



Care Bear

Don't let the growls and vicious tackles Sunday afternoons fool you. At heart, Bears linebacker James Anderson is a thought-provoking artist on a mission to improve education and eradicate bullying once and for all.

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 | *Shot on location at the Westin Chicago North Shore* |

There's no need to remind James Anderson of the number stitched onto the back of his uniform. In May 2013, after seven years with the Carolina Panthers, the former Virginia Tech standout signed a one-year deal with the Chicago Bears, becoming the first Bear linebacker to wear No. 50 since 10-time Pro Bowler Mike Singletary hung up his cleats in 1992.

The stress of that transition—of moving to a major market and then slipping on a uniform that's considered something of a holy relic—might have been overwhelming to some, but not to Anderson, who's long counteracted the pressures of professional football by picking up a paint brush and pouring his emotions onto canvas.

"For me, it's an escape," says Anderson, who lives in Skokie. "Football is an aggressive physical sport, where the idea is to hit someone as hard as you can. But art is about fluidity and rhythm, trying to find a moment of peace."

Anderson has been dabbling in art since he was only knee-high, when he honed his drawing skills by tracing over comic strips. In high school, he began transitioning to oils and chalk, before graduating with a degree in studio art from Virginia Tech.

Today, he specializes in symbolism and

deftly controlled brushstrokes, of specially commissioned pieces for charities, nonprofits and organizations. For Anderson, charity work is a priority. He spends a great deal of his free time at local schools, impressing upon students the dangers of bullying, work that's inspired by his mother, a longtime grade-school teacher.

As a result, Anderson recently teamed up with tennis star Serena Williams and other luminaries to launch Driving For Change Circle (drivingforcecgc.org), which grants to organizations that encourage academic achievement. In addition, he's a Scholastic's Read Like a Pro (scholastic.com) initiative to promote reading, all with the goal of setting up his own charity, the James Anderson Foundation, which focuses on art and advancements in medicine and breaking the cycle of poverty.

"You can separate who you are from the field," says Anderson, who credits his grit and deep-set values for his success. "There's a difference between being able to be a professional athlete and become physical, and being two different people. I want to carry my message—and treat everyone with whatever I'm doing, wherever I am."

Somewhere, we suspect, he