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## Former linebacker Battaglia wants to be a big man on camera

By RUSS BROWN  
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Matt Battaglia found it difficult to give up football when a bum shoulder sent the former University of Louisville standout linebacker to the sidelines permanently a year ago.


But now, after trying his hand briefly at modeling, Battaglia thinks he's found a satisfying replacement for football: He's tackling acting.

Although he never had read a line or stepped in front of a camera, Battaglia applied for admission into an apprentice program and this month started a year-long course in Burt Reynolds' acting school in Jupiter, Fla.

How did Battaglia, 23, make the leap from the football field to the stage?

"What made me the happiest was football," he said. "But the part of football I liked the most was being in the spotlight and being in front of a crowd. So what better way than acting?"

So he talked his way into an audition for



Matt Battaglia

"... the part of football I liked the most was being in the spotlight and being in front of a crowd..."

In his first appearance, he and another bad guy got into a fight with Reynolds' cronies, Oz Jackson. It didn't last long.

"It was pretty funny," Battaglia said. "He mauled me."

With one punch.

"When Matt told me he got beat up with one punch, I told him, 'Sounds like old times,'" said Chris Thieneman, a former U of L teammate.

At least Battaglia got to say a few words on national TV before he hit the deck.

"My buddy said, 'That looks like Oz Jackson,'" Battaglia recalled. "I said, 'Yeah, so what, I'll take him. You take the other little guy (Reynolds).' One punch and I dropped."

Battaglia wasn't actually supposed to get hit, but he did. Battaglia was to walk up to a piece of tape and stop and Jackson's fist was to miss him by about three inches.

"But I couldn't look down at the ground, so I accidentally stepped past the tape," Battaglia said. "He didn't hit me square, but he had a handful of quarters and I had a bruise on my chin the next day."

Battaglia's second scene was more demanding, even though he had no dialogue. Trying to escape from Reynolds and the police, Battaglia had to jump off an 18-foot bridge into 4 feet of water. Seven times.

"It took us all day to get it right," Battaglia said. "We had to keep getting out of the water and changing clothes, and when I hit the bottom it felt like I was hitting concrete."

Battaglia said he likes performing his own stunts, with a possible career as a stuntman in the back of his mind should an acting career not pan out.

"It's fun and you get paid extra," he said. "I wouldn't do anything life-threatening like jumping off a 30-story building, but the bridge wasn't that dangerous. I'm athletic enough that maybe I could be a stunt person."

Battaglia is now rehearsing a small role in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" at Reynolds' dinner theater and putting in 14-hour days, seven days a week, in his acting classes. He's hoping for more parts in "B. L. Stryker" when the series resumes filming next month.

Battaglia's path to show business wound through Louisville, Cleveland, Canada, Philadelphia and Atlanta.

After his final season at U of L in 1986, he tried out with the Cleveland Browns as a free agent but was cut. The next day he landed a job with the Ottawa Rough Riders of the Canadian Football League. A strike idled the league five weeks later, but Battaglia was picked up by the Philadelphia Eagles and finished the 1987 season. He was invited to return for a tryout in 1988, but the shoulder surgery ended his career.

Battaglia then finished his degree in marketing at U of L and tried modeling in his hometown of Atlanta before chasing the acting spotlight, against the advice of some friends and family.

"Everyone says it's such a long shot and all that," Battaglia said. "But I never was one to back down from something I wanted to do. I'm having a good time, learning a lot, and you never know."

# Chris Thieneman Former U of L Teammate Battaglia gets hit 7 01 1989

