

## Bronko Nagurski

**L**EGEND HAS IT that University of Minnesota football coach Doc Spears stopped to ask directions from a young Bronko Nagurski, who was plowing a field near his home in International Falls. Nagurski pointed the way with the plow. Such was his strength—and his hold on the imaginations of those who saw him perform amazing athletic feats.

From 1927 to 1929, the 6-foot-2, 225-pound Nagurski played both ways on the university's football team—fullback on offense, tackle on defense—though Spears said, “He can play any one of 11 positions and be better than anyone else at it.” Indeed, in 1929 sportswriters picked him as a first-team All-American at both positions, the only time that's happened. In 1947, the eminent sportswriter Grantland Rice anointed Nagurski as the best all-around football player ever, declaring that a team of 11 Nagurskis would not only defeat their opponent but also “it would be something close to a murder and a massacre.”

Nagurski graduated to play in the NFL with the Chicago Bears from 1930 to 1937 and again in 1943, where he burnished his legend. One afternoon, they say, he bulled his way into Chicago's Wrigley Field end zone for a touchdown, knocking one aspiring tackler unconscious and crushing another's shoulder before he slammed into the wall in the back, cracking the bricks. Returning to the huddle for the point-after attempt, he said, “That last guy hit me awfully hard.”

Though the stories may be apocryphal, Nagurski's status remains



*In addition to being a football star, Bronko Nagurski was a champion wrestler. Here he flips an opponent during a 1937 match. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)*

immense. He was a charter member of both the college and pro football halls of fame. College football has named its award for the best defensive football player after him. And the US Postal Service immortalized him with a commemorative stamp.

Nagurski moonlighted as a professional wrestler and was a five-time national champion. In the photo, he's taking down an opponent in a scissors hold during a 1937 match. He retired from wrestling in 1942 but made a comeback in 1946, competing for another 12 years until he finally tapped out at age 49.

Nagurski's legendary strength followed him into retirement, when he opened a gas station in International Falls. They said he had the most repeat business because after filling up a tank, he screwed the gas cap on so tight only he was strong enough to unscrew it.

Nagurski died in 1990, but his legend lives on in the stories still being circulated in his memory.

—John Rosengren

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