



# THE SECRET ORIGIN OF THE DEFENSIVE END WHO LOVED COMICS!

**ISRAEL IDONIJE** LEAPS FROM THE TITANIC BATTLES OF THE GRIDIRON INTO A NEW ROLE DESTINED SINCE HIS CHILDHOOD—THE OWNER OF HIS OWN PUBLISHING COMPANY, **ATHLITACOMICS**. BY JOHN MIHALY

# Ask any comic book fan what superhero title hooked them on the genre and they will be able to reel off the issue number, how old they were, who bought it for them, and probably what they had



THE LIMITED PRINT RUN, ORIGIN ISSUE #0 OF *THE PROTECTORS*.

for dinner later that evening. Such is the case with former Chicago Bears defensive end, Israel Idonije.

“I was given a series of about five or six issues of *The Green Hornet*,” Idonije says. “I wasn’t a big reader as a kid, but my parents wanted me to read an hour a day. That became my platform for reading. My mom would take me to that one little comic shop in my neighborhood and that’s how it all started. I even had a paper route and I used my money to go buy comics!”

It’s that initial, nostalgic encounter that sticks with an individual much like Spider-Man does to walls. No matter how old one gets, that moment of discovery follows them wherever they may go in life, even to the NFL.

Historically, sports and comics only team up at the same shops where cards and books are sold or where ill-fated crossovers are attempted (Google *NFL SuperPro* to get an idea and a chuckle). Like any good super hero worth his cape and mask, there’s an origin story to Idonije’s own company, Athlitacomics.

“It was 2007 when I was with the Bears at training camp, which is very monotonous,” he says. “It’s like Groundhog Day. It’s the same routine every day: football, meetings, football, practice, eat lunch and take a nap. Then you get some free time at night when everyone is in the hallway, playing videos games or just having fun,” Idonije says. “That year I decided I wanted to do something different. When I checked into the dorm, I brought a pad and a pen, and did some research on story writing. I had never written a story before, so I searched the best approaches to writing one and creating a property. And in a few weeks, I had *The Protectors*.”

In his decade-long NFL career Idonije has experienced quite a few heroic moments on the field of battle. “Over

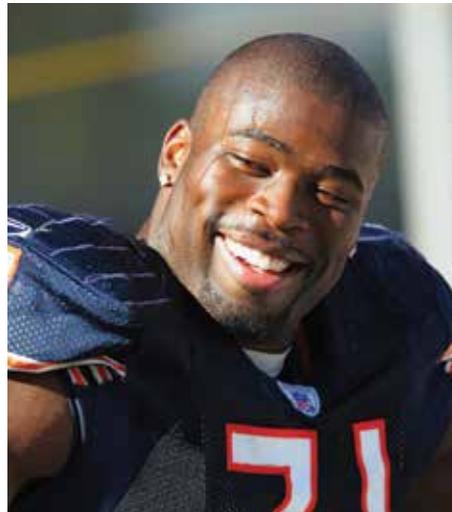


***"I've created a comic. I've held it in my hand. I have this incredible team, and we make comics on a high level that can stand with anything in this industry."***

the years I've seen a lot of amazing things. "In the Super Bowl, every Bears fan in the galaxy said that Devin Hester was going to return that kick off for a touchdown. And as he broke tackle after tackle, the place erupted! The stadium was shaking, and your footing was vibrating! That's why you play the game." That's also the kind of passion and energy that Athlitacomics hopes to harness.

*The Protectors* tells the story of athletes who are given a spark or gift and how they choose to use this ability. That power struggle of good versus evil will play in the foreground. In order to maintain their identities, these athletes still have to practice, do interviews and live their public lives. However, with great ideas come great obstacles. "After I had the whole bible and the universe laid out, I reached out to Marvel and DC Comics—I still have the emails. I wanted to tell these great stories. They said, 'Thank you for your submission.' Sometimes what you think is a great idea doesn't necessarily translate into what someone else thinks is a great idea," Idonije says. "The first three or four people I fleshed this idea out with loved the story, but asked, 'Why a comic? Why not a book?' That's what started me reading. Now we're part of the Just Read Program. There are kids out there who may not be great readers but can use this as a platform."

Israel wanted to be a leader in that niche market of sports comics, to rise where others have fallen, telling stories in the right way in the right space. Even Iron Man needs a hand in saving the planet, so the I-Train (the heroic sounding nickname that Israel has carried throughout his playing days) used what he learned on the field and in the locker room to draft a team of industry All-Stars (think of them as The Avengers) to make his dream project come true. There's Ron Marz, a writer with decades of experience penning the tales of *Green Lantern*, *Silver Surfer* and the Star Wars universe. That led to teaming with artist Bart Sears, whose distinctly muscular drawing styles has graced the pages of *Batman*, *The Justice League* and *Captain America* comics.



IDONIJE PLAYED DEFENSIVE END FOR TWELVE NFL SEASONS, INCLUDING TEN WITH THE CHICAGO BEARS.

"The greatest thing about sports, and really football, is it's all about team," Idonije says. "The success of that team is dependent on each piece, each player doing their part to the best of their abilities and coming together as a collective to deliver. For me, that correlates directly to business. I do one thing well, our writer does something well. So does the artist, the editor, the letterer, everyone. They are each a player on our team. In the same way we all bring our skills to the table and we turn in this issue, this finished piece, this comic. We work to put the best comic out there that people can enjoy every time it comes out."

IN ADDITION TO *The Protectors*, Athlitacomics has also created *Sports Heroes*, a concept that parallels the actual story. "*Sports Heroes* takes these real athletes that we look up to in the real world and transforms them into these characters that are stylized similar to these athletes in the comics," Idonije says. "There's a little play on what each athlete's power is, what their ability is in sports. On all the quarterback images, there's

a little energy burst around their arm or the football. If they are a QB that is extremely cerebral and wins a lot of games because they are able to outsmart or outthink their opponents, you might see a little aura around their head. The image of Julius Peppers is a menacing image but his power and strength are reflected in the force that he is on the field. *Sports Heroes* is the bridge between the fantasy that is *The Protectors* and the reality of the world we live in."

According to Idonije, if he could have any super power it would be precognition, the ability to see everything that is going to happen and to be one step ahead of every situation. Looking ahead at the future of Athlitacomics, he feels like this is already a big win. "I've created a comic. I've held it in my hands," he says. "I have this incredible team, and we make comics on a high level that can stand with anything in the industry. We have so many other things going on with the company. I can't wait until people see this." ■

