# Medina Highland's Kudla Thrives On Weights

#### By GARY HOUSTEAU Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

In what is certain to be a bumper crop for prep linebackers next football season in the state of Ohio, Mike Kudla' of Medina Highland High School is the one who most emulates that big physical linebacker anchored in the middle of the Ohio State defense that was made fashionable in recent seasons by guys like Andy Katzenmoyer and now Matt Wilhelm.

At 6-4, 235 pounds, the rugged Kudla comes fully equipped for his senior campaign with a combination of speed and strength.

"My game is speed definitely — speed and strength," Kudla said. "And when I get to the ball, I rarely ever miss tackles. I can wrap anybody up. And I also shed blockers well and my footwork has really improved."

Highland head coach John Hopkins describes the individually talented Kudla as simply the ultimate team player.

"Mike's got the tremendous physical tools and above all that, with everything that he's been blessed with, he has a tremendous work ethic," he said. "Whether it be in the weight room, the classroom, or the practice field or on game night, he's a relentless worker. He's very committed to improvement of himself but more so to the improvement of the team."

On paper, Kudla, who has bench pressed 485 pounds and will attempt to hoist 505 in late May, already has the resume to enter the NFL draft.

"I've bench pressed 225 pounds for 31 reps, I've got a 37-inch vertical, and I can dunk a ball from a standstill," he said.

Those types of daunting physical skills aside, Kudla thinks that he can really get an edge when he's on the football field from the mental aspect of the game.

"Watching game films I already know what a lot of the guys on offense are going to run before they even run it, you can tell from their alignment," he said. "And it's at that point when you know that the ball is going to be right there at a certain time and you're right there to meet the running back in the hole and then you see his eyes light up and then you smash him."

Mixing it all together with a few intangibles, it's easy to see what all the fuss over Kudla is about.

"I think his best asset probably is his instinct and nose for the ball," Hopkins said. "Yes his foot speed is a definite plus. Whether it be lateral or filling a hole, he gets there right away. But I'd say proba-



Mike Kudla

bly that his instinct that he's developed has really elevated his play."

For the past two seasons, Kudla has been elevating and then smashing running backs from his middle linebacker position on the defensive side of the football while doubling up full time as a pulling guard out of a predominantly Wing-T offense. But the rather speedy Kudla first broke into the varsity lineup at Highland as a running back.

"I came up through middle school as a running back, but I was a bigger running back, more of a fullback-type," said Kudla, who started his freshman year at running back. "I've always had decent speed, not the greatest, until I went to high school and really found out how to improve it. I've busted my tail doing plyometries.

"I ran a 4.58-second 40 as a freshman and I went to Notre Dame's camp and ran a 4.52 (last summer) and now I'm probably around a 4.49 or 4.5-flat."

From talking with a lot of college players and coaches, Kudla believes that the game of football is just going to continue to get faster.

"The thing they always tell me is that the speed of the game and the mental aspect of it is what changes the most," he said. "So speed can always be improved."

Fortunately for Kudla, his speed has stayed with him as he's evolved into a now hulking linebacker in the middle.

"Between my freshman and sophomore year I grew a ton and got much stronger, and they found that inside 'backer was the place for me," Kudla said. During much of the coming spring and

summer months, Kudla intends to visit as many college football programs as he can to see if his style matches up with

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### **The Kudla File**

NAME — Mike Kudia HIGH SCHOOL — Medina (Ohio) Highland POSITION — Linebacker HEIGHT, WEIGHT — 6-4, 235 pounds 40-YARD DASH TIME — 4.5 seconds BENCH PRESS — 485 pounds

GRADE-POINT AVERAGE --- 3.86

COLLEGE ENTRANCE TEST - He is awaiting results from his first ACT attempt.

VITAL STATISTICS — Kudia had 115 tackles as a sophomore and 167 as a junior at middle linebacker. Some scouts believe he could continue to grow and become a standout defensive end at the college level. Others see him as a prototype middle linebacker prospect. He is ranked as Ohio's 16th-best junior prospect by Ohio's Future Stars and No. 20 by The Ohio Football Recruiting News.

COACH'S COMMENT — "Mike is a real strong, agile-footed and very physical football player. He combines the raw physical tools with the aggressiveness that's needed at the linebacker spot, but he also has stuff going on outside the football field, too. He's a one-ofkind kid. Any accolades that he receives, he's well deserving of. "He's as down-to-earth as they come. He's a very committed, very dedicated kid, one of

"He's as down-to-earth as they come. He's a very committed, very dedicated kid, one of those kids that's very special because they probably come along maybe once or twice in your career at a school our size. He's got the total package. Mike combines the classroom work, the physical tools and the desire to play the game of football the way it was meant to be played, all in one package." — Highland coach John Hopkins

HOBBIES - Works on a farm baling hay every summer.

SCHOOLS INTERESTED IN — Ohio State, Northwestern, Michigan, Purdue and Notre Dame are a few of his early favorites.

their style. On April 16, Kudla attended OSU's spring practice at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center and said that he came away with a rather favorable impression of everything that he saw.

"I was basically just checking it out," said Kudla, who brought his mom and dad and two brothers along on the unofficial visit. "I want to see a lot of schools, and I had fun. It was pretty windy and it was cold; but I really liked the coaches and the facilities a lot. Coach (Jim) Tressel was really nice, my position coach (Mark Snyder) was really nice, and I had a lot of fun just basically getting a good feel for the university."

Contrary to some fairly credible Internet reports that have Kudla strongly interested in Northwestern and even Notre Dame, Kudla said his trip to Ohio State certainly moved the Buckeyes up a peg or two in his eyes. However, he said the choice was still wide open.

"I rate them a lot better," he said. "I like the Big Ten, especially Ohio State. I was really unsure of what I was going to see down there, but after seeing them, I was really impressed and they're definitely one of my top schools.

"One good thing about Ohio State is they play a bigger linebacker, which I am. Some schools don't like bigger linebackers, they like smaller linebackers. But I've still got a whole other year to go and basically I'm just getting a feel for a lot of these colleges, what they're like, what are their coaches like, what are their schemes, and bringing that all into perspective."

Of course perspective could be somewhat shaped or enhanced if one happens to meet your boyhood hero on the gridiron — a hero who just happened to play middle linebacker for the Buckeyes at one time himself.

"Growing up I really watched a lot of Ohio State games and Andy Katzenmoyer was one of my idols," Kudla said. "I got to meet him (while at OSU). It was really nice. Tve always wanted to meet him. I've watched him while growing up. It was a big impact just seeing him in person. Actually I got to talk to him for a couple of minutes and he was giving me a couple of pointers. It was a lot of fun." Fun for Kudla usually means spending countless hours in the weight room fine-tuning his body for the rigors of his upcoming senior season at Highland. He's currently in a "real intense" conditioning program to improve his strength, speed and agility. Although he played on the basketball team this past winter, football is a year-round sport for him.

"Basically I played basketball to stay in shape for football," said Kudla, who admitted that he's a defensive specialist on the hardwood. "The weight room is addicting to me. I've always got to be in there. That's where I have my fun. When most kids are out partying and having fun, I'm in the weight room lifting. That's just where I have my fun."

It's precisely that kind of dedicated work ethic that has landed him atop many of the annual recruiting publications. He said that he's on as many as five preseason high school All-American teams already.

"Those kind of ratings are nice to have but I had to work real hard to get them," Kudla said. "Nothing was free. Last year, I was lifting four hours a day in the summer just to get ready and now it's really paying off. I had a good junior year but I'm really going to improve more in my senior year."

With a Division I scholarship in the offing, Kudla envisions his senior year as being a year to step up and help the team.

"Leadership is my job, getting the team together as one to take us back to the state playoffs," Kudla said. "I really want to get our team back to the state playoffs."

Hopkins is certain that Kudla has everything it takes to lead and even carry his team wherever it wants to go.

"We want Mike to have a successful season," Hopkins said, "but our expectation of Mike is to help provide leadership for us. Mike is not extremely vocal, he's more of a leader by action. He lets his play do the talking. He'll make'a hit and he'll get back to the huddle.

"He doesn't pounce around or wave his arms to the crowd. He plays the game the way it's meant to be played. He's a good leader for us."

### **OHIO STATE FOOTBALL PROFILE**

### **Kudla Keeps Coming Back From Adversity**

#### By ERIC LOUGHRY Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

With the afterglow still bright a week after Ohio State defeated Miami (Fla.) to win the 2002 national championship, the outlook suddenly appeared dim for Mike Kudla.

A freshman on the OSU's undefeated 2002 squad, Kudla had worked his consistent playing time on defense that season was linebacker A.J. Hawk. It was an encouraging beginning to a career, but late in the season Kudla began to feel physically run-down.

He had one tackle in the Buckeyes' 14-9 win over Michigan in the regularseason finale, a victory that gave the team a berth in the Fiesta Bowl and a chance to play for the national championship. Kudla couldn't enjoy the



LONG ROAD BACK — Ohio State defensive end Mike Kudla has endured his share of trials and tribulations on the way to making a mark on the Buckeye defense. The strongest member of the team, Kudla is looking to finish his career with a bang.

way into the rotation on the defensive line. Backing up Darrion Scott at defensive end, he played in every game that season and finished with 12 tackles.

The only other freshman to garner

### moment, though.

He had felt sick during the week leading up the game but thought he just had the flu. He played through it, but after the game his family was alarmed by his appearance.



"I played the game sick, and pretty much after that game, just because all the excitement and everything, I kind of got really sick that night," Kudla said.

He was diagnosed with mononucleosis and missed most of Ohio State's practice in the weeks prior to the Fiesta Bowl but was able to join the team in Tempe.

He thought he was back up to speed, but Kudla, who assisted on a tackle in the double-overtime win over the Hurricanes, fell ill a few days after the win.

"And it just kind of got worse from there," he said.

A few days after the Buckeyes returned from Arizona, Kudla was rushed to the OSU Medical Center.

His immune system shut down, and Kudla's condition weakened as doctors struggled to diagnose what was ravaging his body. He was covered with sores, including on his lips and in his mouth.

A few days passed as he lay in isolation before it was determined the mono had escalated to microplasmic pneumonia. That led to the diagnosis of the disease called Stevens-Johnson's Syndrome, which attacks the body's mucous membranes.

With the cause finally determined, there was a change in medication. Almost immediately, Kudla began to respond positively.

He doesn't remember much about the ordeal, but knows he was fortunate to pull through because the combination of illnesses was life-threatening. "I was pretty much out of it," Kudla

"I was pretty much out of it," Kudla said. "I was sedated for quite a while. If you look back at it, you see pictures of people that have had (the disease) and it's unbelievable that you can pull through something like that.

"It was kind of gruesome and it's kind of rough just thinking about it." Kudla made a full recovery, but there were lingering effects.

It wasn't-long before he was training again, and his bench prese was back up to more than 500 pounds less than two months after the ordeal, but any activity drained him completely.

"It took me probably the better part of a year and a half to get all the way back and feel normal again," Kudla said.

After he was held out of spring practice for an unrelated shoulder injury, Kudla was back in the fold for fall camp 2003.

Playing in every game, he finished his sophomore campaign with nine tackles, including a 14-yard sack against Northwestern. In the last home game of the season, against Purdue, he recovered a Kyle Orton fumble in the end zone for OSU's lone touchdown in a 16-13 overtime win.

Kudla was set to start at a defensive end spot last season, but a pinched nerve set him back. After coming off the bench the first half of the season, he started the last six games. He had six tackles each against Penn State and Purdue and finished the year with 28 stops, including four sacks and 2 1/2 other tackles for loss.

Prior to this season, Kudla — now obviously back at full strength — set the OSU team record for the bench press with a mark of 610 pounds.

"It's crazy, man," safety Donte Whitner said. "I'm scared to spot him. I'm scared because I know if something goes wrong I'm not going to be able to get that weight off him."

Finally healthy, Kudla is having a strong senior year. Through the team's first five games, he led all defensive linemen with 14 tackles and 3 1/2 sacks.

"Mike's always been a good football player for us," said defensive coordinator Jim Heacock, who doubles as defensive line coach. "He's had some problems with health, staying healthy, and had some injury problems over the years.

"When he's played, he's always been a good football player for us. (Head coach Jim) Tressel always talks about for us to be good, our seniors have to be great, (play) their best football, and I think that's what these seniors are doing — stepping up and playing their best football. I think Mike Kudla is doing that."

Kudla has sustained pressure on opposing quarterbacks throughout the season. He had one sack against lowa's Drew Tate and was in on another. In the Buckeyes' loss to Texas, Kudla had Vince Young in his grasp when the Longhorns' QB threw an ill-advised pass that was intercepted by Hawk.

"He's putting a whole lot of pressure on the quarterback," safety Nate Salley said. "He's getting sacks for us. He's making our job in the back unit real easy.

"He's always had the ability to do it. He's always been one of the strongest on the team (and) he's fast. Now it's all just coming together for him."

Kudla is also athletic enough to fall back in coverage from his end spot when the Buckeyes go to a zone defense.

"He almost becomes a linebacker," Heacock said.

Kudla has become a stalwart for the OSU defense, and he certainly overcame his share of obstacles to get to that point.

"If something would happen to Kudes — ever — I would always have my money on him, that's he's going to bounce back because he's just that determined," defensive end David Patterson said.



**MICHIGAN MEMORIES** 

## Kudla Fought Against More Than U-M At OSU

By JAMES GREGA Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Few people are as strong as Mike Kudla was in his time at Ohio State, both on and off the football field.

Shortly after the Buckeyes knocked off Miami (Fla.) in the 2003 Fiesta Bowl to win their first national title since 1968, Kudla was diagnosed with Toxic Epidermal Necrolysis, a disease that nearly took his life.

However, Kudla fought through and came back from the illness to put together an impressive Ohio State career that saw him not only win a national title but also collect three victories over Michigan.

A native of Hinckley, Ohio, just a short drive down I-71 from Cleveland, Kudla was the Associated Press' Div. III Co-Defensive Player of the Year in 2001 as a senior at Highland High School and a prized recruit pursued by many top schools.

But even before suiting up for the Hornets, Kudla said the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry was something he grew up watching. "Evervone would huddle around the old

tube sets on the floor, and our entire family huddled in this room watching those games," Kudla told BSB. "For me, it was just one of those things you became so familiar with because it was a tradition. It was part of the normal calendar year. It was fun to see that as a child and grow up and then have the ability to play in it."

Before he actually suited up for the Buckeyes, Kudla said Ohio State's 2001 victory over the Wolverines was a game that stood out to him.

Kudla committed to Ohio State in the summer of 2001, just before his senior season. He said watching Jim Tressel's first Buckeye team beat the Wolverines in Ann Arbor was a special moment for him.

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"Watching Coach Tress go in there, in their back yard and perform and reset the standard of what the rivalry was, it was unbelievable to watch," Kudla said. "That gave you the honor and privilege to say, 'It is our job to do the same thing.' As we came in as young players, the bar was set and that was the expectation."

After arriving on campus, Kudla played in all 14 games during the 2002 season, collecting 12 tackles, one tackle for loss and a fumble recovery, with most of his production coming on special teams.

One of those tackles came in the 2002 version of The Game, Kudla's first personal experience in the rivalry.

"It is one of those things that as you have gone through life, you are entrenched in this tradition," Kudla said. "When you have the opportunity to partake in it and play in the game, it was interesting. As a freshman, you have never gone through that process. It was so different, because you get through your last game, and then it is The Game. It changed instantaneously.

"I will never forget coming in on that Sunday of The Game for that week (in 2002), campus was different. Everything that happened was different. You knew that this was a different opportunity."

The Buckeyes won that game, 14-9, and went on to defeat Miami in the national title bout.

Kudla then had to fight for his life as the previously mentioned illness sent him to the OSU Medical Center just days after the Buckeyes returned from their big win in Arizona. The disease covered his body in sores as one of the strongest football players in the country dropped around 50 pounds.

After spending almost two weeks in the hospital and undergoing treatment, Kudla fought back and got himself back into football shape, playing in all of Ohio State's 13 games in 2003.

The Game in 2003 saw the Buckeyes lose a 35-21 contest to the Wolverines and a likely chance at defending their national title. Kudla did not record a stat in that game but said he remembers what the locker room was like following the loss. "When you lose The Game, it is emphasized," Kudla said. "We left everything that we had out there. It wasn't a situation where we weren't playing up to our capabilities. We had some phenomenal senior leadership. They did a great job of after that game saying, 'Don't let this happen again.' It wasn't that they didn't put everything out there, it was that you never want to walk out of that place with a loss. That is the standard."

For Kudla, losing to the Wolverines is not something he experienced a second time, though in 2004 the Buckeyes suffered through the worst season in Tressel's tenure at Ohio State.

The Buckeyes entered the Michigan game that year with a 6-4 record having just dropped a 24-17 decision to Purdue on the road. Regardless of the loss, Kudla said the focus was heightened for the matchup with the Wolverines.

"I think when the week turned and it turns over to Sunday, the week changes. It is not a normal game week," Kudla said. "I go back to '04 when we were going through some transition. We put it all together for that game, and it really set the tone for how we were transitioning."

After the unranked Buckeyes knocked off the No. 7 Wolverines 37-21 in Columbus, Ohio State carried an 8-2 record into Ann Arbor in 2005 after losses to Texas and Penn State had knocked them from the outright Big Ten title race and the national title hunt.

Despite that, Kudla and the Buckeyes remembered the words of the 2003 seniors and came away with a 25-21 victory in Ann Arbor.

Kudla recorded just two tackles in that game but capped his college career with a three-sack performance against Notre Dame in the 2006 Fiesta Bowl, finishing with a 3-1 record against Michigan and 4-0 in bowl games. He currently sits in a three-way tie for 16th in career sacks in Ohio State history with former teammates Bobby Carpenter and Darrion Scott at 14½ each.

Kudla said that while he cherishes his success against the Wolverines, he looks at his time at Ohio State as a whole and treasures all of the moments as much as he can.



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### MICHIGAN MEMORIES



STRONG SHOWING - Defensive lineman Mike Kudla (57) finished his Ohio State career with a 3-1 record against Michigan.

"I always look at it in totality," Kudla said. "I think you have to because you experience so much. Obviously winning the national championship is the pinnacle that you can reach as a collegiate athlete, so it is easy to sit here and say, 'That is a great moment.' But it is not far off that you start to say those games that we played up north, especially in their back yard - spectacular.

"The message was always finish strong. Ironically enough, my last play in college I sacked (Notre Dame's) Brady Quinn, and that ended the game," Kudla said. "I can honestly say that is a visual representation of what I did at Ohio State. I left everything, every ounce on that field to play for the coaches, fans and my teammates. I look back with hindsight, I wouldn't do a single thing different."

### **Gold Pants Stay** Locked Away

In his time at Ohio State, Kudla earned three pairs of gold pants, the famous keepsakes given to Buckeye players who are a part of winning teams over Michigan.

While Kudla said he originally distributed his gold pants to family members, they are now locked away for safe keeping.

"You go through the normal tradition," Kudla said. "I gave my first set of gold pants to my mom and my second pair to my dad. I had one, and slowly but surely they all kind of morphed together. You start to do certain things and you take your memorabilia with you. It is phenomenal to see the impact those things have. It is very critical as a player to earn those."

#### **Kudla Remembers** Late Teammate

In addition to his memories of the rivalry with Michigan, Kudla said he has fond memories of the late Will Smith, who died in April after he was shot during a traffic incident in New Orleans.

When Kudla came to Ohio State, Smith was entering his junior year, and both played what was then called the "Leo" position along the Buckeye defensive front. At the time, current OSU co-defensive coordinator Luke Fickell was transitioning back onto the staff in Columbus after spending the 2000 and 2001 seasons as the defensive line coach at Akron.

Kudla said he spent a lot of time with Smith both on and off the field while Smith was still in Columbus, something Kudla said he cherishes

"Fickell's first year, basically all he did was coach Will and I," Kudla said. "Will and I roomed together and spent a lot of time together. I just can't say enough good things about Will as a person, as a competitor. I was honored and privileged to suit up and play with him."

Perhaps Kudla's most famous play as a Buckeye came in large part because of the play of Smith. On Nov. 15, 2003, Ohio State played host to Purdue on Senior Night in Columbus. Smith, who had been honored before the game, forced a fumble of Boilermaker quarterback Kyle Orton on the goal line. And who was there to pick it up for the lone touchdown of the game for the Buckeyes? You guessed it, Mike Kudla.

"There isn't a thing I wouldn't do to - if Will called me up and needed a ride, I would drive all night to go do it," Kudla said. "It is one of those things where you are a part of something and we were a family. I was lucky and privileged to have the opportunity to play with Will, call Will my friend."

The Buckeyes went on to win that game over the Boilermakers 16-13 in overtime, thanks in large part to that play by Smith and Kudla.



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