BLACKSBURG — Little wonder opposing 285-pound offensive linemen don’t scare Jim Baron. After all, Virginia Tech’s senior defensive tackle was a bona fide trench fighter long before he ever stepped foot on the Tech campus.

“Compared to everything else that’s happened in my life, this is a piece of cake,” Baron said.

“I’ve been around the block, so to speak, and let me tell you, this right here is heaven for me.”

He had to go through hell to get here, that’s all.

Growing up in a single-parent family in the housing projects of the tough South Side of Chicago, Baron was introduced to life’s minifields early.

“Yeah, I had it pretty hard coming up,” Baron said. “I never had a father. I grew up with just my mother (Andrea) and she had to work and provide.

“The area was tough, too. Believe me, there weren’t any country clubs where I grew up.

“And due to economics, we were always moving around, from one project to the other. If you can’t pay the rent at one place and things aren’t working out, you’ve got to move to the next.

“It’s pretty much been that way my whole life.”

Talk about being dealt a tough hand. The nights in Chicago’s high-crime South Side, at times, seemed to last forever, Baron conceded.

“I’ve gone nights with no lights and no heat,” he said. “You could have your gas cut off in the middle of the night.

Not to mention, going to sleep to the tune of ringing gunfire. As Baron aptly put it, “It was a situation where you either grow up fast or you don’t last.”

“I had my share of trouble growing up as we all have,” Baron said.

“I could have gotten shot. A lot of guys I went to high school with are maybe dead, locked up or they’re still at home not doing anything.

“No doubt, I feel fortunate now. I guess it’s just perseverance. That’s the one skill I learned growing up the way I did.”

If Jim Baron had been a quitter, he’d never have found Blacksburg.

Unable to qualify academically coming out of Chicago’s Donald E. Gavit High, Baron was forced to begin his college football career at Iowa Central Community College in 1991.

“It was in Fort Dodge, Iowa, which is about an hour-and-a-half north of Des Moines,” Baron said. “Talk about being in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes these guys complain about there being nothing to do in Blacksburg. Well, they should have seen Fort Dodge.”

Home sick, Baron transferred in 1992 to Triton Junior College, located 20 minutes from his house in the Chicago suburb of River Grove.

Baron was Triton’s most valuable player in ’92. Soon, his name surfaced on various junior college recruiting lists.

Enter Virginia Tech. Hokies assistant coach Todd Granham got a hold of some film of Baron, liked what he saw, and invited him to visit Blacksburg.

“It was either here or Youngstown State,” Baron said. “I know now I made the right choice.”

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After accepting Tech’s offer, Baron still had one more hurdle to avoid. His Hokie career had to be put on hold when it was discovered he was short of the 48 transferable hours he needed to enroll at Tech and be eligible for 1993.

While the ‘93 Hokies went 9-3 and beat Indiana in the Independence Bowl, Baron spent his fall taking classes at Virginia Western Community College in Roanoke.

“Here everybody else was playing football and winning games and I was driving back and forth from Blacksburg to Roanoke twice a week for classes,” said Baron, shaking his head.

“Talk about lonesome. They’re going to the Independence Bowl and I’m driving down I-81. I wasn’t working out, I’m farnow and I don’t know a lot of people. It was my first time out of football and I’m sort of depressed.

“But I knew times would get better. They couldn’t get much worse than what it was. Hey, I was in a house that had food on the table.

“And a lot of times that kind of stuff is maybe more important than some other things, if you know what I mean.”

After finally entering Tech in January 1994, Baron, depressed and some 25 pounds overweight, showed up for spring practice.

And he hasn’t stopped since.

“When I reported that spring, it was business again, it was football again,” Baron said. “I started working out real hard and got myself down to 260 pounds. Getting back into football was all the motivation I needed.”

The 6-foot-4, 250-pounder registered three sacks against Arkansas State in his first game as a Hokie. Despite hurting his hip late in the season and missing almost two games, Baron finished second on the team in quarterback pressures (29) and tied for second in sacks (five).

In the spring, the Tech coaches selected Baron as the team’s most improved defensive player.

“He’s a player,” Granham said. “The guy just won’t quit. He’s proved that his entire life.”

Baron, who had seven tackles in Tech’s 20-14 season-opening loss to Boston College, realizes he has backed some serious odds.

“I never quit and I got that from my mother,” Baron said. “She has always made me work pretty hard. But there was only so much she could do and I had to do a lot by myself.

“My drive to succeed comes from not wanting to continue to live the way I grew up. Not living from week to week and having some security in my life is what drives me.

“Yes, I get a lot of satisfaction from what I’ve done. Shoot, I took on adversity every day. There’s no doubt in my mind that a lot of people in my shoes would have thrown their hands up in the air and said, ‘To heck with it all’.”