

Reggie White Remembered as a Godly Man With a 'Huge Heart'

Nicknamed the 'Minister of Defense,' White began questioning his effectiveness in ministry during the last years of his life

At 6 feet 5 inches and 300 pounds, Reggie White was arguably one of the best defensive players in National Football League (NFL) history. But friends and colleagues say it was the 43-year-old's strength off the field—as an ordained minister and humanitarian—that left the biggest mark.

"He was a big guy with a huge heart," said longtime friend and fellow minister Paul Cole. "You could be in a room with other guys who were physically large, but Reggie would fill the room if he was there. Literally, he would walk in and something happened in the air. It was more than his physical presence; there was something bigger inside him."

White's sudden death on Dec. 26—likely caused by respiratory problems stemming from sarcoidosis (inflamed lungs) and sleep apnea—sent shockwaves of grief throughout the sports community. Survived by his wife, Sara, and their two children, Jeremy and Jecolia, White was buried Dec. 30 in Charlotte, N.C.

"He was one of the greatest players who ever put on a uniform at his position," said Johnny Majors, White's former coach at the University of Tennessee. "I once referred to him as the Tony Dorsett, [a legendary running back], of defensive linemen. There's never been a better one."

Twice honored as the NFL Defensive Player of the Year, White was voted to play in a record-setting 13 Pro Bowls, helped lead the Green Bay Packers to victory in Super Bowl XXXI in 1997, and held the all-time record for quarterback sacks (198) at the time of his final retirement in 2000.

But he was also an outspoken Christian who lost a \$6 million deal as a sports analyst after he labeled homosexuality a sin during a 1998 speech before the Wisconsin state legislature. The Chattanooga, Tenn., native who became known as the "Minister of Defense" founded and supported several ministries. Among them were Urban Hope, which helps provide loans to minority businesspeople who can't get funding from traditional sources; Christian Athletes United for Spiritual Empowerment (CAUSE); and the Inner City Church of Knoxville, Tenn., where he was a co-pastor.

Yet after a second and final retirement after the 2000 season, White grew introspective and began questioning his effectiveness in ministry. "I've been a preacher 21 years, preaching what somebody wrote or what I heard somebody else say," said White in his final interview with the NFL Network in 2004.

"I was not a student of the Scripture. I did not read the Bible every day because I didn't understand it. As much as I gave the perception that I understood what I was talking about, I didn't understand it. I came to the realization that I had become more of a motivational speaker than a teacher of the Word.

"In many respects, I'd been prostituting," he went on to say. "Most people who wanted me to speak at their churches were only asking me to speak because I played football, not because

I was this great religious guy or this theologian.”

White put his ministry on hold and began an extensive study of the Hebrew language and the Torah. “I came to the realization that if I’m gonna find God,” White said, “I’ve gotta go back and research the Scripture in its original language to see what it says.”

After two years of study, White even altered his diet, giving up eating pork and meat from scavengers such as shrimp and lobster, as per Old Testament law. Some friends and colleagues began questioning whether he was straying into legalism.

“When Reggie started down the road of going back to the original language it really revitalized him,” said Qadry Ismail, a former wide receiver for the Minnesota Vikings and the Baltimore Ravens who took up Hebrew studies along with White. “From the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation, that’s what Reggie held to be true. The traditions that we should not be involved in—the ones that have crept up into our ‘Christian’ lives over time—he moved away from.”

For a season, MorningStar Ministries founder Rick Joyner wouldn’t allow White to teach certain doctrines in his church. “As is common with those who have the insatiable hunger for deeper knowledge and understanding, sometimes they are open to those who have carried doctrines to extremes, and I felt that this happened to Reggie,” Joyner wrote in a tribute on his Web site in the days after White’s death. “However, I was never too concerned about Reggie, knowing that his sincere love of the truth and his integrity, would ultimately lead him to ultimate truth.”

Joyner said the two had reconciled before White's death.

White's story will be featured in the March/April issue of New Man magazine, which is owned by Charisma's parent company, Strang Communications. "Reggie was one the best defensive players the NFL has ever seen—if not the best ever," said New Man editor Robert Andrescik. "He lived an exemplary life. All of the scandals you hear about with pro athletes ... Reggie rose above all that. He made us proud because he played hard and lived godly, both on and off the field."

Jarrold Gollihare