

# Mike Maslowski

Mike Maslowski, or Maz, as many people know him, is one of those great small-town success stories. Hearing where he came from, what he has overcome and how he earned his breaks renews the human spirit and makes you feel like you can do anything. Mike grew up in Thorp, Wisconsin, where his high school had an enrollment of 200 and his class only 45 students. Mike played quarterback and linebacker on the football team at Thorp High School, point guard in basketball and pitcher for the baseball team. Although he excelled in all sports, football was his passion. He earned all-state honors as a senior, where he accumulated 128 tackles and 13 interceptions that season.



The success he achieved in high school carried him to UW-LaCrosse, which is one of the most successful programs in college football history. UWL is the only college football program to win National Championships in both the NAIA and the NCAA, earning an NAIA title in 1985, NCAA Division III Championships in 1992 and 1995, along with a handful of runner-up appearances. Legendary Coach Roger Harring had amassed more victories than any other coach in Division III history and the “smash-mouth” defense-first style Harring preached at UWL seemed the perfect place for Maz.

Just when Maz was getting started, it appeared his career might be over, when he broke his wrist as a freshman. Any injury at the college level is devastating, because getting the most number of reps in practice is the biggest factor in developing as a player. Having to sit out the remainder of the season turned out to be a blessing for Maz, as he spent the season assisting Roland Christenson, UWL’s Defensive Coordinator and mastermind. Coach “Chris” had been developing league-leading defenses and standout linebackers for decades, and Maz made the most of his bench-time by learning the intricacies of reading offenses and studying tendencies. Maz became a real student of the game, which was the last piece he needed to be a truly complete football player. His new cerebral understanding of the game, coupled with his athletic ability, determination and unparalleled instincts on the field made him even more dangerous than before.

Maz went on to lead UWL to the 1995 Division III National Championship and earned 1<sup>st</sup> Team All-American Honors and MVP of the entire Conference. He finished the season with 108 tackles and led a defense that did not allow a single point in the third quarter of any game the entire season. In the five games of the national playoffs, the UWL defense only gave up two touchdowns. In the championship game, the only points scored by their opponent came after UWL fumbled inside their own one yard line. It took them all four downs to finally punch it in on the UWL defense, and was the only blemish on a nearly perfect game, which they won 36-7. Maz and UWL finished the next season with the nation’s longest winning streak in any division and one game short of returning to the NCAA title game for the second year in a row.

In 1997, Maz signed as a rookie free agent with the San Diego Chargers, but was cut by the team prior to the start of the regular season. The next year, he played in the Arena Football League for the San Jose Sabercats. Maz then signed a contract with the Kansas City Chiefs and they sent him to NFL Europe where he played one season for the Barcelona Dragons. In that one year, he broke the single season record for tackles with 105. Maz is the only player in the history of NFL Europe to record a 100 tackle season. As a member of the Dragons, Maslowski was twice named the NFL Europe Defensive Player of the Week, was the League Defensive Player of the Year, and helped lead his team to play in World Bowl VII against the Frankfurt Galaxy.

Maslowski joined the Chiefs after the conclusion of the 1999 NFL Europe season, and played a significant role on the Chief’s special teams, earning the prestigious Mack Lee Hill Award, which is awarded to the most outstanding first-year player on the team. Just when it seemed he was poised to become a star in the NFL, his 2001 season was cut short by a major knee injury. Never giving up, Maz tirelessly rehabbed and earned back a starting spot at linebacker the next season. In the 2002 season, Maz recorded 162 tackles, 109 of which were solo tackles, and broke the Chief’s single season record in tackles, which had stood since 1979. Maz’s single-season tackle record for the Chiefs still stands today. He also regularly led the Chiefs in special teams tackles throughout his career, even when he was a starter. He played every linebacking position on the field, was named to Dr. Z’s Sports Illustrated All-Pro Team and the USA Today All-Joe Team, which recognizes the league’s top blue-collar players. Maz earned AFC Defensive Player of the Week Honors, was the Chiefs Special Teams Captain, and regularly had double-digit tackle games.

Despite his obvious success, Maz’s knee continued to give him problems, and he underwent a tibial osteotomy, which only one other professional athlete had ever returned from, Steve Yzerman of the Detroit Red Wings. After a couple more seasons with the Chiefs, Maz decided to retire in 2005, but continues to live in the Kansas City area, along with his wife and three kids. Maz remains active in the Kansas City athletic community and performs many charitable functions, including working with the Maz’s Mentors Foundation, which he started as a player, and helps mentally challenged students and adults prepare for employment.

He is an exemplary human being, and the rocky path he overcame to achieve his NFL dream can teach us all that hard work, determination and a positive outlook on life is still the best way to achieve your goals.

