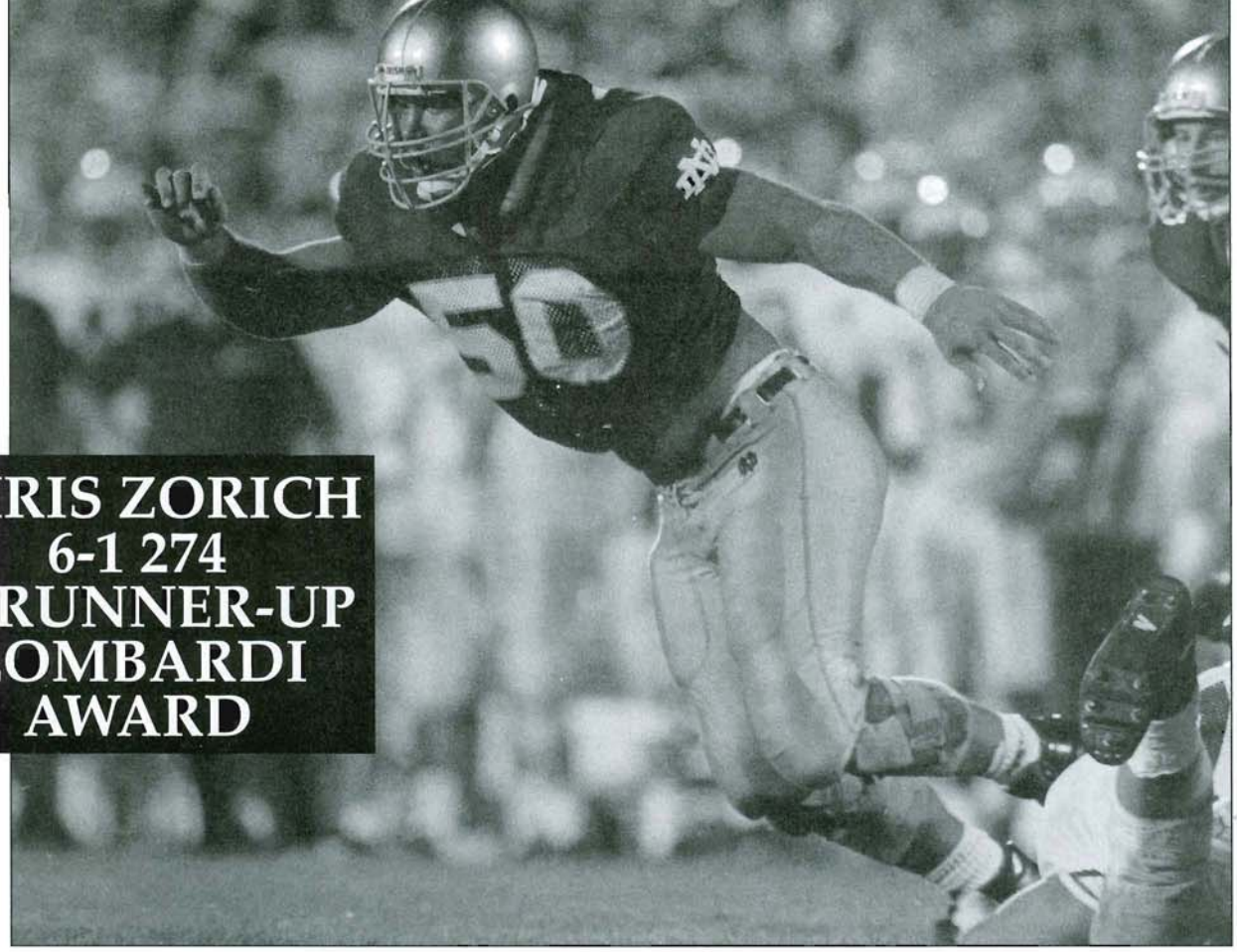

CHRIS ZORICH
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89 RUNNER-UP LOMBARDI AWARD

Photo by Bill Panzica

Butkus who also attended Chicago Vocational High. However, in spite of all the talk of this viciousness there is an opposite side. Chris has discovered the joy of playing the piano and likes to feed the ducks on the Notre Dame campus. I asked Chris if he had more compassion for one of these ducks or a human being in the form of an offensive center. Chris laughed, "You know the answer to that one." Not quite sure, I wanted a confirmation, "You mean the duck." With a matter of fact response, Chris replied, "Of course."

When Chris Started To Lift, He Weighed 250 Pounds. "I Did 3 Reps On The Bench With Only 115 Pounds And Died."

When asked about the future outside of football, Chris beamed, "I'd love to be a dad. I want to be the best possible father and husband, I never had a father so that's my motivation. I want to be exactly the same kind of parent as my mother was to me."

Chris was baptized in the Lutheran faith but attends Catholic masses at Notre Dame. Chris with a serious tone reverently stated, "I thank God for everything I've accomplished. If He wasn't watching out for me, I'd be dead. I say my prayers every night and before meals. I'm just grateful for everything I've been given."

Chris Zorich, All-American Nose Guard and Notre Dame Co-Captain, was a delight to interview. What a wonderful story for coaches to use as an Upper Limit example. We thank Chris and Coach Jerry Schmidt for making this article possible.