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Shane Conlan Learned To Deliver Big Hits In His Back Yard

MINNEAPOLIS – When their children were growing up, Dan and Kay Conlan didn't have a back yard at their Carroll Street home in Frewsburg as much as they had a battleground.

And neither of their oldest sons, Kevin and Shane, would ever wave the white flag in surrender.

Ever

“My brother and I used to bang heads and it always ended up in a fight,” Conlan recalled Thursday morning during a breakfast interview session at the Hyatt Regency. “Even our friends would (try to) separate us so the game could continue.

Fat chance.

Kevin and Shane (they also have a younger brother, Michael and older sister Kelly) weren't about to let one get the better of the other even if it meant stopping the game for good.”

“When my Mom would come out, the game would be over,” Conlan said.

Suffice it to say, Mrs. Conlan was a familiar face in those neighborhood pickup games.

But what Conlan said he developed from those sibling skirmishes was a healthy respect for his older brother and the kind of mentality that has allowed him to excel as one of the National Football League's best inside linebackers.

“He taught me a lot,” Conlan said of Kevin, who at 28 is older by a year. “I think if he hadn't wrecked his knee (in high school), he would have been playing someplace, too. He could bring it in. “That's where I think I learned it, from him.”

What Conlan “learned” was how to deliver fierce, bone-jarring tackles, a trademark that he has left on more than a few poor souls in the NFL the last five years.

Surprisingly, the hit Conlan most remembers is when he was a member of the Frewsburg Central School football team. And he couldn't even take credit for it, although it remained in the family.

“To this day, I think the best hit I’ve ever seen in my life is when (Kevin) hit a guy on the goal line. He was playing safety and he came up and hit this guy and the guy flew about five yards in the air and landed on his head. That’s what makes football fun to see, those kind of things, even if you’re not a ballplayer.”

There’s no question that Conlan is.

One need look only at this season – his finest since joining the Bills as a first-round pick in the 1987 draft – as a barometer.

Despite not playing on every down (he leaves the game when the Bills go to their “dime” defense) Conlan led the team in tackles with 122, including 82 solo stops. He also had two quarterback pressures, three passes defensed, one forced fumble and one fumble recovery.

“The linebackers’ play this year was key to our success.” Conlan said. “We all played extremely well...I made a lot of plays. I guess that’s the biggest thing for having one of my best years.”

Bills defense coordinator Walt Corey agrees, although Conlan wasn’t selected to the Pro Bowl for the first time since his rookie year.

“I think the worst thing that happened was that Shane Conlan played 16 games this year,” Corey said. “He made the Pro Bowl playing eight straight games one year and everybody said ‘How the hell did he make the Pro bowl playing only eight games?’ He played 16, but he plays on a nickel and not on a dime. He plays 60 per cent of the plays and he’s our leading tackler. He’s the best tackler on our team. He has more tackles and he graded out very well.”

Making the grade has never been a problem for Conlan at any level. In high school, he was the Western New York Player of the Year as a senior, at Penn State, he was a consensus All-American and as a pro he has been to three Pro Bowls and is about to play in his second Super Bowl.

“He’s a tough SOB,” Corey said. “He loves to hit you and he’s not afraid to stick his head in there. He’ll stick that head in there and he’ll just knock the dog out of you.”

Oh, yeah, the head.

“One of my best attributes, I think, is the size of my head,” he admitted. “It really gives me a lot of area to work with. And it doesn’t hurt. I’ve worked hard on my neck throughout the years. I’ve never had any shoulder injuries because – it’s sad to say because of the young people – but I don’t really hit with my shoulders. If you hit with your shoulders, you’ll get turned out of the play. You have to stay square on these people.”

Conlan is also known for another anatomical feature – his skinny legs.

“I think it’s kind of funny,” he said of the good-natured ribbing he received about his pencil-thin calves. “I was working out (Wednesday) and all the college kids from the University of Minnesota were down working out, too, and they were all just looking at me and looking at my legs.”

“From the waist up, he’s probably a 280 pound guy,” Corey said. “From the waist down, he’s like a defensive back.”

Big head, skinny legs, big heart.

Who says, linebackers have to come out of a mold anyway?