

# In climb to NFL stardom, Benson never forgot his roots

By Jim Lane

**H**ollywood couldn't have written a better script for Brad Benson. At Altoona High school, he was a football hero and the school's first state champion wrestler. At Penn State, he was an All-East football player in four bowl games. In the NFL, he had an 11-year career with the New York Giants, won a Super Bowl ring, and earned a Pro Bowl selection.

"It was a storybook career," Benson said.

The final chapter to Brad Benson's athletic career takes place tonight when he's inducted into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame at the Lakemont Park Casino by former Giant teammate Phil Simms.

"I take special pride in the fact that it's Blair County and in Lakemont, where I spent so much time," said Benson, who now owns and operates Brad Benson Jaguar in Edison, N.J.

The name Benson was synonymous with Altoona High athletics in the 1970's and 80's. Brad was the first, then Shawn and Todd and finally, Troy. All four brothers were outstanding football players and wrestlers, and all four earned Division I scholarships. Brad made his mark at Penn State, Shawn and Todd were starters at Maryland, and Troy, currently a linebacker with the New York Jets, was a standout at Pitt.

Bill and Joanne Benson and their four sons lived a stone's throw from Lakemont Park and Brad has many fond memories of his childhood days.

"I could lie in bed and hear the dances at the Casino," Brad recalled. "I knew all the words to all the songs in those days."

One of Brad's biggest supporters throughout his athletic career was his grandfather, the late Forrest Bartholomew.

"My biggest disappointment was that he wasn't alive for the Super Bowl," Benson said.

The Bensons lived with the Bartholomews while they were building their home in the same Lakemont neighborhood and Brad used to tag along with grandpa on his daily visits to Pat Labriola's barbershop.

"My grandfather never had a boy — my mother was the only child — and he used to take me everywhere," Benson



*Brad's 11 years culminated with a Super Bowl Championship in 1986. At left tackle, Brad often drew the opponent's top pass rusher.*

recalled. "I remember being in the barbershop one day when I was in 6th grade. Pat Trimble was there and so was his big brother, Jim. Jim was director of player personnel with the New York Giants and was visiting his brother at the time. I remember Pat Labriola pointing to me and telling Jim that I was a future New York Giant. Many years later, after I was cut by the Patriots, Jim Trimble was the guy who got me a tryout with the Giants. It's a small world."

Benson credits Milford Pittman with getting him involved in wrestling.

"Milford grabbed me one day, during wrestling at the YMCA, and made sure my grandfather used to get me to practice," Benson said. "He was my first contact, and he still keeps in touch. He

called me a couple of months ago."

Benson always was bigger than most kids his age and felt he got an unjust rap during his early athletic days because his body was ahead of his ability.

"When I got to Roosevelt, I was so big that they moved me up to the (football) varsity," Benson recalled.

"Lou Glashauser was the 9th grade coach and he scared the hell out of me," Benson said, with a laugh. "They moved me back down (to the 7th grade team) in a hurry."

Benson has many fond memories of his athletic career at Altoona High where he was a state champion wrestler and a fullback/defensive lineman on the football team.

"Marty Rusnak and Jim Torsell did

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*Brad spends moment with Frank Gifford, another ex-Giant great, at 1987 roast for Benson at Meadowlands Hilton.*

tremendous things for me, and so did Matty McKee and John Iorio," he said of his former wrestling coaches. "They developed me as a person and it was a real community effort between them to get me through the state championships.

"Football was a nice experience, too. I think Mansion Park is one of the greatest stadiums for high school football anywhere," he said. "The times were changing then, and it was the beginning of a little decline. We started getting a little behind in offseason things. Earl (Strohm) wanted it, but they wouldn't let him get it done. But, I have fond memories of games with Johnstown and McKeesport."

Benson had offers from just about every major university in the country. Ohio State wanted him as a fullback, but Mike Reid's influence made him lean toward Penn State.

"I was young. In fact, I couldn't drive a car until midway through my senior year," he said. "Penn State wanted me to go to the (Altoona) Campus for a year to mature, then go up there. Earl called (PSU recruiter) Sevor Toretti and told him to sign me or I was going to Ohio State."

State recruited Benson as a defensive lineman, but he quickly found his way to the other side of the line.

"I had a wonderful time at Penn State," he said. "I played for some good people. My first year there was Dick Anderson's first year. John Chuckran was the other line coach. Both were outstanding.

"I went to the Orange, Sugar, Cotton and Gator Bowls, and then played in the Japan and Hula All-Star games. That pretty well sums up Penn State."

Benson was drafted in the eighth round by the New England Patriots, but

was cut and returned home to Altoona where he did some substitute teaching.

"The Giants called and asked me to go to New York for a tryout. I went up on a Friday afternoon and saw Jim Trimble and John McVey, who was the head coach then. The tryout went well, but they didn't have a spot at the time."

Ironically, the Giants lost an offensive guard to an injury that Sunday in Dallas.

"Jim Trimble called me Monday afternoon, right in the middle of a class, and asked me if I could be there by midnight. Tony Labriola was my principal and he told me to go," Benson said. "I ran home, grabbed my gear and took off for New York. I've been there ever since."

Benson and the Giants endured some lean years early in his career.

"After Ray Perkins went to Alabama, Bill Parcells came in and started putting

some things together," Benson said. "I had more fun than ever the last four years. We had a tremendous program and tremendous people. It was magnificent. We were destined to win.

"The year we won the Super Bowl (1986) I think we were the most physical football team the NFL had ever seen. We beat San Francisco 49-7 that year. We had a tremendous offseason program and a lot of camaraderie. The Giants were more than Lawrence (Taylor) and (Mark) Bavaro. It was a whole group and included some misfits like me and Jim Burt and Phil McConkey. Parcells called us his lunch-pail guys."

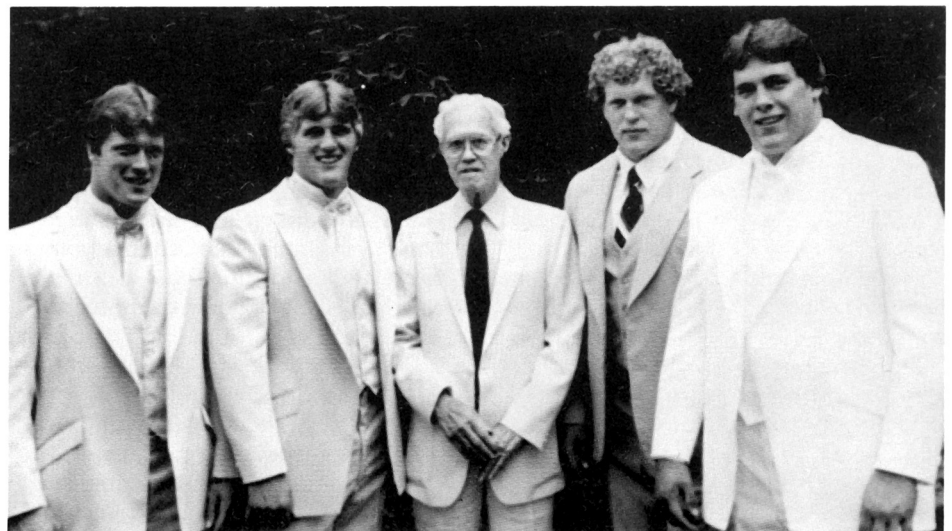
That was a great year in many ways for Benson. Besides playing and winning the Super Bowl, he was picked to play in the Pro Bowl. It also was the same year that Brad and his wife Lisa adopted their son, Tyler Bartholomew, who is now 3½.

"Nothing could go wrong that year," he said. "We trounced the 49ers in the playoffs, then there was the big buildup with Dexter Manley and the Redskins for the NFC championship. The following Thursday we got the call for our little boy. We went on to win the Super Bowl (beating the Broncos), then we flew right to Hawaii for the Pro Bowl."

The Super Bowl and Pro Bowl led to the Super Teams competition in Hawaii, then a White House meeting with President Reagan and dinner with former President Nixon.

Benson played one more year — his 11th — before problems with his hip forced him to retire.

"They had a wonderful day for me at Giants Stadium for my last game," Benson said. "It couldn't have been any nicer. I'm convinced I couldn't have played for a better outfit."



*The Bros. Benson — (from left) Todd, Troy, Brad and Shawn — gather around their grandfather, Forrest Bartholomew, at Shawn's wedding in 1981. Forrest was a former County Commissioner.*