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NFL FEATURES

1983 Remembered: Riki Ellison

By Lisa Zimmerman
NFL.com

When it comes to finding someone who knows more than his fair share about defense, Riki Ellison is your man. And we're not just talking DE-fense, but de-FENSE.

The DE-fense part started when the San Francisco 49ers selected the former USC linebacker with their fifth-round pick in the 1983 NFL Draft, and nobody was more surprised than Ellison himself.

"I didn't think I was going to play professional football," he said. "I had flunked all the physicals because I had had four knee surgeries. Then the day of the draft, I see my name go across the TV. I was shocked and pretty excited. I think Jerry Attaway, my conditioning coach at USC and (teammate) Ronnie Lott had convinced Bill Walsh to take a shot at me."

Ellison went on to win three Super Bowls during his six years with the 49ers. He was part of a 1983 draft class that also included a pair of future Pro Bowlers, running back Roger Craig and center/guard Jesse Sapolu. They joined an already impressive roster that produced a storied period in the organization's history.

"Walsh looked for quickness, poise, intelligence," Ellison recalled. "And the personalities that were brought together in that locker room were amazing. These guys were characters, they had heart and Bill Walsh was able to mix that all together and make it work."

Ellison's path to the NFL was a unique one. He was born in New Zealand and is part Maori (the native people of that country) on his father's side. In fact, his uncle was chief of the Ngai Tahu (NAH-hee TAH-who) tribe on the South Island and a cousin still sits on the governing board.

At the age of eight, Ellison moved to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for a year with his father, Dan, who at the time was an economics professor and who went on to become an economic advisor to the United Nations.

Shortly thereafter, Riki's parents divorced and he relocated with his mother to Los Angeles, where she remarried. It was that relationship that introduced Ellison to football.

"My stepfather Dennis Gray took me to a USC football game in 1972," he explained. "I went home and wrote on a piece of paper that I was going to start for USC, beat UCLA, Notre Dame, go to the Rose Bowl, win a national championship and marry a cheerleader. And I did all of it."

In 1992, after success in both college and the NFL (where he played his final three seasons with the Los Angeles Raiders), Ellison decided it was time to move on and relocated his family to his native New Zealand. Always one to look for new opportunities, he brought American football there via a college bowl game he created called the Haka Bowl. Ellison contacted ESPN and developed the event, which showcased schools from the Pac-10 and the WAC. After a few years, however, Ellison decided it was time to return to the United States.



Riki Ellison made it his duty to defend on and off the field.

This brings us to de-FENSE. Ellison became committed to the cause of missile defense in college when he became acquainted with Dr. Bill Van Cleave, then a professor of international relations at USC. Dr. Van Cleave also was part of the U.S. delegation to the SALT talks and a senior advisor and defense-policy coordinator to Ronald Reagan. Ellison found himself captivated by the subject and took internships with defense and aerospace companies throughout his years with the 49ers. Upon leaving the NFL, he made it his full-time career.

"I never intended to play football," he said. "Missile defense is something I've been involved with for more than 20 years. It's my life's work."

Ellison is an advocate for building a missile defense system that would protect the United States from all foreign threats. In 2002, he founded the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance (www.missiledefenseadvocacy.org), a non-profit coalition based in Washington, D.C. In conjunction with a wide variety of other groups across all areas of the private and public sectors, he works to educate people on the dangers that exist -- especially in the post-September 11 environment.

"This is a bi-partisan thing. It's a non-offensive weapons system," he explained. "There are countries in this world that have weapons of mass destruction and have the means to send them into our country. We don't have anything to stop that from happening. There is a real threat out there against our country, our communities and our people. We have to do something about it."

In addition, Ellison made a foray back into football in 2001-2002, coaching at T.C. Williams High School, the Virginia school made famous by the movie, *Remember the Titans*. While he was able to apply and teach many of the techniques and vast experience he acquired during his playing days, his primary goal was off-the-field success.

"I wasn't coaching football for football," he said. "I coached because it was a means for me to give back to my community. We had a foundation and we raised over \$350,000 in just two years. That money did not go toward football; it went toward tutors, feeding the kids. I was in there to help the kids out."

An impact player during his NFL days, Ellison has continued to make a difference in everything he has tackled since.