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The occupier

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HE IS A SIMPLE MAN, with a simple dream: He wants just one man to block him.

Is that too much to ask? Of all the requests he could make, isn't that one modest enough?

After 11 years

of dropping his hand on the turf and having his body torn up by the inhuman -- and inhumane -- demands of his position, his knees shredded, fingers bent and body in a constant state of fourth-degree bruising, is the occasional single-team really that big of a deal?

He wants it to be like the old days, when men were men and centers blocked nose tackles by themselves. "Mano a mano," he says wistfully. Those were the days when the whistle would blow at the end of a play and everyone in the stadium, and in front of their TVs, knew who the stronger man was. He wants to return to the days when he could pound a center all day, look across the line as the offense approached, point at his weary victim and tell the guards, "This man needs your help."

Those were the days. Back then, [Casey Hampton](#) had young legs, a big mouth and 21-inch biceps. The NFL didn't yet fully understand the havoc the Steelers nose tackle could wreak while making just a tackle or two a game. To use one of the league's fancy new terms, teams hadn't game-planned for Hampton the way they have since -- sending two and three guys at him, diving at his knees and running him down the line instead of blocking him.

He's not looking for pity, far from it. At 34, Hampton has reached his angle of repose.

"I was made for this," he says, holding his arms out to display a body shaped like a 55-gallon drum. He has a genial grin and an unselfish ethic that comes with doing a crappy job well. The game has changed, and so has he. Gone are the days when he thinks about all the plays he could make if he were lining up



Steelers fans showed their love for Hampton by voting him to Pittsburgh's all-time team.

over the guard, as he did when he was a dominant college defensive tackle at Texas. He doesn't talk as much either; it takes too much energy. He's given up lifting the heavy weights in favor of relying on what he calls "grown-ass man strength."

Still, he's one of the largest men you'll ever see, seemingly shorter than his listed 6-foot-1 with a 320-or-so-pound body that must lead the league in density. Inside his own thoughts, though, he's still the fast kid who played running back and linebacker growing up in Galveston, Texas, before becoming a defensive lineman his sophomore year in college. Allowing Hampton to borrow his heritage, [Troy Polamalu](#) calls his switch from running back to lineman "The Samoan Evolution." From any angle outside Hampton's head, it takes some imagination to see the young running back within. "I'm a little guy stuck inside this body," he says. "This isn't me. This is just how I look."

From an early age, Hampton seemed uniquely positioned to adopt this role, high on selflessness and low on covetousness. He grew up poor in Galveston, where his mother worked a series of food-service jobs, bringing home what would otherwise go to waste. "To me, my childhood was good. We always had food," Hampton says. "We got the lights cut off a couple times, but that wasn't nothing. That's just things you go through."

Homespun aphorisms, sentences that are impossible to diagram but are both entertaining and deceptively deep, compose Hampton's conversational style. "I never really knew I didn't have nothing until I got to college and saw people who had something."

TO TELL THE STORY of Casey Hampton, you must first tell the story of the Pittsburgh defense. It has been the NFL's signature defense in the past decade, and the signature aspect of that unit is its ability to stop the run. That starts with Hampton. "The attention goes to the linebackers, but if you've been around this defense, you understand Hamp is the one who makes it go," says linebacker [James Farrior](#).

Indeed, Hampton is a walking testament to the unreliability of statistics. In 150 career games through Nov. 6, he's contributed to 329 tackles, an average of 2.2 per game. He averages slightly more than one solo tackle a game. He's had nine sacks in 11 years and never more than 2.5 in a season. Yet as an example of the collective football knowledge in Pittsburgh, he was voted by fans to the Steelers' all-time first team, no small feat.

Hampton's effectiveness is judged by the statistics of others. The nose tackle's job is unique that way. He's fine with it, as long as his ego subjugation creates ego gratification among his teammates. The man might not seek the spotlight, but he has expectations. "He doesn't hesitate to tell us when we're not doing our jobs," Farrior says. "He gets emotional out there." After all, when you're sacrificing your body for the good of the team, the least you can expect is some decent pursuit from the backside linebacker.

Hampton's longtime backup, [Chris Hoke](#), describes the position this way: "Stay on the center, stay on the guards and let the linebackers roam. Our job is to occupy blockers."

Occupy. Despite its recent political co-opting, it's a remarkably static football word. Other positions get active verbs. Linebackers get to flow, pursue or even blitz. Defensive backs get to cover and defend. Even offensive linemen -- those supposed paragons of anonymity and disrespect -- get to drive or push. Hampton gets to occupy. Occupy blockers so someone else can swoop in, flow or pursue and make the play. The cameras flow and pursue right along with them, showing them in all their tackle-making, headline-grabbing glory. And Hampton, under a pile of bodies somewhere on the margins, is lucky to

get off the ground in time to join the celebration of someone else's achievement.

Hoke tells a heartwarming story of youthful ignorance that took place during the preseason. He won't name names or the team, but he says two young offensive linemen teamed up to take him to the ground. They stood over him, saying, "We got you. We got you." They slapped hands and laughed. Hoke got to his feet and replied, "Yeah, you got me, but someone behind me is unblocked. Congratulations." Thinking back on it, Hoke says, "They were young guys. Didn't know any better."

Yet this hasn't stopped other NFL teams from using the same technique. An NFL truism is that it's a copycat league, so when teams such as Denver found some success running the ball against a 3-4 defense by using zone-blocking schemes, other teams enlisted en masse. The zone schemes are intended to mitigate the destructive tendencies of a nose tackle like Hampton. The most popular and effective blocking technique involves the center engaging the nose tackle while one of the guards dives at his legs.



Hampton has only nine career sacks, but teammates say Big Snack plays the most pivotal role in the Steelers D.

The tactic, informally called the high/low, is both legal and infuriating, a street mugging on every play. Hampton has adapted -- or tried to. Remarkably, he can be engaged with the center and hop over a guard attempting to cut his legs. Consider this for a moment: A 320-or-so-pound man can not only fight pressure exerted by another 320-or-so-pound man but can simultaneously leap over another 320-or-so-pound man who's launching himself at his knees. If they have jump rope in hell, it figures to look something like this.

"There's something dirty about everybody's job," Hampton says. "Mine's just a little dirtier than most."

THERE ARE MORE THAN 50 friends and family members from Galveston in Reliant Stadium to watch Hampton play the Texans. This time, he took care of all the little people: cousins, nieces and nephews. He sounds almost angry with himself when he says, "They got left out last time. This time I made sure."

All the nieces, nephews and little cousins got to see the dirty side of the big man's job. You want to know why Hampton dreams of being blocked by one man? One play in the fourth quarter tells you all you need to know.

First and 10 from the Steelers 42, about 12 minutes left in a 10-10 game. After breaking the huddle, Hampton stood near the line of scrimmage to assess the formation, processing years of information in the seconds before lowering himself into his stance. Hampton identified advantages and disadvantages, formulating a pretty good idea of where the Texans could and couldn't run.

This must be said: Hampton's transition from upright to his three-point stance is a sight to behold. He doesn't so much ease into place as bend at the waist and let gravity win. His girth demands that his body angle toward the center like a missile, with his butt considerably higher than his head. Once the ball is

snapped, he propels that body into the center like a wrecking ball swinging slowly and deliberately into the side of a building. Or as Hampton succinctly refers to his goal: "Eating up two."



Despite several injuries, Casey Hampton has never considered walking away from the game.

On the play in question,

Texans center [Chris Myers](#) engaged Hampton as right guard [Mike Brisiel](#) pulled left to lead [Arian Foster](#) into the hole. Hampton pursued, but Myers pushed him down the line of scrimmage to, in Hampton's words, "get me running." It's not a block so much as a dance. As Foster, whose patience makes him the perfect zone back, cut to the right to avoid Hampton, Brisiel came from the side and took out Hampton's legs. His momentum put Hampton on the turf just as right tackle [Eric Winston](#) and Hoke (a combined 607 pounds) steamrolled him. While the sold-out crowd -- including the nieces and nephews and little cousins -- watched Foster run 42 yards into the end zone, Hampton lay on the ground as pain shot through his right shoulder as if he had been stabbed with a hundred knives. At this point, his agony was at war with his fury.

Watching him struggle off the field with his shoulder in tatters and his brain overcome with cut-block rage, one question springs to mind: Why? He already has scars on each knee from matching ACL tears. By midseason, all 10 fingers are jammed, bent or broken. He long ago stopped even noticing the kinds of car-wreck bruises that would send the average person to the ER. And for what? For the glory of averaging a shade over two tackles a game in 141 career starts? For the fame and adoration that come with occupying blockers?

With money in the bank and Super Bowl rings for two fingers, does it occur to him to take his rage and his pain and walk off that field while he still can? "Nah, nah," he says. "I just love competing, I love playing. I love being out there with my boys and fighting with them. You do it for so long, you can't think of doing anything else."

More than a week later, standing in the hallway outside the Steelers' locker room, Hampton recounts the injury while leaning against a wall. He's already missed one game and will miss two more. He's remarkably sanguine, saying, "If the O-linemen can get an advantage by doing something that's deemed legal, I understand." Mike Tomlin bounces past and whispers something over his shoulder that Hampton finds hilarious. "That's Mike T," he says, shaking his head.

These sacrifices might not be fodder for the highlight reel, but those inside the game recognize Hampton's indelible mark on it. "Because of Casey, teams have changed the way they attack our

defense," Polamalu says. "It's been awesome to see the evolution. Teams used to try to go one-on-one on Casey with their center. That didn't work. Then they tried to double-team him. He's been triple-teamed many a time. Now they're trying to hold him up with one guy while cutting him with another guy. It should be illegal, but it isn't."

This is a big topic in the Steelers' locker room. They've sent tapes to the league asking it to address the issue. Linebacker [LaMarr Woodley](#), with anger in his voice, says, "The NFL needs to change that rule. Everything is so tight in the middle, they don't see it, but even when you make a report and send it in, there's still no response the next week."

"They're worried about protecting defenseless players, right? What are we?" Hoke adds. Asked why he thinks the league doesn't address it, Polamalu laughs and says, "Maybe because it only hurts us?"

Without official sanctioning, what recourse does Hampton have? He smiles conspiratorially and says, "There are different ways of getting back at those guys." His eyes widen mischievously, as if to say, *You don't think I lasted 11 years in this league without secrets, do you?* Pressed for specifics, he says, "If I'm under one of those piles, you better believe I'm getting my get-back."

Steelers center [Maurkice Pouncey](#), who battles Hampton in practice, says, "Hamp's the best player I've ever gone against. The first time I had to block him on a pass rush, he lifted me off the ground and dropped me. I almost broke my ankle." When this quote is read to Hampton, he says, "Don't believe him."

Certain events make it hard to decide what to believe. For instance, the sequence that took place after the high/low on Foster's touchdown run. On the sideline, Hampton bent at the waist holding his shoulder, occasionally lifting his bald, unhelmeted head to scream something to the heavens. He walked around some, kicking at whatever was close. A trainer followed him tentatively, careful to stay a few feet behind. His teammates gave him room. On the field, the Steelers were forced to punt.

(This is where it teeters toward the unbelievable.) Hampton looked out at the game, assessed the situation and quickly retrieved his helmet from wherever he'd thrown it. And then Hampton, his right arm dangling at his side, so sore he couldn't even swing it as he jogged onto the field, buckled his chin strap and ducked into the huddle.

Did you know the injury was bad?

"Oh yeah," he says. "I could tell."

And you still went back out?

He smiles, nods and shrugs the one good shoulder.

"You just do things, man," he says. "You just do."

And here's where we finally understand Hampton, by sliding down into the man's angle of repose. Sure, the high/lows infuriate him, but each one is a veiled compliment. It means, in his words, "mano a mano is not part of your game." The sentiment is such a part of Hampton's self-worth that his bio in Canton -- should the Hall come calling -- could tell his entire story in three words: They needed help.

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