Merlin Olsen: NFL Hall of Famer Scored as Petal Pitchman

After making a name for himself knocking people over for the Los Angeles Rams, Merlin Olsen picked up a bouquet of flowers and made millions of florists cheer.

Since Olsen died March 11 at the age of 69, the response and tributes paid to him speak volumes about his crossover appeal. Not many celebrities can count football fanatics, "Little House on the Prairie" devotees and the floral industry in their loyal following, but the former FTD spokesman did. Olsen came to FTD from his induction into the Professional Football Hall of Fame and was introduced as the FTD spokesperson at the 1983 Hawaii convention.

He used that contrasting juxtaposition of a former "Fearsome Foursome" becoming a pitcher of perky petals to great effect. The ads, many with Olsen's massive frame sitting next to a bright bouquet, made the case with humor: "Why a 6' 5'' 245 lb. man like me turned from tackling to tickling. I used to tackle my friends but now I tickle them with FTD's Tickler Bouquet."

Campy in retrospect, but wildly popular and seemingly everywhere in the 80s, the ads were just part of what won over florists. FTD's fall sales rose immediately and momentum was expected to carry over into the spring, according to "Since 1910: A History of FTD." Analysts credited the dramatic gain to the members' acceptance of Olsen, a positive consumer response to the marketing campaign and an improving economy.

"FTD has suffered a great loss with the passing of Merlin Olsen. He was a wonderful friend and spokesperson for us for many years and will always be a member of the FTD family. Our heartfelt condolences go out to his wife, Susan, and his entire family," said FTD President Robert Apatoff.

It was Olsen's down-to-earth demeanor and love of flowers that FTD members got to know at the many conventions he attended.

"I met Merlin at the Illinois State Flower Association Spring Show years ago when I was a teenager, and he could not have been nicer to spend time talking to adults and kids alike," said David Mitchell, AAF, PFCI, owner of Mitchell's Flower Shop in Orland Park, Ill. "When I saw him again at the Rose Bowl just a couple years ago and he was the same gracious, patient man that I met years before. He was a wonderful spokesperson for both FTD and the entire floral industry. He will be missed."

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