

MetroWest Daily News

Nelson gets his Night

By John Ingoldsby
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BURLINGTON -- It is rare that an NFL player is remembered for never having taken a cheap shot, while also being called the most ferocious player on the team. The two disparate images seemingly clash, like the crushing -- yet clean -- hits delivered by the aptly described player.

Yet both are true, and they were but two of many tributes used to recall the career of former New England Patriot Steve Nelson, who was named the Gridiron Club of Greater Boston's Man of the Year at the NFL Legends Night Dinner last night at the Burlington Marriott.

Approximately 350 former teammates, coaches, friends and fans gathered to honor the former All-Pro linebacker, and although many legends roamed the room, it was clearly Nellie's Night. True to his career and his personality, the evening was a dignified recognition of more than just his stellar performance between the white lines. It was a night to also recognize his post-playing career as the highly-successful coach and athletic director at Curry College in Milton since 1998.

Nelson attributes his coaching success to the fine coaching he himself received, starting with his father Stan back in Minnesota, who proudly referenced the absence of cheap shots in his son's game. Nelson also thanked former Patriots Coach Chuck Fairbanks, who flew in from the Midwest to honor No. 57.

"I took something from each of them, as well as from Ron Erhardt, my college coach at North Dakota State," Nelson said during his acceptance speech.

Gazing out at the audience, he added, "We are all here because of football, which is just a great game that gives back to me every day."

He also thanked Steve Zabel, a fellow bone-crunching linebacker from his Patriot days, for remembering him as such a ferocious player, before kidding him about talking longer than Nellie himself. "I didn't know if it was your night or my night," Nellie quipped.

Zabel was in good company with his teammates in honoring Nelson, joining local legends

Steve Grogan, Andre Tippett, Mosi Tatupu, Pete Brock, Russ Francis and John Smith, among others.

Nelson was just the seventh Patriot ever to have his number retired, and was also named to the Patriots Team of the Century in 2000. During his 13-year playing career spanning 174 games, he was voted to the Pro Bowl three times and, like the true blue Patriot he was, finished with 1,776 career tackles.

He has similarly impressive numbers coaching at Curry College, where he sports a 64-21 record with four straight postseason appearances, and has been Coach of the Year three times in the Division III New England Football Conference.

Proceeds from a Gridiron Club raffle were designated by Nelson to benefit two local charities, and \$5,000 was given to both the South Norfolk County Association for Retarded Citizens in Westwood and the Seven Hills Foundation of Worcester, where Nelson is a trustee.

From football player to coach, and from charitable works to television personality, Nelson received his just reward last night, a veritable legend among legends.