



The Country Gentleman

**Merlin Olsen As
Father Murphy**

After football fame with the L.A. Rams, this intimidating 275-pounder has tackled everything from sports broadcasting to "Little House on the Prairie" to his current television triumph, "Father Murphy."

by S. LaMar Wade

For 15 years, Merlin Olsen made his living knocking people down. As a 6-foot-5, 275-pound defensive tackle for the Los Angeles Rams, his hits weren't recorded by statisticians; they were monitored by seismologists. He never had his name sewn on his jersey—just a "Do Not Feed" sign.

Now, instead of getting paid to knock people down, he gets paid to uplift them. He's been doing that for the past five years as Jonathan Garvey on NBC's "Little House on the Prairie" series. And in addition to his National Football League broadcasting chores, he's starting his second season as headliner of his own show, "Father Murphy." In a role that draws on his pastoral personality and rural West upbringing, Olsen stars as an unpolished Dakota goldminer who strikes it sentimentally rich, impersonating a priest to help save a group of orphans from the clutches of the harsh state workhouse. This TV season he has shed the robe, having married the orphanage's schoolteacher and become the orphans' legal guardian.

"We had a great deal of fun originally with the idea of Father Murphy impersonating a priest," says Olsen. "But we found that that started to get into the road as we progressed. It was so difficult to explain to people who had missed the pilot episode why Father Murphy had to dress up as a priest. I'm happy with the new situation."

It may seem out of character to see this behemoth hugging children instead of crashing about on our TV screen. But not so, considering a remark made by one of his former NFL rivals. Former Green Bay Packer Bill Curry once described Olsen as a "magnifying glass and a pile of leaves," threatening "to burst into flame all the time." So despite the transition from an intimidating athlete to a Paul Bunyan of pioneer America, Olsen is still propelled by that intensity.

"It's a tremendous contrast from sacking quarterbacks and hand-to-hand combat," he concedes. "In football, I knew what my responsibilities were, and I knew what I needed to do to be good. I wanted that kind of intensity and concentration when I went into acting. I don't think that part of my personality is gone. Some of the things Jonathan Garvey and the new character, John Michael Murphy, do are pretty violent. You have to remember that back in the days of 'Little House' you had to fight to survive."

This switch from strength to sentiment didn't really involve any wizardry for this Merlin. "Anytime you deal with honest emotions, you see it," he says. "That's one of the things I've learned through Michael Landon. You don't have to be macho to be manly. It's all right to cry. It's all right to care about kids and dogs. Besides," he chuckles, "I've always been more comfortable with kids and dogs anyway."

So, is Jonathan Garvey—or John Michael Murphy—the alter ego of Merlin Olsen? "Not purely so," he has decided. "But we share a lot of values."

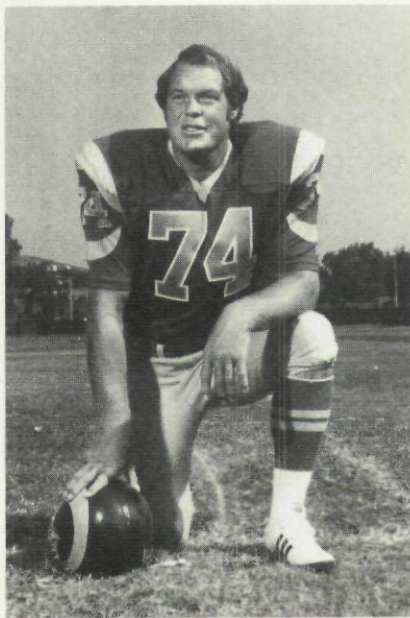
They actually have quite a bit in common. Merlin Olsen's formative years were very much like those of Jonathan Garvey and John Michael Murphy. Olsen is the second oldest of nine children born to mother Merle and father Lynn Olsen of Logan, Utah. And he grew up in surroundings not unlike Walnut Grove.

He worked on a farm in northern Utah's Cache Valley, caring for dairy cattle, baling hay, doing some construction work and serving as a hod carrier. He sometimes hunted deer and elk for family meals and even helped out by peeling potatoes and canning peaches along with his brothers and sisters. And his family knew the importance of religious instruction as dedicated members of the Mormon Church.

And that's precisely why Michael Landon, executive producer of both "Little House" and "Father Murphy," considers Olsen a natural. He says he's capitalizing on Olsen's real-life disposition and experience.

Surprisingly, Olsen found his football colleagues responded to his new role not with guffaws but with encouragement.

"I started doing Jonathan Garvey



Olsen, All-American at Utah State University, has now been inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

within months after my retirement from football. And I knew I'd have to go back and see (my football friends) when we did the broadcasts. And I was a little concerned how they'd react," he recalls. "But they loved it! Some of these big guys you think chew nails came up to me and said, 'Hey, I sit down with my kids and watch the show.' Most of the reaction has been positive."

In fact, that's a major reason, says Olsen, that "working with 'Little House' has been such a good experience." Explains Olsen, "I have three children"—daughters Kelly, 17, and Jill, 14, and son Nathan, nine—"and here's something I can say, 'Look, kids, I've been working on something, and I'd like you to see it.' How many shows could you do that with? I think that's a tribute to Michael Landon and the kinds of ideas he's been able to put on TV."

Yet he realizes that some critics think "Little House" is too syrupy and charming to be realistic. And he has caustically been labeled a "graduating member of the 'Little House' Mafia." But he's not bothered by any of that. "Some people would rather watch a show that'll give them 30,000 thrills in a half-hour. But that's not the way life is," Olsen figures. "Because of the framework it's in and because young children are going to be watching it, you have to keep the show rather simple. But I think the

strength of the show is its simplicity.

"My great grandparents came out on the wagon trains and settled in Utah," says Olsen. "And survival was the key. Like in the show, the important thing was not that the house was beautiful, but would it survive the winter? Sometimes we try to put our own kind of complexity into the situation. But we ought to remember those people were out there trying to survive."

On a broader spectrum, Merlin Olsen is concerned about what sort of morals television is molding for today's youth.

"We've kind of gotten lost a little bit," he says of the television industry. "We do have a responsibility to young people who spend a lot of time in front of the TV and accept what they see. TV has made a greater impact on us than anything in our society. We're not exactly sure just what impact TV has had on us. But we do know kids spend more time sitting in front of the TV than they do reading and talking to their parents and doing their homework. It's almost like a sleeping pill; you can sit there for hours without doing anything. There's no response required."

He gives an example. "What scares me is here in California, there was a bank robbery within sight of a school. The robber ran out of the bank and was shot and killed. . . all in front of the children," he recounted. "And there was almost no response from the children. I guess they'd seen it on TV too many times. Maybe we've been desensitized by TV. If we're doing that to people, we've done a great disservice." As for the contribution of "Father Murphy," Olsen says, "There are so many shows that deal with life in the fast lane. If all you see on television are people who drink, use drugs and go racing around from bed to bed, you begin to believe what you see, that everybody lives like that. We show another style of life. We help to even the scale. I don't know if television really molds children's morals, but I definitely feel there's a role there."

He's troubled that this same irresponsibility has spilled over into college athletics. Laments Olsen, "I think something sad has happened. We've changed the structure of athletics today, and athletes are

becoming lazy. There's too much willingness to compromise. One of the responsibilities a school has is to make sure the athlete is getting an education. By eliminating personal responsibility, we've allowed the athlete to remain like a child.

"The athlete gets a cushy summer job, gets to sign up for easy classes and can make it through college with very little effort," he says. "The guy who gets hurt worst is the athlete. He's not asked to carry the responsibility that'll make him grow.

"I didn't go to school to be an athlete," Olsen states. "I applied the same kind of competitiveness in the classroom that I did on the football field—and it's paid dividends."

Indeed it has. At Utah State University, Olsen is probably best remembered for those accomplishments that won him induction in November 1980 into the College Football Hall of Fame. He was consensus All-American his senior year, won the Outland Trophy as the nation's top collegiate defender and played in three post-season all-star games.

But Olsen hit the schoolbooks as hard as his football foes to be graduated *summa cum laude* in 1961 with a degree in finance and a Phi Beta Kappa key. And he returned to earn a master's degree in economics. As a testimony to his excellence in a variety of campus activities, the athletic trophy case in the Utah State basketball arena houses a photo of Merlin Olsen—not in football gear but in military dress as the school's ROTC commander.

Success followed him to professional football, a hazardous business he endured 15 years where the average career span is four. He played in a record 14 Pro Bowls, was the Rams' Most Valuable Player in 1970 and 1972, the NFC's Most Valuable Lineman in 1973 and was the league's MVP in 1974.

"The most exciting thing was playing the game," Olsen says. But he calls his induction this past August into the Pro Football Hall of Fame "a layer of whipped cream on a very nice dessert. It was certainly the greatest honor accorded to me as an athlete."

Nevertheless, he didn't rely on his athletic reputation to guarantee him a second career. He believes plain, hard work has carried him through.

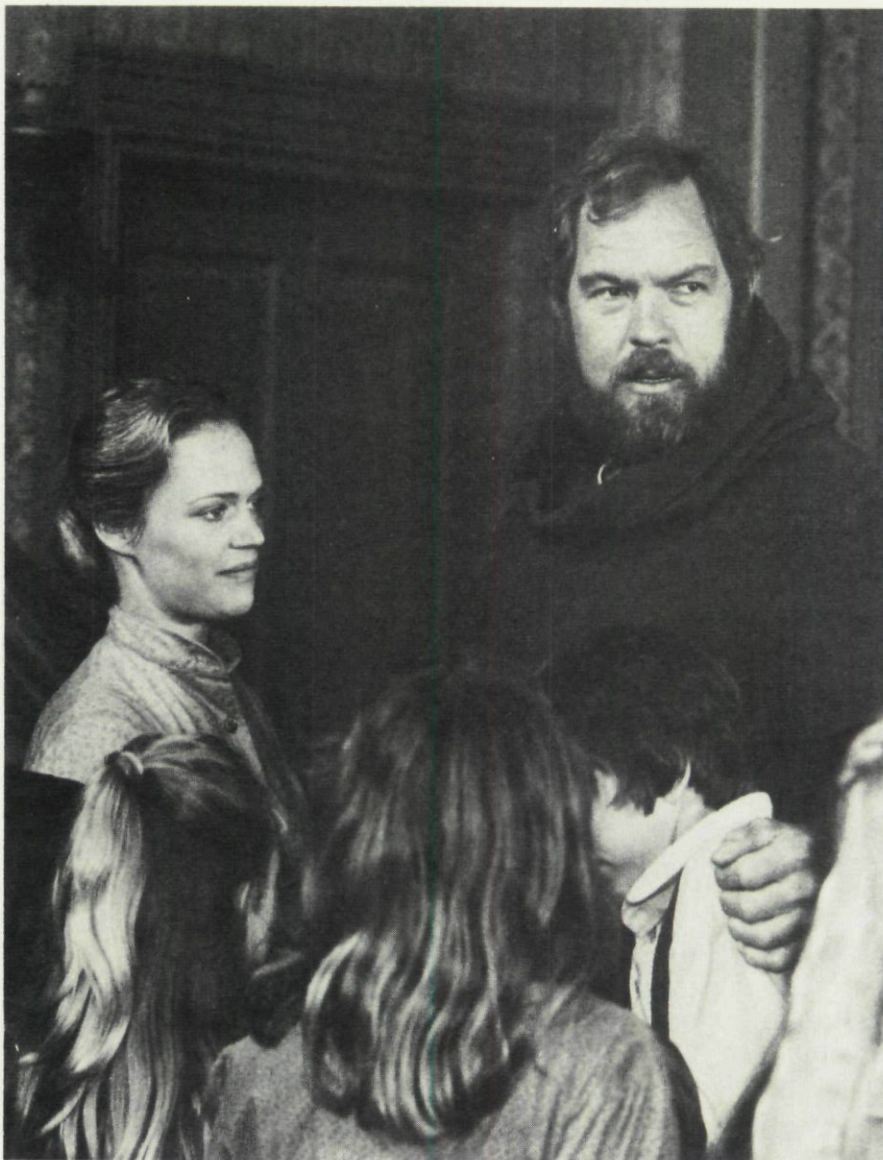
"Being an athlete doesn't qualify you to be anything other than an athlete," he stresses. "Like (Miami Dolphins' Coach) Don Shula said, 'Winning is never final; it just means you've been there.' Hard work and preparation are what will keep you there. If you're really good at what you do, you make it look easy. And in being good, you go unrecognized. I understood that (while playing football). And that's one of the reasons I survived as long as I did. In the long run, if you do your job, people will know."

Merlin Olsen learned at an early age that he would have to depend more on perseverance than physical ability. "Up through the ninth grade, I was always cut off teams. I

wasn't coordinated. I couldn't stand up straight on a flat sidewalk," he recalls with a laugh. "And the coaches would tell me, 'We're trying to prepare kids for the high school team, and you're just in the way here. Why don't you go out for the school newspaper?' I couldn't say anything. I was too busy fighting back the tears. But then I made the sophomore football team.

"I think one of the underlying needs for success is some kind of frustration," he reasons. "You have to say to yourself, 'I don't care what happens. I'm going to go out and do that.' You have to have that fire, that burning desire, to take that

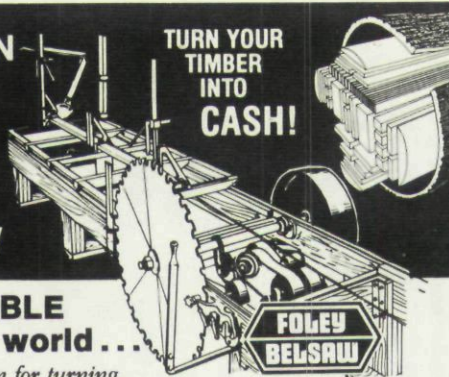
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After Olsen's debut in *The Undefeated*, starring John Wayne, director Andrew McLaglen said, "The big kid's a natural. If he wanted to, he could make acting a career." The big kid wanted to—and the director was right.

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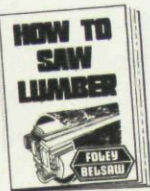
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Merlin Olsen

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extra step to the big league. And when the body and mind work together as a team, they can do amazing things."

When Olsen decided football "was no longer my game. . . it belongs to the younger people," he planned his second career. And that was about four years before he retired from the Rams in 1976.

"I knew I wanted to do some broadcasting and acting. So I contacted the networks and got them thinking about it," he calculates. "As far as NBC was concerned, I think acting was a throw-away. They put it in the contract, but they really wanted to concentrate on the sportscasting. They told me they'd talk to some people about my acting—to see if I could get any minor guest roles."

He had acted in the 1968 film *The Undefeated* with John Wayne, Rock Hudson and Rams teammate Roman Gabriel. And back then, director Andrew McLaglen is quoted as saying of Olsen, "The big kid is a natural actor. If he wanted to, he

could make it a career." Olsen had about a half-dozen small roles in films and television movies between then and 1976.

"I really had a strange premonition that I'd be doing some acting," he remembers. "So I went to an acting coach. I told him what I needed was a crash course. Then, after two sessions, I got a call from Michael Landon. I assumed I'd be trying for a guest role, a one-show situation. I read some lines with the woman who was going to play Alice Garvey. Then Michael said he'd let me know.

"I found out later he'd made the decision about 10 or 15 minutes after I left. But two days later I called *him* back. I said, 'I don't mean to bug you, but I'm dying! Have you made a decision?' He said, 'Haven't they told you? How would you like to be a regular on "Little House"?' I was walking on air for awhile."

Olsen says for now he's "happy getting up every day and doing my job. Acting is occupying a great part of my time. But we change. I keep a list of goals in my drawer. Everybody should have their goals or am-

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Merlin Olsen

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bitions written down and kept in front of them. I have a whole list of things I'd like to do. Maybe writing—I've toyed with a couple of scripts. Maybe I'd like to direct someday. . . or produce. As I become more comfortable as an actor, I can look at these things."

One thing he has made a lifelong commitment to is his marriage to the former Susan Wakley, his college sweetheart. They celebrated their 20th anniversary this past March.

"She's a bright woman, an honor graduate," he beams. "We got mar-

ried the spring of our senior year in college. She's active in a number of charitable organizations—and she keeps me out of trouble," kids Olsen.

Incidentally, Merlin says his name comes from Merlin the Magician of King Arthur legend and not from the combination of his parents' names.

There's really no mystery behind the success of Merlin Olsen. Just a desire to excel and a blueprint for carrying it out. Olsen puts it this way: "I would like for people to say, 'He's a real pro. He knows what he's doing.'" Regardless of Merlin Olsen's dimensions, no one would argue with that. ♣

Copper Ring

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ing. I read *From Here to Eternity* while I was there, and also some psychology so I could try to understand myself. But then I found I wasn't really absorbing what I read. I couldn't concentrate anymore. Oh—and also about that time I began to drool. That was almost the worst thing of all. And there was nothing I could do about it. I just sat there and drooled. The strange thing—although I didn't know it then—was that the usual effect of Thorazine is dryness of the mouth. But nobody seemed to notice or care. I began to get the feeling that I couldn't talk. I don't know how to explain that. I knew I could talk, and yet I felt I couldn't. I was so miserable. I began to feel I wanted to die. Really die. That whole period is a little blurred in my memory—partly, I suppose, because of all that Thorazine. But I remember certain moments vividly. I remember that just before Thanksgiving I had the feeling I was actually going to die that very night. My mother came to see me that afternoon, and I made her take my wedding ring and gold necklace. I was afraid one of the hospital people would steal them that night off my dead body. When I woke up the next morning and found I was still alive, I refused to believe it. I told everybody I was dead. I insisted. That's all I remember of that episode. But about that time they gave me a series of physical tests. They did blood tests, a brain scan and a liver-function test. They told me my liver was enlarged. The reason, they said, was all that Thorazine. So they took me off Thorazine, and put me into electroshock therapy. I suppose they talked to my parents and got their permission. I had three treatments, and there seemed to be some improvement. My psychiatrist said I was sufficiently improved to go home. But they were mistaken. I began to feel I was really off my rocker. Pat came up to see me, and we were driving somewhere, and I tried to jump out of the car. The psychiatrist decided they hadn't gone far enough with my electroshock therapy. He put me back in the hospital for a full course. I had eight

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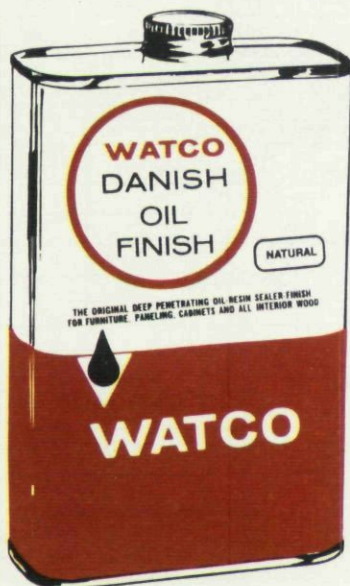
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